

# Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

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## *Wise as Serpents – A Practical Theology of Evil*

**(Part 7 – What Does Evil Look  
Like?)**

**January 24, 2016**

**Sermon Text:** Galatians 6:2

**Scripture Reading:** 1 Cor 13

### **Introduction-**

I saw that my abuser has the same spirit as a murderer. But he is well able to hide his murderous intent. If anything bad was to happen, he wouldn't care less except about being caught, and no-one would suspect him. He fools most people with his appearance of being a good, responsible and reasonable person, but it is a complete facade. Most of the time he managed to keep the dark side of his nature invisible from me too, but occasionally the mask would slip.

Then just for a few seconds at a time I would see the evil grin, the look of pure selfishness and greed, the contemptuous hatred, the expression that seemed demonic. Even now I'm not sure what he's capable of, because his real self is so hidden.

He is all about control. Most of his methods are clever and covert. It's only when people stand up to him that he becomes aggressive and angry. Eventually I came to realise the whole problem could be summed up in that one word, control. In hindsight the signs of his true nature were present very early on, but I didn't know how to make sense of it all. They aren't necessarily the things that people warn you about. He didn't hit me and he didn't order me around, at least not in the beginning. He didn't have addictions or mental health problems. He wore a suit and tie and had a good job. He was a church elder and he gave elderly ladies a ride to church every Sunday. I met him through friends who are beyond reproach.

When I first met him I asked around to see what people thought of him. The

reports were glowing. There did seem to be one or two people who didn't like him. But I found I couldn't get to talk to those people, they kept their distance and they weren't willing to talk. So I thought any problems must not be that important. I realize now that the people with bad reports were afraid of retaliation for speaking out. It was a sign of ruthless and wide scale impression management.

At the start he was often pleasant, but just occasionally he would fly into a rage for no reason at all, and blame me. None of this ever happened in front of witnesses. An important sign I missed was that he never took responsibility for anything, he was never sorry for anything. Everything was always someone else's fault. Because of this behaviour early on, I tried to back off out of the relationship. But he seemed to see that coming and manipulated me into staying involved. After a while I realised that my circle of friends had got dramatically smaller. I was discouraged from meeting people and from following my own interests. It was all done by deceit and manipulation.

I felt confused and tired. I knew something was really wrong but I didn't have an explanation. If I ever raised these problems with other Christians, they reassured me that everything was alright. So I just got

wound up tighter and tighter in the abuser's web.

It was never a normal relationship. The abuser was not a normal person. He was never not controlling, he was never not telling lies, he was never not prepared to be physically violent if other methods failed. The only way to prevent this kind of abuse is for people to learn to identify controlling behaviour at the very first sign. And most importantly, to recognize the real evil behind that behavior.

Something good has come out of this. I've taught these lessons to the young people in my life, and they are spreading the message. They've already been able to help and rescue some of their friends. That's something very good. [KayE, ACFJ]

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men....(Mat 10:16-17a)

Jeremiah knew of these things all too well:

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and

you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD. (Jer 23:1-2)

"Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their evil, declares the LORD. Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall, for I will bring disaster upon them in the year of their punishment, declares the LORD. In the prophets of Samaria I saw an unsavory thing: they prophesied by Baal and led my people Israel astray. But in the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: they commit adultery and walk in lies; they strengthen the hands of evildoers, so that no one turns from his evil; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomorrah." Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets: "Behold, I will feed them with bitter food and give them poisoned water to drink, for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone out into all the land." Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. They say continually to those who despise the word of the LORD, 'It shall be well with you'; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, 'No disaster shall

come upon you.'" For who among them has stood in the council of the LORD to see and to hear his word, or who has paid attention to his word and listened? Behold, the storm of the LORD! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the LORD will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his heart. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds. "Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD. I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal? (Jer 23:11-27)

What does evil look like? As we have seen these past few weeks, evil *always*

comes on the scene right on the heels of truth. We see it here in this account from Jeremiah. Chosen as God's prophet, Jeremiah faithfully announced the Lord's Word to the Jews, and very quickly he was plagued by these false prophets and lying priests. *Prophets and priests*. The "church" leaders of the day! Notice that their tactic to gain a hearing was to tell the people what they wanted to hear – *no disaster shall come upon you*. And so it is today. Evil flatters. Evil does not call the wicked to repentance, but pronounces them to be righteous. Evil denies the Lord's coming judgment of sin.

