

BELIEF

BARRIERS



Touching Lives
with James Merritt

Touching Lives with Dr. James Merritt

Good God?

Belief Barriers | Psalm 73

INTRODUCTION

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Have you ever asked the question, “If God is good, why does He allow evil and suffering to happen in the world?” It’s a question many have asked, and sadly, many don’t know how to answer it. But in this message, I want us to take a look at the story of a man named Asaph as we try to find a way to answer this question that haunts humankind, Christian or not. Asaph was playing by the rules, doing life by the numbers, went to church, paid his taxes, didn’t cheat on his business deals, was a good dad and husband, and always tried to do the right thing and yet he said, he was “Afflicted, and every morning brought new punishments.” We don’t know whether he struggled with physical disease, financial ruin, or family problems. His thinking was, “What is the use of living right if God is not going to do right and I’m going in the wrong direction?” When we find ourselves in a similar situation, wondering the same things, there are three things we must do.

KEY POINTS

1. We Should Realize The Dynamic Of Good And Evil

People who want to eliminate either God or a good God, run into a brick wall for this reason. Once you admit the existence of evil, you have to admit the existence of good. We describe evil as the negative of things that are good. We say someone is “immoral, unjust, unfair, dishonest” and simply put we would all admit there is not only evil in the world, but there is good in the world. We see both evil and good. More to the point, you have to introduce God.

However, many people don’t want to take that step. They want to throw God out instead. But when you throw out the idea of God, you throw out the meaning of good and then you throw out the meaning of evil. In an atheistic world, there can really be no actual good or evil, because there is no absolute standard by which to judge anything as being good or evil, right or wrong. The problem of evil is rather than being an argument against God, it actually becomes an argument for God which leads to the second part of this issue.

2. We Must Recognize The Dilemma Of Good And Evil

Even when you introduce God that doesn’t solve the problem; it really exposes the problem. You see something bothered Asaph that also bothers us. It goes back to the very first thing Asaph says about God. “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart”(Psalm 73:1).

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He goes on to say that God is “the Sovereign Lord.” God is all good and God is all-powerful. He knows that God could forbid trouble from ever coming to any of us if He chose to. If God is sovereign, that means nothing happens to us unless God either causes it or God allows it. He keeps bad things happening from us. He does it all throughout Scripture. He kept the lions from eating Daniel. He kept the fire from burning Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. He kept the giant, Goliath, from killing David. So, we know he can do it, but He doesn’t always do it. And that’s the dilemma we must wrestle with.

What we have to remember is that God wants to use even the bad things in our lives to mature us and grow us, to force us to look to him, to place our trust in him. Some of us will do that in good health, and some of us will do that battling illness. Some of us will do that having a lot, some of us will do that having a little. The point is God is going to get every one of us to the same destination, but He is not going to get all of us there the same way. At the end of the day, everything will be put together in such a way and used in such a way it will be for our ultimate good and for His eternal glory.

3. We Can Rejoice In The Defeat Over Evil

The thinking that if God is good and God is powerful, He would always prevent evil is not true. But here is the truth. A good and a powerful God will always prevent suffering and evil unless He has a good reason and purpose to allow it. God will allow one evil, because it will prevent a greater one. Sometimes He will allow evil, because it will produce an even greater good.

Exhibit A of this truth is the cross of Jesus Christ. The greatest evil that has ever happened, happened to the only perfect person who has ever lived. The world crucified the totally perfect Son of God. In fact, of all the world’s religions, only Christianity reveals the God who suffers with us and for us and who has ever lived. Jesus knows what it is when a bad thing happens not just to a good person, the perfect person of a human being, but to the Son of God.

We had better thank God there is a God; a God who is all good, all powerful and all knowing. For all the wrong that was done, justice will prevail. For all the evil we experience, ultimately it will turn to good. The resurrection of Jesus tells us that no matter how bad Friday may be, Sunday is always coming.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you find yourself questioning God when bad things happen to good people?
2. When was a time God used a seemingly bad circumstance in your life to bring about something good?
3. If someone were to ask you, “Why does a good God allow evil and suffering?” how would you answer them based on what you’ve learned in this message?

