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### **1<sup>st</sup> Kings 3:5–12 ESV, highly abridged**

*The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, “Ask what I shall give you.” <sup>6</sup>And Solomon said, “You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you. <sup>7</sup>And now, O LORD my God, give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.” <sup>10</sup>It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this. <sup>11</sup>And God said to him, “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind. I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind.*

### **The absence of good.**

I went to grad school at USC, near the old downtown center of L.A., which is a bit of a rundown area. USC is wedged between two rather tough neighborhoods. I chose not to live near USC, and instead, I lived out near the ocean, about 15 miles away. I could drive to USC in an hour and a quarter, or bicycle there in 45 minutes. Just do the math and then you’ll understand the nature of L.A. freeways. But seriously, I would drive or bike in each day for classes, and if I drove in, I would often would stay there until the middle of the evening before driving home in slightly lighter traffic. I did not want to pay the fee for parking in a structure at USC, so when I was first there, I parked on the perimeter of campus,

on a public street that bordered USC. One day when I was done with class, I walked to my car, having decided to go home early that day. I was just stepping off the curb, with one foot in the air, when I saw that there was someone lying on his back in the gutter, behind my car. He seemed to have been shot in the chest, perhaps with a shotgun. He was quite dead. My immediate reaction was to look around me, to make sure I hadn't stepped into the middle of a shoot-out. The only people I saw were two cops pulling up in a police car. At this point, I was worried that they might somehow think I had done it. But, as they got of their car, one of them called to me to go ahead and go about my business, that the guy had been there for a couple of hours. I asked the officer what happened to the man, and his reply is the basis of today's sermon. I'll get back to this.

Our Bible quote today is from 1<sup>st</sup> Kings. 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Kings were originally a single book in Hebrew, by the way. 1<sup>st</sup> Kings begins with the last years of the reign of the famous King David. The part we're looking at today concerns Solomon becoming king after David passes away. Our passage comes from Chapter 3, and the first two chapters tell us how Solomon became king. David was an extremely successful king. He united the many tribes of Israel. He defeated the Philistines, the vicious, long-standing enemy of the Israelites. David made Jerusalem the political and spiritual center of Israel, a place that it holds

today. He gave the ark of the covenant an honored place in Jerusalem. King David grew the size of Israel and Israel became the dominant power in the ancient Near East. But as he grew older, he became corrupt. The question of succession led to violence, as there were no clear rules about who should take over after a king died. Having a son succeed his father was common in other, pagan nations, but Israel's tradition was to elect a charismatic leader from among the ranks of the people. Remember that David was a nobody shepherd boy until he killed Goliath and was then acclaimed by the people of Israel. There was a lot of infighting in King David's household, as various people, including his sons, fought for power. Apparently, King David did not do a good job of managing the conflict. Only when those around him forced him to come up with a plan did he turn to the question of succession. It became clear that, in the absence of a charismatic person, the new leader of Israel would be a son of David. Apparently, the influential people of Israel realized that this was the only way that a new leader would be accepted by the population as a whole. David's eldest son, Adonijah fought hard for power. He was handsome, like his father, and had been a loyal son. But there were other, powerful leaders of Israel who preferred Solomon, the younger brother. Ultimately, David was convinced to choose Solomon. Perhaps a

powerful reason for this choice was that Solomon was known to be extremely intelligent.

In our passage, Solomon is talking to God, asking for guidance in leading the people of Israel. I have highly abbreviated this: *The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you."* <sup>6</sup> *And Solomon said, "You have shown great and steadfast love to your servant David my father, because he walked before you in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart toward you."* <sup>7</sup> *And now, O LORD my God, give your servant an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil."* <sup>10</sup> *It pleased the Lord that Solomon had asked this.* <sup>11</sup> *And God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind. And, Solomon became known as the wisest of Israel's kings.*

Many of us today would be extremely happy to know that a leader of our nation had as his or her primary concern the ability to know the difference between good and evil. We, as Christians, would be all the more excited to see that person turn to God for this knowledge. But just what is good and evil? This has been a major philosophical question for thousands of years. One of the

arguments made by people who deny the existence of God is this: God created everything, right? So why would God knowingly create evil, something that would do harm to God's people? Wouldn't a true God create only good things? But God must have created evil, right? So, why did God do this? The argument by atheists is that this is a paradox, and so there really must not be any God. The truth for us, as Christians, is that we simply have to accept that God has carefully created a world that gives us the best possible chance of discovering God, learning to live by God's law, and developing the kind of love for humanity that Jesus taught us to have. Somehow, this involves allowing evil to exist. But there is another argument that is very intriguing.