Notice also here the *energy* of these evil prophets. *I did not send the prophets, yet they RAN*. And they claim God's authorization for themselves. Most often the agents of evil in the church are the most zealous, the most "sacrificing," the apparently most energetic of anyone in the entire church. *In the church*. Remember, we are learning that evil most often shows up among God's people, working to deceive them.

How do you recognize evil? It is soooo deceptive. Listen to Robert Hare describe the psychopath, but I am going to insert "evil" for that term so that we make direct application of Hare's description to evil. Remember, *evil always comes to us in a person. Evil is not some disembodied non-*

*personal "dark side of the force." It always comes in flesh and blood. What do its emissaries look like? -*

"[Evil] is often witty and articulate. It can be an amusing and entertaining conversationalist, ready with a quick and clever comeback, and can tell unlikely but convincing stories that cast itself in a good light. [Evil] can be very effective in presenting itself well and is often very likeable and charming."<sup>1</sup>

See it? This is vital to get hold of. *Evil is very often the most charming, "likeable" man in the room. The most "saintly" fellow in the church.*

In contrast, how do you suppose Jeremiah, God's true prophet, looked? What did his message sound like? I recommend to you that there are many, many, many of these flatterers in pulpits and pews today.

NOTE: We need to frequently remind ourselves as we are learning more about evil and its tactics, *that the Lord Jesus Christ is Victor over evil*. There is a danger here of forgetting that. Evil is everywhere in this world today and it is everywhere in local churches in its disguises. As I hear the true stories

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hare, *Without Conscience*, The Guilford Press, 1993, p. 34. I have altered Hare's pronouns here to apply his description of the psychopath to what I am called "evil" people.

every single week, and really most every single day, of how evil lurking in churches victimized and oppressed the innocent, and how its agents are enjoying fame and comfort and large followings, I know that we must guard against sliding in to hopelessness. And a real remedy for us is to remember regularly that *Christ sees it all, just as He saw it in the "church" when He was on this earth:*

"Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you. "And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (Mat 6:2-5)

Understand? These hypocrites were and are in full view of the Lord's eyes. He knows and He sees and He is going to repay.

### **Love: What Does it Look Like?**

We know that in His very essence and being, *God is love.*

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1Jn 4:7-8)

It is not surprising then that Scripture repeatedly identifies *love* as the Christian's badge.

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1Jn 3:11-15)

Jesus said the same:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you

have love for one another." (Joh 13:34-35)

And again:

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Mat 22:36-40)

Now, here is the question that I want to spend the rest of our time this morning attempting to answer, at least in part.

***What does love look like? And in contrast, what does a person look like who does not love others?***

The answers to these questions, as you are about to see, is not as evident as we might think. And the answers will enable us to recognize evil through all of its disguises.

### ***Love Has Empathy***

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal 6:2)

Once more, it is one thing to speak of loving one another, or of not loving

one another, and still another to truly grasp *what love or its lack looks like*.

Let me draw your attention to a fundamental quality of love – *empathy*.

### ***Evil is devoid of empathy.***

Empathy is that emotion, that aspect of love, which enables us to do what Jesus says fulfills His Law – *bearing one another's burdens*. Let me call on Robert Hare and then Scott Allen Johnson for some assistance here in helping us learn what empathy *looks like*, and what its absence (*evil*) looks like. Hare deals in his work with *psychopaths*, but do not make the mistake of assuming that these type are mostly locked up in prisons. Nope. They are quite commonly around us and in churches as well, parading as "saints."

Psychopaths, says Hare, are egocentric, without remorse, have shallow emotions, and are deceitful, and these qualities, he says, are "closely associated with a profound lack of empathy (an ability to construct a mental and emotional 'facsimile' of another person). They seem unable to 'get into the skin' or to 'walk in the shoes' of others, except in a purely intellectual sense. The feelings of other people are of no concern to psychopaths."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 44

This lack of empathy is a very commonly noted quality in the accounts of victims of evil. Jesus made note of it in regard to the religious leaders of His day:

And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mar 12:38-44)

No empathy for these widows, you see. Quite happy to exalt themselves and even take from the widows and not be bothered about it at all. This is evil. Now, you might be thinking something like this right now, "Ok, there it is. Evil is recognized by its lack of empathy. I can watch for that." But let

me warn you, *a lack of empathy and therefore, evil, is NOT easy to see. The thing is very, very deceptive.* No doubt the people thought these hypocrites in Jesus' day were pious, great, godly men! But they weren't. People missed it. They didn't see it for what it was – EVIL. No one dreamed these "holy ones" were the devil's children. But they were! So it is today with us.

