

Vanessa Koppel

Mr. Harrell

Theology 1

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Final Exam

This class has opened my mind to different opinions, theories, and beliefs through the readings and the class discussions. I will focus on how my beliefs have changed concerning Christ's death on the cross, the concept of good and evil, Satan, and the limits of the human mind.

Before this class, my response to the crucifixion limited itself to Christ simply dying for our sins. While this is obviously a crucial part to God's sacrifice for us, there is so much more that I had been missing out on. I had always wondered why Jesus cries out to God and asks why he has forsaken him. I now realize that Jesus had to save us by becoming what we are, by experiencing everything we experience including the loss of God. Jesus had to go to the depths of humanity in order to save us completely.

"Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

(Romans 8: 1-2) There is one quote from St. Maximus the Confessor that expresses the extent of God's sacrifice to us: "Ineffably the infinite limits itself, while the finite is expanded to the measure of the infinite." (*The Orthodox Way*, p74) Christ did not only take the sins in our hearts and put them on his shoulders, but also took the divinity in his own heart and placed it in ours. Because of his suffering love, we are able to unite and become one with God.

With the crucifixion comes the question: “Why?” I always knew the answer was love, but I could never quite wrap my mind around the connection. Yes, God loves us, but what now? The connection became clear when I read John4:7: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” God loves us so that we may love him and through him love each other. I was also able to finally, *finally*, understand the definition of love: Love is the will to act for the highest good for the one you love. The happy feelings are just a side effect. I realized in class that this definition drastically broadens our definition for who we *do* love. Just with that definition, I realized I loved a lot more people than I thought I did. Even people that I had grudges against, or people that I was not on best terms with, I realized I loved them. It was like a light bulb went off in my head. Suddenly, the “stuff” about loving our neighbor suddenly made sense. I had always looked at the Commandment as an ideal. I knew that’s what we were supposed to do, but it seemed laughably impossible to even arrive *close* to that state. But as I was sitting in the Theater snuggled in my blanket, I realized the possibility, no, the *necessity*, to do exactly that. To love your neighbor.

While I was reading *Inferno* and *The Orthodox Way*, I really started thinking about the concept of good and evil. As I started questioning Ware’s explanations, I ended up forming my own explanation. He states that there cannot be pure evil like there is pure “goodness”, if you will. At the beginning there was only God and therefore his goodness is the only thing that is truly pure. I agree with everything he says except for what seems to me is a contradiction. He speaks of “evil” as “the twisting and misappropriation of what is in itself good....” (p 47) but also quotes Evagrius in saying evil “is not a substance but the absence of good, just as darkness is nothing else than the absence of

light.” (p47) In my opinion, these two concepts contradict each other in the formation of what we term “evil.” If God has embedded “goodness” in our human nature, how is it that evil is a lack of goodness? Can we simply *will* away goodness? Can we *will* away our human nature? I don’t believe so. I believe the original goodness that we possess from in the womb never leaves our souls to create a “lack of goodness,” but rather is perverted, changed, distorted from our own acts of free will to create “evil,” as Ware mentions.

In order for this concept to make sense in my mind, I thought of an analogy: God gives each human a play size house made of legos. This house contains exactly 50 lego pieces representing “goodness.” As humans, we have the free will to take apart the house and attempt to create another figure. As we make the decision to pull one lego piece away from the complete construction of the house, we are misusing the lego piece. The one lego is detached from the rest and is unable to fulfill its purpose as part of the complete house, while the house is left incomplete because of the missing piece. At this point, there is still time, if the decision is made, to return the detached lego piece to its original position, its original purpose, to maintain completeness. But as we make the decision to continue to pull apart lego pieces, one by one, the house becomes unrecognizable and is now in shambles. It’s too late to put it back together. We have moved so far from its construction that we have neither memory nor desire to reconstruct the pure house. This answers my question that follows: “Why don’t those in hell desire to be saved? Why don’t they desire heaven? Why are they unable to be good?” It is because their house has been long destroyed and is past the point of recovery. They have distorted it to such a degree where there is no turning back. Satan is the perfect example of one that looks at

goodness, knowing he will never be able to enjoy it. He watches the rebuilding of other houses and realizes he will never enjoy the beauty of the goodness, even if he desired it, because of the destruction of his own. I now understand that the lego pieces are not “lost” or given away, or dismissed, but rather misused. The only means of reaching evil is the *misuse* of goodness, not the *lack* of it. We contain the same lego pieces from birth as we do in death. The only difference is what we have chosen to create with them.

Before our discussions, I always thought of good and evil on two separate spectrums; a “good” spectrum and an “evil” spectrum. I thought there was a point when someone gets wicked enough to skip from the good spectrum to the evil spectrum and be graded by how “evil” they are. But from the readings, I must conclude that we are all graded on one spectrum with good and evil on either side, like a thermometer. There are not two thermometers for heat: one for hot and one for cold. Because evil is a misuse of good, its contents are the same, just manipulated. Also like heat, evil cannot ever reach “absolute zero,” if you will. It is physically impossible to reach the absence of all heat just as it is impossible to reach the absence (or manipulation) of all good. What I realized was that Satan is our exception to the rule. Satan is our absolute zero.

When I learned that Satan was God’s head angel Lucifer, I had a replaying of the movie *Lion King* in my head. What we love about this theme is that the good guy always wins. Simba gets crowned and good prevails. Scar gets kicked off the cliff and is sent tumbling. What I never really realized until this class was the true torment that Satan is in. For some reason, I always pictured him having a party and torturing everyone else, but never being tortured himself. I pictured him as the king of the underworld, not its prisoner. Now it makes sense. Of course Satan is suffering the most because his sin was

the greatest. He completely betrayed Christ. I also realized grasping the concept of Satan is just as impossible as grasping the concept of God. But what I *do* know is that *both* are ever present.

In Canto XI in Purgatory, Oderisi of Gubbio describes the empty glory of human talent. This hit me very hard. Talents we have are given to us by God. But I realized that when exploited, they are doing the opposite from what they are intended do: glorify God. Later in Canto XXX, Beatrice scolds Dante for wasting his God-given talent. If she is upset he wasted them, then they are obviously important. But how? I now believe that God gives us talents so that we may use them and follow in his path for us. I now realize that our talent and his plan for us could be one in the same. If God gives us a gift, I'm sure he would want us to use it. We shouldn't keep it in its wrapping.

If there was only one thing I could take from this class, it would be the realization that as a follower of Christ, I need to understand that I simply cannot understand. From the concept of good and evil, to the divine love God has for us, to the sacrifice made for our sakes, to the plan God has for us, I realized I need to accept the fact that I cannot come close to understanding the full meaning of any of it. Dante is constantly bringing up this theme of ignorance. In Purgatory he says "...madness it is to hope that human minds can ever understand the infinite that comprehends Three Persons in One Being." (Canto III, lines 34-36). In the final Canto of Paradise he says: "O light Supreme, so far beyond the reach of mortal understanding, to my mind relend how some part of Your own self." (Canto XXX, lines 67-69).

The only thing I can do is trust in God and pray for guidance. Dante knows that we simply cannot do it alone. One of the gate guardians in Inferno says to Virgil: "Let

him [Dante] retrace his foolish way alone, just let him try.” (Canto VIII) I realize that being a true Christian is more than just going to church and praying at the dinner table. True faith in Christ means “to interpret the Word of God accurately, to perceive the depths of its message and its power to transform human life, [to] “live” the Word.” (Scripture in Tradition, p67)