Today we start a new series of messages talking about Godly or Wicked. I chose this topic because it is my opinion that often we don’t know how to distinguish between what is good and what might be evil. Sometimes we are naïve and trust people who may not be good for us, and other times we are quick to judge others as bad because we simply don’t like them or agree with them.

As a father, I want my children to be wise enough to know the difference between good and evil for the sake of themselves and those around them. And as a pastor, I want the same for us as a congregation.

Therefore, the purpose of this series is not to become judgmental (far from it!) but wise in distinguishing behaviors that may be inclined to evil. I believe most people are good; however, there are few, and I mean few, who are evil or entertain behaviors inclined to evil. This is particularly helpful to know when we are in a leadership position because we need to know who we are dealing with.

So, beginning today through September (with some exceptions on particular Sundays), we will be exploring stories from the Bible and around us to show and teach us what godliness and wickedness look like so we can be wise in knowing the differences and respond accordingly.

Today, I will focus on defining wickedness. Then, next Sunday, we will have a royal guest preacher, a godly woman who will talk to us about godliness: our own Michele Sisson.

The Scripture for today’s message is Psalms 10: 1-10,

“Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
    Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—
    let them be caught in the schemes they have devised.

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart;
    those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.
In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”;
    all their thoughts are, “There is no God.”

Their ways prosper at all times;
    your judgments are on high, out of their sight;
    as for their foes, they scoff at them.
They think in their heart, “We shall not be moved;
    throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity.”

Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;
    under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.
They sit in ambush in the villages;
    in hiding places they murder the innocent.

Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;
   they lurk in secret like a lion in its den;
they lurk that they may seize the poor;
    they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

They stoop, they crouch,
    and the helpless fall by their might.
They think in their heart, “God has forgotten;
    he has hidden his face; he will never see it.”

A lot is happening in this text. The Psalmist is desperately praying to God, asking for help and deliverance against evil people. The way he conveys his feelings and thoughts in the opening questions manifests this, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” This writer asked this because he felt as if God was absent, cut off, in times of trouble. And the reason for this fair question is that there were people that seemed to be getting away with taking advantage, abusing, and hurting others. It is evident he is asking God to act quickly and don’t delay his judgment against them. In his prayer, the writer asks God to hear the cries of the oppressed and do justice to them so the wicked may no longer strike terror.

But the way he describes the wicked is eye-opening and very helpful to us for our subject today:

* The wicked persecute and scheme against the poor.
* The wicked boast of the desires of their heart; those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.
* In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will not seek it out”; all their thoughts are, “There is no God.”
* Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under their tongues are mischief and iniquity.
* They sit in ambush in the villages; in hiding places they murder the innocent.
* Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; they lurk in secret like a lion in its den; they lurk that they may seize the poor; they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.
* They think in their heart, “God has forgotten; he has hidden his face; he will never see it.”

This is very descriptive and insightful. This list is not only full of adjectives but also verbs that define the character and behaviors of those inclined to be evil or are genuinely evil.

An important distinction before we get deep into the subject is that being ignorant, making bad choices, and hurting people because we don’t know better is not evil, probably sinful, but not evil.

For example, you may get so angry at someone and want to retaliate because your emotions have been compromised, and all you want to do is even the scores. Is that evil? Not in my understanding. Maybe sinful if you act on your anger, but not evil.

Evil people, on the other hand, are sinister; they willfully persecute and scheme to get what they want from whoever they want. They curse, deceive, oppress, and kill as the devil does (John 10:10), and they plan for all of it to surprise and overcome their victims.

This Psalms describes this as it explains the mind, manners, works, words, and feelings of the wicked in a very vivid, clear, and compelling way. If you notice, three words summarize who the wicked are: greedy, arrogant, and aggressive.

The wicked think they can get whatever they want no matter the means and who they hurt. They can lie about you, steal from you, and manipulate you just to get what they want. And they plan for all of it. The wicked think of themselves as self-made and can do whatever they want without any repercussion. In their arrogance, they think God or anyone else will never do anything. They are proud of how they take advantage of others and get what they want. They worship only themselves as they say, “There is no God.” And they are violent in speech and deed. Their words are carefully thought out and spoken to divide and cause harm. For them, “chaos is a ladder” (Lord Baelish, aka Littlefinger), so they create chaos to take advantage.

In other words, wicked people are treacherous, and this Psalms paints a picture of them and their behavior: they ambush, hunt for the vulnerable and trusting, and lurk and watch for their victims. They care for nothing but to get what they want by any means necessary because they think they can get away with it.

In all of this, the root of their rotten heart is their eager contempt for God. They are not greedy, arrogant, and violent because they don’t know better; no, that is the path they have chosen and have willingly rejected any notion of God and moral constraint.

Can you trust someone like that? I hope not because you can’t. I know it is hard to imagine that evil people exist because how can anyone deceive with no conscience, hurt with no remorse, lie to ruin someone’s life, or pretend to be faithful yet with no fear of God? But I can tell you that as a pastor, over the years in ministering to many people and dealing with chaos, I have learned to discern between evil people and sinners who mess up.

Indeed, there is a difference between acting sinfully out of ignorance versus wickedness. The Bible is clear about this and refers to the wicked as those who are like wolves in sheep’s clothing to deceive (Jeremiah 23:14; Titus 1:10; Revelations 2:2).

So, how do we distinguish between the godly and the wicked? Good people still sin because we stumble and are still learning and fighting our ignorance. But we don’t willingly plan to do evil things. On the other hand, wickedness is something that defines the content of the character. An evil person intends to hurt, destroy, and kill because that is in their nature.

Here is the invitation: beware of evil people, don’t trust them, partner with them, give them access to you, or believe you can manage them because you won’t. They will use you and surprise you in ways that will break you and those around you.

And most importantly, here is the good news: the difference between sinners like me, for example, and a wicked person, is that sinners don’t indulge in evil, nor can they relate to it because it is so foreign to them.

So, a powerful sign of not being evil is not understanding it, “How can anyone do such a thing?!” And perhaps an even more pragmatic sign is the feelings of guilt, remorse, and shame. If you feel guilt, remorse, or shame for something you did that was wrong, that is a blessing! It means God is with you and the Holy Spirit is working in your life to heal you and bring healing to others. And it means that you are not evil but a child of God struggling with sin like many of us on a lifelong journey to be perfected in love.

I leave you with a prayer I pray sometimes when I learn of some heinous event or tragedy, “God, forgive our sins and judge our evils.” The thought behind my prayer is that I want all people to experience the love and grace of God, but also want evil to be dealt with.

So be it.