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Holy Hypocrisy

Belief Barriers | Matthew 6:1-4; 23:3,5

INTRODUCTION

It is by consensus the number one reason people don't come to church, criticize the church, and have no use for the church. Every church has hypocrites. Frankly, that shouldn't really be surprising. The movement that Jesus started produced many hypocrites. As a matter of fact, being the largest religion in the world, Christianity has probably produced more hypocrites than any other movement in history. The word "hypocrites" is used seventeen times in the New Testament and every time it is used by Jesus. Nobody used it or talked about it as much as he did, who first critiqued religious hypocrisy in a way that shaped the way we look at it and made it such a negative term. In the Sermon on the Mount, He dealt with this issue of hypocrisy head on and shared with his disciples then and his followers now how to avoid holy hypocrisy. If we are going to break down barriers and build bridges to unbelievers and especially the next generation, Jesus tells us three things we have to do.

KEY POINTS

1. Be Holy In Your Private Life

The only way to cure public hypocrisy is through private holiness is what may sound contradictory. If you are going to preach what you practice you have to practice what you preach. I want you to understand what hypocrisy is not. Hypocrisy is not the difference between what we are and what we want to be. It is not the separation between what we want to do and what we actually do. Hypocrisy is the difference between your private character and your public conduct.

If you want to start living a holier private life, ask yourself this question, "If your heart was a glass window would you want it to be a stained glass with the curtains closed or would you want it to be clear so everybody could see it?" Are you really in private what you claim to be in public? You see, the most important part of your life will always be the part that nobody sees but you and God. Because in that secret place, in that private place there is no applause, nobody is clapping for you. There is no acclaim. Nobody is telling you how great you appear to be and there are no awards. Nobody is giving you a trophy for what you do. It is for His eyes only and that is when he knows he has your heart.

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2. Be Humble In Your Public Life

Pharisees had a reputation of not just being great teachers or prophets or practitioners, but great prayers and they knew how to put on a show. They would stretch out their hands with their palms upward, with their head bowed, and they would give the speech of a lifetime, as loud as they could, standing on the most crowded street corner, so people could hear them, and see them, and brag on how close they must be to God.

I want to confess something. Nothing irritates me more than people who pray long prayers in public, because I know what they are doing most of the time. They are catching up on their prayer life at our expense. It was Charles Spurgeon who said, “Let your public prayers be brief. Let your private prayers be as long as you want.” This advice is what we should all take to heart if we want to be humble in our public life.

3. Be Honorable In Your Personal Life

We want to do everything we can to be a stepping-stone to Jesus, not a stumbling block. There is something we must remember that Jesus repeats three times in this passage. He says it in verse 4, verse 6, and verse 18. Here is the firewall that will guard against hypocrisy.

“Your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you...” (Matthew 6:4, 6,18). The single most important part of your life is the part that God sees when no one else is looking. I love the way someone put it, “The theology that matters is not the theology we profess, but the theology we practice.”

The only honor we should be seeking is God’s honor. The only glory we should be seeking is God’s glory. The only praise we should ever worry about is God’s praise. In order to achieve that you can’t be a phony. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Make up your mind on what you truly believe, not just what you say you believe and then behave what you believe. Be what you need to be in private, then you will be who you need to be in public.

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Belief Barriers | Matthew 6:1-4; 23:3,5

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Would the people closest to you say that your faith is the same in public as it is in private?
2. How do your private prayers compare to your public prayers?
3. If your heart was a glass window, would you be drawing the curtains or leaving them open?

