

Are you good or evil?

(Pastor Jeremiah)

May the peace of Lord be with you.

Owing to the epidemic for the past three years, we had not have the opportunity to visit in China. Since the opening of China at the end of last year, we had travelled to many places to visit different churches. After the epidemic, we appreciate this freedom, we really need to make good use of the freedom that God gives us to work for Him, treasure the opportunity that we can spend time together. Therefore, I encourage everyone not to be lazy when we have this freedom, we should gather together with a thankful heart to worship God.

I'm very happy to share God's words with you today. Through the words of God, we can encourage everyone. Let us have an opening prayer together:

"Our Heavenly Father, we come before You, asking You to be willing to be with us, lead us to get close to You. Our hearts always have the thought to escape from You, we want to escape from Your spirit, we want to hide from Your face, please help us to get rid of this bad thought, let our hearts able to see Your goodness, let our heart willing to come close to You. Don't let the sin hinder us to get close to You, or even want to hide from You, so I ask God to work in everyone's heart, so that we can truly know You. You are the good Heavenly Father, let our heart be really willing to get close to You, so I respectfully entrust the following time to Your hands, whether those are attending here or stay online, may You witness Your words and guide them with Your words. Let us understand more why we should believe in You, why we should follow You, let us understand the meaning and our direction as Christians in this world, we commit the following time into Your hand. Regardless the speaker or audience, may Your Spirit take control of us and lead us, Amen."

Today, I want to share with a very familiar scripture with your all, that is in Matthew 7:7-12. We shall not overlook those familiar verses as we tend to forget it quickly and ignore it. Let's read this passage carefully:

"⁷Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? ¹¹If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! ¹²Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

Most bibles put a heading on this passage that reads 'Ask, Seek, Knock'? So, when you read these verses, the first thing you immediately think about is prayer, right? It is true that 'ask' and 'give' are mentioned many times here. It seems that as long as we pray, God will answer us and give us what we want. We will think that Jesus is telling us that Heavenly God is a loving Father who will respond to our every request. We also tend to encourage non-Christians with these verses. This is because we wanted them to experience God so much, so we told them that God will listen to all the needs they prayed, just as what the scriptures said

that ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. This is our own understanding.

If this is your understanding, does God answer all your prayers? If not, it means that God is not responsive. What even worse, if you encouraged a non-Christian with your understanding, what does it mean if God doesn't listen his prayers and he doesn't get what he wants? Is he not religious enough and has to pray harder? The same thing happen to us, if God doesn't listen to my prayers, maybe I have to be more devout or pray for a longer time or even fast and pray or am I not persistent enough? Otherwise, it proves that God is not real, and what Jesus said is not true. You have to think about this.

There is a danger if you encourage a non-Christian with this verse. This friend may go home and pray quietly, but then stop coming to church after a month of praying. When you asked him why, he dare not tell you the truth because worry of hurting you, so he simply gave an excuse. Perhaps the real reason is that God does not listen to his prayers as what you told him. Since God does not listen, it proves that God is unreal, so he stopped coming to church. It can be seen that when you misinterpreted some simple scriptures, you will apply it incorrectly, and in turn affect the your spiritual growth and your understanding of God.

When reading the Bible, we should pay attention to some key words. Today, we will focus on some keywords in verse 11, which is 'good gifts/thing'. The word appears twice here. The word "good" in the original text means goodness, beautiful.

Here it is mentioned to 'ask for good things'. For you, what are the good things you want to ask for? I guess the good things for young people are spouses, houses, jobs, money, and health. These are the good things in our minds. But are these the good things Jesus spoke of? In fact, you can own these good things even without God, as long as you have the ability, money and capability. Many people who don't believe in God can own these good things, and they even own more than you. So, what's so great about this? Therefore, we have to ponder whether the good things Jesus mentioned are the good things we think of.

Next, we focus on the word 'good', which appears twice in verse 11, and the word 'evil' in the same verse. I explained that good is kindness but how do you interpret the phrase "though you are evil"? We can accept that we are bad, including our bad temper and our self-centred. But can you accept that 'you are evil'? This phrase might offend many people, especially Chinese, as per Confucius said that "human beings are born good". We can accept that we are bad, but it would be difficult for us to admit that we are evil.

