

## From Acorn to Oak

*Who is God, and what is he like? Part 22: What are some benefits of his ownership?*

Pastor Edward D. Seely, Ph.D.

Why is it wrong to commit adultery? To engage in other types of sex outside of marriage? To steal? To lie? One answer offered is “Because all these acts hurt people, and that’s bad.” Yet, some object, “Why is that bad?” These and similar questions are being asked in our postmodern age which is inclined more than ever to challenge previously held values and redefine terms. Today many acts condemned in the Bible are being presented as not only tolerable but acceptable and even good. Their promoters try to justify and validate them by referring to them as “the new normal.” We see here an illustration of Isaiah’s prophecy that there are “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.” (5:20)

While many ask these questions out of unworthy motives, many others without the advantages of a Biblically based background in the church sincerely seek to know the answers. Not a few in the latter category often hope for an affirmative response but need a stronger one than an appeal to tradition.

Why, then, is that which the Bible calls wrong, wrong? Why is what it calls good, good? How do we answer the challenges?

Obviously we need to appeal to a higher authority, since most people in our society believe that all truth is relative, i.e., that there is no universal standard for judging right and wrong, except that one, which contradicts their thesis. Even more disappointing is the finding that only 32% of adults who call themselves born-again Christians believe in moral absolutes, according to Barna Research; the figure is even lower for born again teenagers (nine percent).

Thus, without an appeal to God anything we say can be dismissed by someone else who claims to have an opinion equal to or better than ours. Such claims are very common and often come in the frequently quoted but errantly applied assertion in the United States Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal.” They deceptively imply that ipso facto all these people’s values are equal; they are not. The only way we can show the error of such flawed casuistry, is to appeal to a higher authority, and we have the best in God’s Word.

It follows that we’ll also need to give evidence as to why we believe it’s most reasonable to regard the Bible as God’s Word. For help to do so, you can turn to the essays in the section, Prolegomena, at the very beginning of this series. For now, let’s focus on what it means that...

## **God is the owner.**

In his Word we see ample documentation that God is the owner of the universe, of all that is, ever was, and ever will be. The Bible begins with the words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) The Hebrew verb translated create has only one subject in the Bible: God. Further, the word create means to make out of nothing; God made it all. It’s all his; he neither borrowed from nor owes anybody.

God tells Job, “Everything under heaven and earth belongs to me.” (41:11b) With the Holy Spirit’s guidance David sings, “The earth is the LORD’S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.” (Psalm 24:1-2) See also Hebrews 1:10, “In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.” They thus belong to him. If you make something it is yours; you own it.

### ***With ownership comes privilege.***

If you own a car, you can decide who will drive it and who won’t and whether or not you’ll allow smoking in your vehicle. In the house you own you have the right to decide who you allow to enter and what constitutes acceptable behavior under your roof. The owner of a business can do what he or she wants with that business. Of course on the human plane these analogies are limited by certain laws, some just and some unjust. Nevertheless, even for humans if you own something it is generally accepted that you have the authority to decide how it will be used.

Since God is the owner of the cosmos he can do whatever he wants with his creation. That’s perfectly logical. It follows and makes sense that God has the right to establish the standard for judging what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil. It is his definition of good and evil that counts.

At this point it is important to inform people about God’s character, who he is and what he is like, for out of his character comes the standard to which we are being held. This is one of the reasons why this series, which is based on historic Christian systematic theology, and that theology itself, begins with the study of God’s revelation as to who God is and what he is like.

Many people look around and compare and contrast themselves with other human beings. Then they conclude that since they are so much better than So and So, therefore they’re good enough for making it to heaven. Or they look at some individual who is not a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ, and they say, “Well he’s such a good person that my God wouldn’t keep him out of heaven.” We’ll return to this subject in our discussion of anthropology, the doctrine of humankind, the next of the six main themes of the Bible that form the six loci of systematic theology.

However, for now suffice it to say with respect to the aspect of this matter that pertains to God that there are several unwarranted and flat out wrong assumptions being made by

those who make such statements. First, God alone has the right to set the standard of acceptance as to whom he allows into his holy presence. Second, none of us can see all there is to see about other people. We aren't with them 24/7/365; we don't know what goes on within the four walls of their homes. Moreover, we don't know what they are thinking within their minds and hearts. Third, as it has been said, "God doesn't grade on the curve." That is, his standard of judgment is a criterion reference, not a norm reference. He has a criterion we are to meet. It's not enough to be better than someone else, another human being.

