

Sin isn't a necessary evil; aim to know goodness well

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Q. Do you believe that sins are the measurement of your passes to heaven? I don't think so. Sins are necessary to life. How would you know that good is good if you do not experience sin? It gives balance to life.

A. That's an interesting question. It reminds me of a magazine for kids that I used to read, "Highlights for Children." It was usually in doctor and dentist waiting rooms and had any number of short stories and games for kids to play.

My favorite part of "Highlights" was a little comic strip called "Goofus and Gallant." They were two young boys, and one was the embodiment of bad manners and selfishness (Goofus) while the other was an example of good manners and noble behavior. The idea is that children are learning the difference between good and bad behavior through comparing and contrasting the behavior of these two boys.

This is clearly one way that we learn things in life. There are plenty of lessons that we learn as we go through this world by way of comparison and contrast.

We say things like, "This lemonade is sour." In comparison to what? Well, possibly in comparison to something that is not sour (like water) or something that is sweet (like orange juice). We can know things like color based on the light spectrum. This variety adds zest to life and helps us distinguish one thing from another.

But difference in taste or color is not the same thing as difference between good and evil. In fact, this goes back to ancient Christian theology. In Catholic theology, evil is not a "thing" in the same sense that good is a "thing." In fact, it is more accurate to say that evil is either a distortion of or the lack (privation) of a good. We have evil when something good in itself is either distorted, misused or taken away.

Therefore, something like blindness isn't a "thing"; it is the lack of a good (sight). One doesn't need to know blindness in order to know seeing. Or take the case of someone using the truth to hurt another person. Here, one would be misusing a good thing (truth) for an evil purpose, but a person wouldn't need to experience this in order to know the goodness of truth.

'Necessary' doesn't mean 'good'

We recognize that evil is a "necessary" part of life in the same sense that we recognize that sickness is a part of life. These things don't add anything to living. In fact, they mostly serve to take away from our experience of life. They are "necessary" in that we experience them, but sin and evil are not necessary for us to understand the good.

Consider a couple of examples.

When it comes to beauty, a person could be raised (in theory) completely surrounded by beauty. Imagine if all of the music and art and entertainment they were exposed to was consistently in accord with the nature of real beauty. They would not have to be simultaneously exposed to ugliness in order to know beauty.

A person exclusively engaged with those things that reflect beauty would actually come to know beauty in a way that someone who was also exposed to ugliness could not. They would certainly be able to

recognize ugliness when presented with it, but they wouldn't need to know ugliness in order to know beauty.

This is the motivation behind the U.S. Treasury Department's work to train people to be able to spot counterfeit bills. One might imagine that, when training people to recognize counterfeits, they would study all of the different ways a bill could be forged. But this is not how the government does it.

They have found that the single most effective way to train people to know when they are looking at a counterfeit bill is to study genuine bills. They know what "real money" looks and feels like to such a degree that they are able to instantly recognize a fake. They did not, in this sense, need to experience the bad in order to know the good. They just needed to thoroughly know the good.

Or consider parenting. Good parents would certainly vary in the kind of love they gave to their child. At times, their love might be gentle and soothing. At other times, it could be more demanding and less flexible. There would be a great variety of expressions of love that the child would come to know. But the parent would not also have to abuse and use the child in order to "give balance" to their parenting. In a similar way, sin does not "give balance" to life.

Sin adds negatives

It seems shortsighted to say that we wouldn't know that good is good if we didn't experience the opposite.

There are virtually an infinite number of goods in this world. The more fully we are exposed to, experience and come to know these goods, the more full life becomes. Sin merely adds pain and dullness to life, not color.

Lastly, sin isn't necessarily the measurement of one's "pass into heaven." On the contrary, love is the measure.

First, the love God has for us in creating us and redeeming us. Second, in the love we have for him by choosing to obey him. We choose to love God when we choose to respond to his grace with faithfulness.

In the end, sin isn't the test; love is.

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