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Calling Evil Good And Good Evil

*"**Woe** to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter"* (Isa. 5:20).

Isaiah's lengthy labors as a prophet spanned the reigns of four kings — Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, all of whom were *"King of Judah"* (Isa. 1:1), He began the book that bears his name by calling attention to the grievous sins of Judah and Jerusalem. He described his people as a *"sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers"* who had *"forsaken the Lord,"* and had *"provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel"* (Isa. 1:4).

In the chapters that follow the prophet continued to press the issue, leaving no doubt whatever regarding the rebellion, idolatry, and apostate condition of Judah and Jerusalem. Then in chapter five God likened *"the house of Israel and the men of Judah"* to a vineyard which *"brought forth wild grapes"* instead of *"good grapes,"* or a *"plant"* to which He looked for *"justice"* and *"righteousness,"* but beheld *"oppression"* and *"weeping"* instead (Isa.5:1-7). And it was at this point that the prophet pronounced a series of six woes upon a people whose very condition proved that they had *"rejected the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel"* (v. 26). From the Lord's perspective, that which surely added insult to injury must have been the fact that He was not describing Pagans, but the very people to whom He had given the Law of Moses, to whom He sent the prophets and who wore His name!

In the midst of the aforementioned woes is the *"woe"* which provides the basis for the title of this article, namely the *"woe"* pronounced upon those who *"**call** <u>evil good</u>, and <u>good evil.</u>"* This verse (Isa. 5:20) depicts apostasy and rebellion in full bloom. After all, what can be more perverse than the mindset which regards *"evil"* as something *"good,"* which calls *"good"* evil, that *"puts darkness for light, and light for darkness,"* that puts *"bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter?"* Tragically, in the thinking of this writer, the inability to make moral distinctions and the tendency to mislead countless people by calling *"evil good and good evil"* has never been more common in the history of this nation. We shall now consider a few examples of:

Calling <u>Evil</u> "*Good*"

"Evil" is perhaps most commonly translated from KAKOS (Gk.) and which "denotes what is useless, incapable, bad" (Vine). It is used to refer to that which is morally and ethically evil, whether of persons or qualities, intentions, and passions. It denotes "what is injurious, destructive, baneful, pernicious" (*Ibid*). However it is so common for modern man to use the word **"good**" to describe things which are "<u>*evil*</u>" or things which, by definition, are "injurious, destructive, baneful, or pernicious." A few examples should be sufficient.

Lying is repeatedly condemned in the Scriptures. It is so "evil" that the Bible says "***all liars** shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone…*" (Rev. 21:8). However, the ability to exaggerate, misrepresent, or to tell an out and out lie with a straight fact is often regarded as one of the essential qualities of a "good" salesman or a "good" politician. A misbehaving child who concocts a bizarre, obviously false story in order to get out of trouble often goes unpunished, while being admired for his "good imagination." Even in the religious realm, some deliberately lie in order to deceive the ones whom they seek to teach, and they

describe that deceptive conduct as "theocratic war strategy" (as do so-called Jehovah Witnesses), or "Mental Reservation" (as do Catholics).

Fornication is a work *"of the flesh"* and is listed in that catalog of sins which the Holy Spirit said *"those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God"* (Gal,. 5:19-21). However, *"fornication"* is often described as "making love," and everyone knows that love finds its very origin in God Who is love Personified!

Adultery. A couple may marry, later divorce for some cause other than *"fornication"* (Matt. 19:9), and each party to the divorce may go out and marry another unscripturally divorced person, and in many instances the parties in the second marriage stay together and seem to be so happy. They claim to enjoy a "good" marriage, and their friends describe their marriage as "good." Yet, according to the Scriptures, they are living in adultery — another case of calling **evil** "*good*!"

Murder is prohibited throughout the Scriptures (Ex. 20:12; Rev. 21:8, et. al.) However, under the guise of "making love," a young woman can commit adultery, become pregnant, and then legally have the baby aborted (murdered!). But they don't call it murder; instead they label it "a woman's right to choose," and in view of the fact that God created us as free moral agents (divinely designed as beings possessing the "right to choose"), then who can oppose a person exercising that God-given "right?" Yes, even **murder** can be so described as to make it appear to be a "*good*" thing!

Calling Good "Evil"

Scriptural worship is a good activity. God wants us to worship Him *"in spirit and truth"* (John 4:23-24). And it is a fact that the more people worship God in the manner He has stipulated, the more they tend to become like God in character. However, multitudes ridicule those who are steadfast in worship, and speak of them as if they are unlearned ignoramuses who are filled with superstition. And what can be "good" about being superstitious?

Spiritual Warfare. According to God's instructions we are to *"contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints"* (Jude 3), and we are to *"note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine..."* (Rom. 16:17). However, those who do *"contend...for the faith,"* while noting or marking those who go contrary to the doctrine of Christ, are generally described as vicious and mean-spirited. Yes, it is true that one must speak *"the truth in love"* (Eph. 4:15), and exercise caution lest he misrepresent any person, organization, or doctrine. But it is a fact that those whose love for the truth compels them to *"**fight** the good fight of faith"* (I Tim. 6:12) are often maligned and vilified in such a way as to suggest that they represent the worse dregs of society!

Zeal. Jesus gave *"Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His Own special people, **zealous** for good works"* (Tit. 2:14). A Christian should thus be characterized by zeal; figuratively speaking, he should be "on fire for the Lord." And zeal is admired in an employee, a ball player, or a fan. But the same zeal admired in many loyal sports fans, when exercised in the religious realm, generally causes one to be labeled as a "**fanatic**!" Another case of calling good "evil!"

Discipline. The Bible says that *"foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child. But the rod of correction will drive it far from him"* (Prov. 22:15). In fairness, in love, and in keeping with the nature of the offense, parents should apply *"the rod of correction,"* and parents who refuse to thus act sin against both God and the child. But in our society if the parents so act (especially if they do so in public), they run the risk of being charged with "child abuse" and receiving an unwelcomed visit from a government agency. Yes, divinely mandated disciplinary

action administered in love is often labeled "child abuse," and what is worse than that?

Conclusion:

With regards to the tendency to "*call evil good and good evil*," the examples we have cited are so few that they barely "touch the hem of the garment." But sufficient examples have been given so as to illustrate the fact that multitudes have lost their moral and spiritual compass and have placed themselves in the unenviable position of <u>condemning</u> what God **commands**, while <u>commending</u> what God **condemns**. The wise man said "*He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, Both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord*" (Prov. 17:15). Properly understood, no tendency is more dangerous than that of calling "*evil good, and good evil,*" nor more likely to lead people astray. When we pause to commend or condemn, we need to exercise caution lest we become like the very people upon whom God pronounced a "*woe!*"

***   —B. Witherington