We can be eternally grateful that, as we've seen in this series, God's essence is love. Since his love is perfect, it includes righteousness and justice, and he does not change, thus neither do his definitions. We do not have to live in anxiety that he will treat us unfairly, as do the followers of the demonic gods of other religions. (1 Corinthians 10:20-21)

God told Moses to write, "If you enter your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat all the grapes you want, but do not put any in your basket." (Deuteronomy 23:24) **How could God say that? Because he owns all the grapes. And everything else!** *This is one way he cares for his people's daily needs.*

In response to God's graciousness, his people have always given back to him from their bounty. David declared why. "[W]ho am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand." (1 Chronicles 29:14. See also 16.) "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things," Paul declared. "To him be the glory forever!" (Romans 11:35-36)

So, if I have a grape arbor and a garden, and a homeless person needs some food, should I let him or her pick some? Some may say, "Well, the Deuteronomy 23:24 text was written during the theocratic period of Israel's history, and we're no longer functioning in that government, which is why we don't need to keep some of the other laws that pertained to the theocracy, such as the law pertaining to the cities of refuge in Deuteronomy 4:41-43."

Here is why we need to give careful attention to Biblical hermeneutics (> Greek, *hermeneuein*, to interpret), the time-honored principles of interpretation. The failure to employ these principles has led to many wrong interpretations of the Bible and unwarranted applications.<sup>1</sup> Briefly, in order to stay on task, the main matter is how God's

---

<sup>1</sup> This problem exists also with other literature, most notably and involving considerable controversy with the Constitution of the United States. One hermeneutical position holds that the constitution was written in another time in history with different problems and needs and by the nation's Founders who could not envision the challenges of subsequent societies in subsequent centuries; therefore, the constitution has to be interpreted as a "living breathing document" that can be used to inform but should not constrain current decision-making. The other main position, which has been the historic approach to interpreting the constitution, is that that the constitution was written by the Founders of this country who wrote in a principal manner based on carefully thought through philosophical principles and based on the Bible, which transcends culture and time, and the document must be interpreted by examining what the Founders

people are to function in the kingdom of God, which even in the Old Testament theocratic period involved primarily the rule of God over his people, but it was never identified with the kingdom of Israel, and neither is it identical to the visible church today, though it is the invisible church,<sup>2</sup> the faithful believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The kingdom is here in part (Luke 17:21) but not yet in its fullest, so we pray regularly, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come [in its fullest], your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...” (Matthew 6:9-10) This is our only hope for our country, and for every country in the whole world. It is only as human hearts and minds are changed (regenerated, born again) and mature in Christ-likeness (sanctification) issuing forth in faith-activated deeds that submit to God’s rule, glorify him, and accomplish his calling of us to serve him, extending and nurturing his kingdom that any country can survive. (Psalm 9:17; Proverbs 29:2, 18)

The concept of the kingdom of God, though not mentioned in those words in the Old Testament (OT), is a major motif and theme running through the whole Bible.<sup>3</sup> Key principles of the kingdom are mentioned in the OT, including in Deuteronomy 23:24. Thus, those principles that pertain to the kingdom in both testaments apply today and will forever. (Isaiah 58:7,10; Ezekiel 18:7,16; Matthew 5:17-18; 25:35-40)

God’s love is always evident in his ownership, especially in his provision to redeem (Hebrew *gā’al*, Greek *lutroō*), a major motif or theme throughout the Bible, that is rooted in the understanding of purchase, to free by paying a ransom and buying back a person or thing and thus laying claim to the person or thing purchased. (Exodus 6:7-8; Deuteronomy 9:26) God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt as part of his plan to redeem all his people everywhere and throughout all time from slavery to sin and evil, which he did in and through Jesus Christ, “who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.” (Titus 2:14)

### ***With privilege comes responsibility.***

As we’ve just seen, God takes care of his creation that belongs to him, including his people whom he loves. In so doing, he perfectly models what we should do.