Let me show you. First from personal experience, then from the second author I mentioned earlier, Scott Allen Johnson.

Over the years as a pastor I have had to deal with many wicked people. So have many of you. In the last few years, I came to a realization. The "lights came on" you might say, and I realized that I had been largely blind to evil, specifically, it's quality of an absence of empathy. We have had many very difficult situations dropped into our laps in this church over the years. Myself, the elders, and many of you experienced it and these situations *were nothing that any of us asked for.* Yet, there it was. And we had to deal with it and face it the best we could. The Lord sustained us and preserved us through much criticism, attacks, and accusations.

I remember some years ago after still another one of those very unpleasant meetings when we had to deal with people and their sin and we received

the typical, even hateful, accusations. “You did this. You didn’t do this. You never...” and so on. And I was sitting in my office afterwards after having to hear all of that sort of thing again, when it was as if a switch was thrown in my head – one of those “light bulb” moments – that allowed me to put things in proper perspective. And the realization was this: *in all of this turmoil and heartache, in all the grief of having to make decisions and tell people things they didn’t want to hear, and in having to call people out in regard to their sin, never once did we experience empathy from these accusers. Not ONCE.* And that really struck me, not because it enabled me to feel sorry for myself, but because it hit me that this was so incredibly wrong. *But I hadn’t seen it before.* It was right there all along, but I had been blind to it.

Evil, you see, and those who are its agents, are very deceptive. They accuse and guilt and shame in such a way that YOU think YOU are the problem. But I came to realize that something was seriously out of order in the evil ones we had to face. Namely, to state it once more, that never once were they ever heard to say anything like: *“Wow, this is an incredibly difficult and painful situation that you have been put in and it must be very, very hard for you. I*

*can’t imagine having to go through the things that you have had to deal with.”*

Sounds logical, right? Common sense? Empathy. But evil does not empathize. And when you realize that what you are facing is a *vacuum of empathy*, be assured that you are looking at the face of true evil.

Alright, enough then with the personal experience. Here are some excellent and wise observations about evil people and how an absence of empathy evidences them as such. Let’s keep this in biblical perspective. Scripture, you see, gives us statements like this:

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. (1Jn 3:14)
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But what we are working to bring into more clarity is, *just what does this love look like? And what does an absence of this love look like?* These things are not as easy to see as we might think.

As Johnson mentions “abuse,” insert the word “evil.” And where he speaks of “empathy,” think of “love.”

*“Abusive behavior as a rule demonstrates the lack of empathy. There are three characteristics of empathy that I believe are important to demonstrate genuine empathy. These*



aspects are cognitive recognition, emotional connection, and behavioral demonstration...<sup>3</sup>

Johnson continues then:

“Cognitive recognition refers to the understanding of the definition and concept of empathy...understanding the concept of being a victim, that is, to appreciate what victims of abuse experience.” A basic ability to grasp a fundamental idea of empathy.

“Emotional Connection refers to experiencing and being able to identify with the guilt, shame, and fear that the abuser’s behavior has caused his victim...and understanding the possible consequences of behavior.”

“Behavioral Demonstration refers to practicing what you preach. This means that you will do what you say you will do and behave in ways that live up to and demonstrate your beliefs, morals, and values. Repentance, we would call this.

Johnson continues and lists a large number of behavioral indicators that demonstrate the presence of empathy (love). The absence of these indicators is a sign of an absence of love. Namely, of the presence of evil.

Notice as we look at just some of this list how deceptive evil is in regard to these things and *how very often in the church, professing Christians distort Scripture to put the burden back on the shoulders of the innocent.*

1. Love (empathy) allows the victim to vent and to recount the evil that was done to them. A lack of empathy simply wants the victim to “quit talking about it and move on.” People who do the latter habitually over the course of their lives are, plainly, evil. If they are parading as Christians, they will use such “pious” statements such as “if you were really trusting the Lord with this you would stop dwelling on it.”
2. We have all failed to show empathy toward someone on occasion in our lives, but a person with empathy will ultimately acknowledge their sin, admit what they have done, and take full responsibility for it. Evil, however, evil *people* who do not love, blame the victim, make excuses, rationalize their behavior, and choose to repeat it all over again. That is what not loving looks like.
3. A person who lacks empathy and thus evidences an evil heart,

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Allen Johnson, *Physical Abusers and Sexual Offenders*, (Taylor and Francis, 2007) chapter 10.