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Christian Science

Belief Barriers | John 8:32; 17:17; 3:12

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to understanding how Scripture and science are connected, many people simply say that the Bible is not a scientific textbook (which is true), and the Bible was not written primarily to teach us about science (which is also true). So, even if the Bible may be completely wrong when it comes to science, we can trust it when it comes to the more important questions of life and death and eternity. That sounds good in the theory, but it is completely wrong. When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus about the physical process of birth, He makes this incredible statement, “If you won’t believe what I say about earthly matters, why would I expect you to believe what I say about heavenly matters?” It is a fair question. If I cannot rely on the Bible when it touches on any subject like history, science, morality, philosophy then how can I trust it when it comes to theology? Those are the questions I want us to consider as we dive into this message.

KEY POINTS

1. God’s Truth Contains Scientific Truth

At its very core, science is the pursuit of truth. In fact, the word “science” comes from the Latin word “Scientia”, which literally means “truth.” I say again since all truth is God’s truth then there really couldn’t be and shouldn’t be a conflict between science and scripture. Jesus said something else about truth in this regard. “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32, NIV)

That is true in any area of truth. Once you know medical truth you can be set free from disease. Once you know theological truth you can be set free from heresy. Once you know spiritual truth you can be set free from sin.

The point is if there is such a thing as scientific truth and there is such a thing as scriptural truth those paths may cross each other and in fact they should cross each other, but they will never conflict with each other. They will converge into the same street called “truth.” This is the way one scientist (you may have heard of) put it, “A legitimate conflict between science and religion cannot exist. Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.” That scientist was Albert Einstein.

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2. God's Truth Corresponds To Scientific Truth

many people want to put science in the living room and the Bible in the attic. They want to keep them apart, but that really doesn't solve what people see to be the problem for this reason. Science, history, and theology are not three distinct branches of knowledge. They are simply three different ways in which we view the world around us. You can't always separate them. Here is a classic example. Take the resurrection of Jesus. Was that a theological event, a historical event, or a scientific event? The answer to that question is "Yes."

It is recorded as a historical event. If His body was physically and literally raised from the dead then scientifically you are now dealing with anatomy, biology, physics, and even chemistry and of course it is the basis of all Christian theology. The truth of the matter is if you take the scientific and historical truth out of the resurrection you have no theological truth left.

Simply put, the God of the Bible is the God of science. The God of the Bible is the God of nature and also the God of truth.

3. God's Truth Is Confirmed By Scientific Truth

Scripture must always be our go-to book. Science can tell you how you got here, but only scripture can tell you why you are here. Science can tell you how your life began in your mother's womb, but only scripture can tell you how your life is to be lived when you are out of it. Scientific truth has its limits. It can answer a lot of important questions, but it can't answer the most important questions. Only scripture can tell you who you are, why you are here, what you are to do while you are here, and where you go when you leave here.

The Bible is not a book of biology, but it will lead you to the Lamb of God that can take away your sins. It is not a book of botany, but it can lead you to the Rose of Sharon who can give off the fragrance of salvation. It is not a book of astronomy, but it can lead you to the Bright and Morning Star whose light can guide you into the presence of God. It is not a book of medicine, but it can lead you to the Great Physician who can heal your heart and cure you of the one disease that will kill you forever and that is sin. This book is truth and when you know this truth and the one who said He is the truth, you will be set free now and forever.

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Christian Science

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you struggle with conversations about Scripture and science and how they interact with each other?
2. What is one thing you question about science because of what Scripture says?
3. What is one thing that might not make sense in Scripture because of what you know about science? Take the time to think about your answers to questions 2 and 3 this week and spend some time reading and researching, asking God to give you wisdom and discernment to understand His truth above all else.

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Totally Objective

Belief Barriers | James 2:1-12

INTRODUCTION

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Bigotry and prejudice is both an attitude and an action. You either see yourself as superior to someone else or someone else is inferior to you, and this mindset is going to lead you to treat them in a bigoted, prejudicial fashion. Everybody likes to say for the most part, “I’m not a bigot” and pretend that we are always totally objective, but the truth of the matter is we are not, even though we want to be. This is not a problem just for the modern church. The early church dealt with the problem of prejudice and the bias of bigotry a thousand years ago. James, the brother of Jesus, actually dealt with this problem in a book he wrote by his name. Today, when we think of bigotry we think primarily in terms of race, but in this particular case this was the prejudice of affluence and achievement, not of ancestry, but as you are going to see what James said to the church applies perfectly to any kind of bigotry including racial prejudice and racism. James does us a huge favor. He shares with us, not just what a bigot is, but what a bigot does and why any form of bigotry is not a misdemeanor, but it is a felony in the eyes of God.