Further, in that responsibility we see our *raison d’être*, our purpose for being, and our mission. When he established his covenant with Abram, God explained that his people would be blessed to be a blessing. (Genesis 12:1-3) In Deuteronomy Moses wrote, “...the Lord has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he

---

of the country originally meant when they wrote what they wrote. This controversy extends to political theory and the importance of elections that decide whose philosophy determines the appointment of Federal judges and U. S. Supreme Court justices, the decisions of whom profoundly affect the lives of many people and the society as a whole.

<sup>2</sup> John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), pp. 18, 67, 236-244, 255-274.

<sup>3</sup> Bright, p. 244.

promised, and that you are to keep all his commands.” (26:18) God led him to also tell Israel “You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own. [Leviticus 20:26] ...you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.” (Deuteronomy 7:6)

As we saw earlier in this series, holy means set apart, uncommon, pure. Since God’s character is holy, he has thus chosen to **not** consider sex outside of marriage, stealing, and lying as good and acceptable behavior, as acts characteristic of his holy people. (Ephesians 4:17-5:20) Instead, he views such acts as offensive, evil, harmful, and counterproductive to the well-being of his people whom he loves and the accomplishment of his plan of redemption. As always, God is right! Just talk with someone who will honestly tell you what he or she has experienced as a victim of adultery by a spouse, the loss of a family heirloom or other valued item that has been stolen, or the devastating results of a lie.

Here we have more work to do as a church; fewer acorns are maturing into oaks of righteousness. (Isaiah 61:3) In 2006 Barna found that “[t]he notion of personal holiness has slipped out of the consciousness of the vast majority of Christians. While just 21% of adults consider themselves to be holy, by their own admission large numbers have no idea what ‘holiness’ means and only one out of every three (35%) believe that God expects people to become holy.” We need to heed God’s Word through Peter who explained to the church, the New Israel, “you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light...to abstain from sinful desires that war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” (1 Peter 2:9, 11-12)

We can do this! God does not call us to an impossible task, and he is always present to help us! (Joshua 1:5; Matthew 28:20 and many other passages!)

We cannot influence people for Christ if we live our lives in the gutter. No one seeking to be saved is attracted to such a lifestyle. Neither are many others. Such behavior is indistinguishable from the world. Contrary to being separate, uncommon, and pure, such behavior fits in with the world, is all too common, and is very impure. **Do not be afraid to be different!**

## **Further Benefits for Us**

Because God made them he owns the cattle on a thousand hills; “...the world is mine, and all that is in it,” the Psalmist sang of God. (50:10-12) Because God made us, “we are his” as he reveals in Psalm 100:3. We belong to him, as does everything else. What great comfort this gives us! Social science research confirms what we intuitively sense, that belonging is one of the most important of human needs. No greater blessing exists than to know we belong to the Owner of the universe, and that he loves us.

Remember the basis of that blessing as *The Heidelberg Catechism* specifies in its first question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Its joyful answer is, “That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”

The next time you feel overwhelmed by a problem, meditate on these words from the catechism and most of all the Scripture texts upon which they are based. Resist the temptation to view your difficulty with tunnel vision. Put the situation in the fullest perspective: you are not in it alone. Remember that you belong to the One who has redeemed and lays claim to you. Recall, as we’ve seen earlier in this series that you do not have a small God; he is immense, filling more than the universe; he is sovereign and almighty; and he loves you. He not only owns everything, but he rules what he owns. (Psalms 22:28, 66:1-9, 67:4; Ephesians 1:20-23; Revelation 1:5) Then begin to sense in a renewed way God’s all-sufficient help and with it the surpassing peace and joy **he alone provides!**

### **For Further Reflection and Discussion**

1. What can you say when someone tells you, “What’s wrong with adultery?”
2. The next time you hear someone say, “everybody’s equal,” what can you say to correct that misleading statement?
3. Social science research conducted by the Barna Group found that only 35% of adults who are Christians believe that God expects people to be holy, only 21% of adults consider themselves to be holy, and only nine percent of born again teenagers believe in moral absolutes.
  - a. What implications and applications do you see in this situation?
  - b. Beginning with the understanding that we belong to God, how can we help these people, and all the rest of us, to mature in holiness to God and function according to his will as we read in 1 Peter 2:9-12 and elsewhere in the Bible in order to facilitate the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes most effectively?