This argument is due in part to the Christian philosopher Augustine, who lived from about 354 to 430 A.D., near the end of the Roman Empire. His home was in north Africa, although he was a Roman. Augustine thought a lot about evil and why it exists. Here is his argument: God creating all things. But evil is not a thing. Good is a thing, he argued. Or more precisely, he argued that anything that could be said to exist or have some "being" in its nature was made by God and is therefore good. Evil isn't a thing; evil wasn't created by God. Evil is the absence of good. One way of looking at this is that when a human chooses to not take part in the goodness of God's creation, evil arises. Okay, this is a bit

ethereal. But my take on all of this is that God gave us the power to decide on our own if we wanted to embrace God's approach of creating only good, of living in a way that leaves no room for evil to arise. We have the right and the obligation to choose. When we fail, when goodness isn't present in what we do, say, or think, evil fills the void. All that God created is good. We are given the choice to follow in the footsteps of God by deciding that everything we do is good. If we choose not to do this, evil fills the void left by the absence of good.

So, this gets me back to the dead man lying face-up in the gutter behind my car. I remember that he was a big man, young, and well-dressed. His chest had been very badly damaged. I squatted down, touched his forehead, and said a brief prayer. When I asked the officer what had happened, he asked me if I was a student. I said yes, but that I had grown up in a borderline neighborhood and wasn't freaked out by the sight of a dead man. He said that this man was a member of a gang, but not a gang dominated by teenagers, like we see on TV. These men were a bit older and they sold weapons. They were very organized, and the dead man was someone who made a lot of the deals to sell guns, and so a lot of people knew him. He was well-known to the police. Apparently, someone had decided to rip him off. That person agreed to buy some guns, but the police thought that instead of paying for them, that person stole the guns and killed the

gun dealer. Then the police officer said something that I happened to remember the other day, and so it inspired me to write this sermon. He said that this is what happens when people aren't up to good. Evil things happen to them, he said, when people go out there and do bad things.

There you have it. What we should be doing is good. We have the ability to create, in of course, a much less powerful way than God. But we are made in God's image and one of those things that comes with that is having a creative mind. That is what differentiates us from other animals. We have the ability to deliberately create. We don't just react to what happens around us. When an animal appears to create a tool, for instance, when a monkey shoves a stick into an anthill so that the ants will crawl out of the hill and the onto the stick, in order for the monkey to eat the ants off the stick, the monkey is not driven primarily by the goal of creating a tool. That monkey is in the business of eating ants, not making tools: the stick tool is just something that he makes without actually meaning to. But we deliberately create all the time. We don't live by reflex; we decide what we're going to do, and we are often motivated by very abstract reasoning. That man who was shot behind my car was out to make money, much like the monkey was out to eat ants, but the man made a deliberate decision to not make money in an honest, godly way. A monkey isn't capable of deciding to

ignore the way it was meant to live and to stop doing the things that God created it to do. When that man decided to sell guns, goodness was absent from what he created. Evil arose in the vacuum. When we say things about people, when we write things in email, when we find some way to make money, when we work hard within an organization to gain authority and respect, we are creating. All of this can be done with goodness. But if what we create isn't good, then we are choosing to not emulate God. We are supposed to be the hands and the mouths of God on this planet. The reason that it is such a mess, why there are wars and such a huge separation of wealth, why there is bigotry, why people are left to starve during a drought instead of being rescued by other humans, is because we choose to create things that have no goodness in them.

God did not create evil. We do not create evil. But when we refuse to proactively create things that are good, evil arises. We can't be passive in life, like that monkey, just struggling to survive. We have no alternative but to be creative as humans. That's our nature. God made us to create. And so, we create every day of our lives. The gift that God gave us, the gift that God gave to no other creatures, carries with it a huge obligation. We have to think about what we do, what we say, how we behave toward others. Imagine if every human in the world decided that they would only do what God does: create good. There would be



zero room for evil to rise up. Here is a particularly important thing to think about. We don't have to consciously think about what we are creating, about trying to come up with ideas that are somehow magnificent and good. But we do have to think about having goodness in our hearts. If we do that, if goodness is something that we deliberately hold close, then every act of creation that happens in our lives - and there are many of them every day - will be good. Goodness is a filter of sort. All we have to do is pass everything through that filter. We must have God's goodness present within us. We must hold it dearly. We can do this simply by filling our minds with goodness – and thinking about that as we proceed through life. It will then cause us to do good. It's true. If we have goodness in our hearts, we won't be able to do anything other than create good. There will be no room for evil to sprout up between the cracks.

Please pray with me. *God, when we leave this service today, we will be acting as your hands and your mouth, and we will find ourselves having to be creative. You have blessed us with this ability to be creative. We don't just react to what happens around us. We use our minds to decide what to do. Help us drive those decisions by the same goal that has driven you: to create good. Let us use our energy and our faith to bring into this world things that radiate the magnificent, unbounded goodness of God. Amen.*