KEY POINTS

1. Bigotry Discriminates Against A Life From God

We’ve all heard the saying “Never judge a book by its cover.” What James is saying in today’s key passage is that if you truly have faith in Jesus, you will never judge a human being by what you see on the outside. In fact, if every human being was a book, every book would have the same thing on the cover. It would say, “Made in the image of God.” If you judge people by first impressions or if you judge people just by what you see on the outside whether it is the color of their skin or how they are dressed or how they look, the vast majority of time you are going to be sadly mistaken, and you are going to make a tremendous misjudgment.

Dr. Martin Luther King said it in his most eloquent way, “We must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble-white to a bass-black is significant on God’s keyboard precisely because every man is made in the image of God. One day we will learn that. We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man.” There is nothing big about bigotry. It discriminates against a life from God.

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Totally Objective

Belief Barriers | James 2:1-12

2. Bigotry Dishonors The Love Of God

Bigotry is not just a weakness; it is a wickedness. Prejudice is not just problem; it is a poison. When you judge other people on anything on the outside and ignore what is on the inside, you do something even God doesn't do. Remember this, "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (I Samuel 16:7).

God does not show favoritism. Do you know why? God loves everybody. Do you know what that means? Anybody can love God. God offers salvation to everybody. Who is welcomed to enter into God's family? Everybody, because God loves everybody.

If you love God the way you ought to love God, you will love others the way God loves others. If God loves everybody, then you love everybody. If you love everyone equally then you will look at everyone equally. In fact, one of the ways you know you love God is you look at others the way that God looks at others. He looks at them with love.

3. Bigotry Defies The Law Of God

Bigotry doesn't just break human law; it breaks heaven's law. Just take the problem of racial bigotry. It is not primarily a skin problem; it is a sin problem. The problem of a racist is not with the skin of another person on the outside. It is the sin of his own heart on the inside. We look at skin because of sin.

You may think you are a good person because you have never murdered anybody. You may think you are a good person, because you have been faithful to your spouse. What James is saying is if you are guilty of bigotry, bias, prejudice, racism of any kind, to any degree, for any reason your sin is just as bad as adultery or murder. Which by the way, murder was considered one of the top two sins in the eyes of the Jews and the Pharisees. In fact, in the Old Testament, both of those were deserving of the death penalty. You see, bigotry breaks the two greatest commandments. If you are a bigot, you don't love God the way you ought to love God and you don't love your neighbor like you love yourself.

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Belief Barriers | James 2:1-12

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. When was a time someone misjudged you because of your appearance? How did that make you feel?
2. When was a time you misjudged someone else because of their appearance? What did you learn from that situation?
3. In light of today's message, are there times where you fall into the sin of bigotry that you might not have realized until now? If so, what are some practical steps you can take to loving and treating others according to God's Word and example?

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You Be The Judge

Belief Barriers | Matthew 7:1-5

INTRODUCTION

As we wrap up this series, we are going to look at what I believe is probably the most misunderstood, misused and misapplied verse in the entire Bible. By the way, it is not just unbelievers who misapply it and misunderstand it, but sadly many believers make the same mistake. This verse is in regard to judgmentalism. People equate the church today with a holier than thou attitude that screams what they are against and whispers what they are for. They hear the criticism, but they don't see the compassion. They hear the condemnation; they don't feel the care. And I humbly admit for a good bit of this we are guilty as charged. So, we are going to dive into what Jesus said and what Jesus didn't say about this whole matter of judging so that we can make sure we're not only interpreting Scripture correctly, but that we're also living out Scripture correctly so as not to turn others away from the church.

