

# How to Identify and Avoid Evil

**The Big Idea:** Practicing our faith includes working for justice.

**Learning Goal:** Learners will understand evil as a force in the world and their lives, and will gain confidence to combat it. **Students note: you will need your Lutheran Handbook and a Bible ready!**

**Opening:** Begin by sharing a high and a low from the past week or the recent past. When each person has had a chance to listen and to share, open your session together by praying the following prayer together, out loud.

## Opening Prayer

**L: Righteous God, you know the evils of the world and the evils within us. Give to us a sense of your mercy and justice, that we might live according to your commands, and model our actions after Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen**

**Read:** Read the following together, either silently or out loud and pay attention to the questions that the reading brings! If you are comfortable doing so, it is most appropriate to deal with your thoughts and questions on the spot.

In the course of his ministry, Jesus often taught about the distinction between good and evil. In Matthew 7:15-18, Jesus warns that false prophets will be known by their fruit. Later, in Matthew 12:33-35, Jesus wrestles with the Pharisees, people who were trying, through strictly keeping the Torah (the law), to honor their relationship with God. However, Jesus saw that their behavior was more about this fixation on doing things perfectly than on keeping and implementing God's will. He clearly did not respect their religious leadership.

Identifying evil can be easy. There are some things that simply are evil: sexual abuse, domestic violence, murder, genocide. However, it is more often the case that evil is subtle and insinuating. Evil tends to sneak up on us. A student might see another's answer sheet by accident, but then should he or she use the answer seen? We might choose to purchase a larger car because we need to carry more stuff, but is it right to contribute that much more to the destruction of the ozone layer? We may, in frustration, talk about an acquaintance to another person rather than to the one who is annoying us. When does this cross over from asking for advice or support to gossip? How can we know in more subtle instances what is evil and what is not?

Evil has many sources in the history of faith. Natural calamities can be seen as the result of an imperfect world—the evil that simply is around us. We could also interpret the destruction we experience as a result of our own short-sightedness. (Should we be building homes in a flood plain?) Human behavior that is destructive or stands in the way of God's justice and mercy has also been labeled evil. The devil, or Satan, has emerged in human theology as the source of evil. "The devil made me do it" has been a meaningful excuse for centuries of human experience in one way or another.

Luther would give evil its first home in original sin, which he defined as unbelief. All of us, he would say, struggle to let God be God. This can manifest itself either as pride (I'm taking over) or passivity (I'm not worth it). In both cases, we do not trust God to be—we don't believe that God is sufficiently active, or we don't believe that God gave us a place in the enterprise of God's will at work in the world.

If God's will were perfectly clear, it would be much easier to discern what was evil or not. "If it makes for life rather than death" might be a shorthand way of weighing the good of something against the bad. In most cases, an action will never be clearly one or the other, in spite of Matthew's metaphor that the good tree produces good fruit and the bad produces bad. Things are so much more complex, just as God's will is complex.

"Life" is not just my life or just your life. Implied is the life of the whole creation, all of which God loves. Implied also is the life of those yet to come (as in the Iroquois tradition of considering each decision for its impact on the next seven generations). So, as we seek good, our perspective needs to take on God's universality. God's justice and mercy is not simply for those who call themselves Christian, or for those who call themselves a particular kind of Christian.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German World War II theologian, was invited to join a plot to take Hitler's life. He was a pacifist, but he was well aware of the evil inherent in Hitler's regime. He, and many in his family, were in active resistance. Finally, after much prayer and deliberation, he decided to join. Though joining the plot was in direct disobedience of the fifth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill," he chose what he perceived to be the lesser of two evils. In explanation, he said he chose to make the best decision he could, and then rely on God's costly grace. (See the chapter on costly grace in Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*.) His resistance cost him his life, but he is remembered as one who followed his convictions with action.

So we are also called. Our life is one of discernment. God's will may not be clear. God's justice and mercy are not often obvious. Sometimes doing the right thing will cost us. Sometimes not. The point is to seek God's perspective, and to seek to be an agent of God's will and way in the world.

## My Faith Story

Describe a time in your own life when you felt tempted, but made a choice for good. What were the circumstances? What were the choices that were pulling you? What resources did you use to make your decision? Describe ways that daily decisions about the food we eat, the cars we drive, and the friends we make affect others.

## Handbook Connection

Look together at "How to Identify and Avoid Evil," page 112 in *The Lutheran Handbook*. See if you can solicit suggestions about subtle ways the media deceives. Then, on the flip side, see if learners can share how everyday choices might mean personal sacrifice, giving up cherished values like popularity or time. For many, the age of youth is a time to be impulsive. Suggest that we sometimes have to adopt a countercultural stance to do what's right for Jesus' sake.

## Bible Connection: Wrestling with Sin

- Invite learners to read Romans 7:14-25 silently. Suggest that even Paul, the great apostle, struggled under sin and shared this with his readers. Often we know what we should be doing, but find it difficult to do it. Still, Paul thanks God for grace through Jesus Christ, and we also can be thankful for grace.
- Have learners open their Bibles to Genesis 3:1-21. As Christians, this is often described as the fall. This story helps us to recognize how sin is woven into our own humanity. When confronted with sin, we have a tendency to blame others. In the Genesis account, Adam blames Eve for giving him the fruit, and Eve blames the serpent who tricked her. This story also teaches us about consequences, where we learn about our misdeeds the hard way. Yet even in this ancient story, we can find God's grace, as God made clothes (verse 21) for the man and the woman.

## More Bible Connections

Have learners read Matthew 4:1-11. Assign parts for the narrator, the devil, and Jesus, and then read the passage aloud. Discuss the ways Jesus was tempted, and how these represent our own temptations (acquiring possessions, being reckless, honoring other interests more than God). What were the resources Jesus relied upon to avoid temptation?

## Discussion Time

*Use these questions to kick off a conversation about the theme:*

- Try out one of the suggestions from "How to Banish the Devil From Your Presence" on page 126 in *The Lutheran Handbook*. Even if it seems silly, do you think it helps? (*Answers will vary.*)
- Reflect on the symbolism of the cross and its power over evil. Where do you see crosses in your church building? Where do you have crosses in your homes? Where else do you see crosses (*on necklaces, tattoos, on buildings*)? Does the cross bring you comfort and guidance in the face of temptation? Explain.
- Name some of the atrocities that have been endured in recent history (*the Holocaust, civil war in Sudan, genocide in Rwanda, 9/11*). How do these events demonstrate the power of evil in human history? (*Evil is present in each generation and has power to radically change the face of the world*). Have a discussion about how the world responded in each of these situations.
- Name some figures from recent history who have spoken out against injustice because of their faith: Bishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Elie Wiesel, Jimmy Carter, and others you may know about. (*If these names are a little unfamiliar to you, consider using an Internet search engine to learn a little more about their work, then use that information to generate a discussion about what it means to act for good.*) What is it about them that inspires us to act for good? What inspires us to act for good?