*apologizes quickly*. Do you see the deceit in this? The evil person, the one whose heart is devoid of empathy, expects (after this quick and glib apology) the victim to forgive and forget, and the evil one then rushes the victim's recovery process with a "get it done now" attitude.

How many times has such wickedness hidden itself behind a "Jesus commands us to forgive" distortion of Scripture?

4. Evil, an absence of empathy, becomes irritated when confronted and held accountable for its actions.
5. An evil heart devoid of empathy frequently gives ultimatums to the oppressed. "If you don't do...I will...".
6. Where there is a heart empty of empathy, you will often find the tactics of working to turn the victim's support network against the victim.
7. Evil habitually engages in double standards, expecting one thing from their victim while not holding themselves to the same standards.

Johnson actually provides a much longer list than this, but this sample gives you a clearer picture of what genuine love and a lack of it look like. The deception can be remarkable.

If we are going to be wise as serpents in regard to evil, then these are the kinds of things we must know and be able to see when they come our way. Otherwise you will be duped and end up enabling evil and being put into bondage by it.

***Is this person demonstrating the love of Christ as evidenced by the presence of genuine empathy for others?***

If the answer is no, and if the answer remains "no," and this absence is characteristic of a person you are dealing with, then you are most certainly in the presence of evil, no matter how "righteous" its disguise.

### **The Beauty of Christ's Empathy for Us**

Here is a hands-on real-life example of true empathy in action:

My light bulb moment came six months after the new minister (who loved God more than people playing politics) became visibly angry as I told him what had been going on for the past decade and what the responses of

the “establishment” ministers had been throughout my ordeal. A teacher at my kids’ school had been noticing me every morning as I brought my daughter to her kindergarten class. She actually left her class in the care of her assistant so she could come to my home. She rang the doorbell and, when I came to the door, asked that I forgive her if she was minding my business but she was very, very concerned about me.

I was completely surprised; I wasn’t able to recognize in myself what was obvious to someone else (not having received validation in my family of origin after a circle of boys sexually assaulted me when I was around 7 yrs old. The invalidation and abuse continued in my dating relationships, then in my marriage and in the church. It doesn’t end until you can see it for what it is and name it and end its presence in and interference with your life.)

She asked if she could arrange for a social worker to come and visit me. I said OK. I could tell she cared for me, so I trusted her, even though I was oblivious to the politics and dangers in the world. (I learned years later that our church was classified by some as a cult.) The social worker came within the hour, sat down at my kitchen table and asked me a lot of questions and wrote things down on her forms and notepad. She then told me I needed to

go to an office with the city right away and speak with a social worker named \_\_\_\_\_.

I did – and this woman was so gentle and kind. She asked me a number of questions as we talked briefly in her office, then she said, straightforward but very gently, adding that she wanted to make sure I understood what she was going to say: she did not believe I would survive if I stayed in this relationship.

It was like her words had somehow made these heavy steel clockwork parts grind open (that I didn’t even realize were locked around my mind/awareness) just enough that I could sense the truth and gravity of my situation for the first time. I was in very deep water and would soon drown. My vision was like that of the blind man after Jesus touched his eyes and asked him what he saw and he said men walking around like trees – though it wasn’t yet clear, it was nevertheless a degree of sight.

I left that night for the women’s shelter with our three children and one garbage bag with whatever they thought was precious and with what I thought we would need.

All those years, this lady had been in a *church*. But before that new minister came, the place was devoid of the love of Christ and that was evidenced by their lack of *empathy*.

The Lord Jesus Christ is characterized by *empathy*, and if we want to know if our thoughts about who God is are accurate or false, then this is a very good place to begin. How did Christ respond to people who were downtrodden and suffering? What was His reaction to the arrogant religious leaders who oppressed such people? As we answer those questions from Scripture, we find that we are seeing God truly:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. **He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature**, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, (Heb 1:1-3)

Don't be fooled by evil. Don't let the evil one's emissaries deceive you.

I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—

just as it has taught you, abide in him. And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him. (1Jn 2:26-29)