KEY POINTS

1. We Are To Judge Honestly

Let us all be honest. For those of us who do attend church, who try to live the Christian life, who do believe it is important to obey God's commandments, it is very easy to fall into a "holier than thou" attitude. It is easy to look down our nose at people who don't reach our standards. It is easy to elevate our preferences over God's principles and judge people on what we think people ought to be and what we think people ought to do. At this point, I have to make sure you understand there is a difference between confronting a sin and condemning a sinner.

It is right if it is done the right way, in the right time, with the right spirit, but the other is wrong. There is only one way to know when you have crossed the line. When your standard of calling anything wrong is based on anything other than the clear teaching of a moral command in the Word of God you are being judgmental. When you judge someone's motives rather than their methods you are being judgmental. When you judge what people do, it is another thing to judge why people do them.

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2. We Are To Judge Humbly

Now, Jesus had a great sense of humor. The picture He paints is hilarious. Here is a man focusing like a laser beam on a speck of sawdust in one man's eye while he has a two-by-four sticking in his own. The word for "speck" literally means "splinter." Do you know what a splinter is? It is just a piece of a plank. What Jesus said really is, often we criticize faults in others that we have in our own lives. Finding someone else's fault is just a chip off of your block.

The point that Jesus is making is very simple. Before we are so quick to judge others, let's start with ourselves. I've got a feeling if we judge ourselves more, we might judge others less.

What Jesus is saying is when you start to look out the window, look in the mirror instead. The next time you spot a splinter in someone else's life, look for the log that is in your own. Again, it is not that we are not to judge wrongdoing, but we must do it with all humility. Confession of our faults must always come before criticism of other's faults.

3. We Are To Judge Helpfully

It is not wrong to confront a person if there is sin in that person's life. In fact, it is wrong not to do it. Parents need to be doing this with their kids from the time they are young. When you see someone walking down a deadly dark destructive path you owe it to them to judge what they are doing honestly, humbly, but primarily helpfully. Jesus is not telling us not to judge. He is actually commanding us to take the speck out of our brother's eye which involves making a judgment. But He tells us to look at ourselves first so that we will judge helpfully and not hypocritically.

You never a tree by its leaves, but you should judge a tree by its fruit. You should not judge a book by its cover, but you should judge a book by its content. You should not judge a person by the color of their skin, but you should judge a person by the content of their character. All of this is what makes the cross shine and sparkle like a diamond in the noonday sun, because Jesus didn't have even a speck in his eye, not even a splinter. He took the plank that has been in every eye ever formed and put it into his and accepted the judgment that should have been ours, so that we should never have to be judged. He is the supreme judge of the universe. His judgement is the most honest, the most humble, and the most helpful of all. May we follow in his footsteps.

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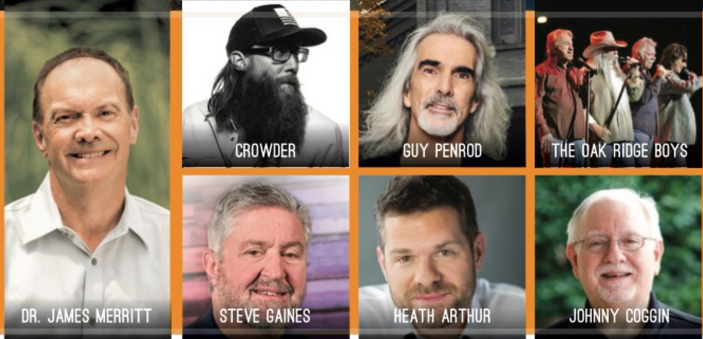
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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you struggle with having a “holier-than-thought” attitude and being judgmental towards others? If so, why do you think that is?
2. Has there been a time when someone judged you unfairly? How did that make you feel? How does that situation make you want to be mindful the way you treat others?
3. What is the log you need to get out of your own eye before you look at the speck in someone else’s?



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