Why does the Bible say that man is evil? Bible is certainly not talking about or teaching the concept of original sin. Original sin holds that people are born evil. This is not Bible's teaching. The Bible says we are evil is because we disobey God and hence we committed sin and live in sin. Consequently we become captives (slaves) or tools for the devil or the evil one to spread evilness in the world. In short, if you leave God, you will definitely become evil, you have no other way, including Christians. Don't think that only non-Christians can become evil, even Christians who sin can become evil.

Let's go back to verse 11 just now, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those

who ask Him!". Isn't it weird? Even evil people want to give good things to their children or their loved one. Does an evil person know what is good gift? If you don't know, how do you give good things to your children or your loved one? Could it be that you'd regarded evil things as good things, and you end up giving these evil things to your children, which in turn harming them. I personally think this is the reality. No matter how, it is true that evil people still want to give good things to their children.

Once, after I watched some news, I felt bored, so I browsed on Baidu the sentence "don't be too kind" and I wanted to see what the result would be. It was beyond my expectation that there are many pages that teach people not to be too kind. I was surprised to see it! Do you think the people who posted these pages are deliberately trying to harm you? No, they actually intend to give you something good. Not only that, you can also find some videos or animations that educate children to be careful and not to be too kind; there are also similar teachings for women, for elderly and for honest people too. I was surprised to see so many articles are teaching us not to be too kind.

In fact, I think these well-intentioned articles are from authors who claim to be good people, they want to help you, teach you, and advise you not to be too kind, so as not to be deceived or harmed by others. As a result, the readers including children will come to the conclusion that kindness is stupid, ignorant, harmful and it is wrongful to be too kind.

The phrase "don't be too kind" is actually quite scary, because it teaches you to choose evil. How would you help your friend who is asking for your advice? If your female friend told you that her relationship with her husband was not good, how would you advise her? We might advise her to divorce or not to be too kind to her husband in order not to suffer disadvantage. Aren't we trying to ask her to choose evil, are we? On the other hand, we might advise someone to take revenge against the bully or encourage someone to lie for his own sake. We may even teach people not to care someone who is dying. This is the teaching you would often heard in China, which is ignore people who is lying injured, as you will be deceived for your kindness. In fact, do you really know what 'good' is?

I think that many times we do it out of good intentions, we thought we are offering good advice but indeed we are offering evil advise. We are actually graffitiing the conscience of those who are relatively kind like children and young people, they are not evil in their hearts, sometimes they might be naughty and disobedient, they may not be evil. However, with our exhortations, we are graffitiing their minds and slowly turning them into evil. This is scary, but why are we doing this? This is actually reflecting the true state of our hearts. Just like what Jesus said, you are evil, and you don't know what is good at all, so it is impossible for you to give good things to others.

Jesus said that a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. I think this is very true, it is impossible for evil people to neither say good things nor give good things to people. We are all diseased fruit trees, so we cannot give good things to others. I suggest you should go back and carefully think these words of Jesus, don't be cheated by your sincerity and love. There are many times when we help others out of sincerity and love, i.e. I want to give you good things and good advice, but in fact I am cheated by my sincerity and love. The key point is, do you have a

fearful and loving heart toward God? If not, there can't be any kindness in you. Owing to this, you are unable to help others. Why there are so many advice teaching us not to be kind? This is because there is no goodness in their hearts, so they have nothing good to give to others.

Jesus told us that evil people also want to give good things to others. But the problem is that whatever come out from an evil person is evil, so he cannot give you good things, and he cannot give good things to his children. Remember, if you don't fear God in your heart, you don't have God in your heart, you have nothing good to give your children.

Let me give you an example. When my wife Karen and I were in China, we had the opportunity to teach bible to three secondary school students. They planned to further their studies in the United States after finishing secondary school. One day, one of the older students who is going to the United States soon came to ask us, "Pastor Zhang, I would like to ask you a question that I don't quite understand." He said that his mother taught and encouraged him to marry an American citizen or someone who is holding a green card, so that he can stay back in the United States. The young man felt something was not right with this advice but he couldn't tell which part was wrong, so he came to ask for my opinion. I guess there are a lot of China people having the same thinking. Most of them study in U.S. with the hope to stay there, and the fastest way to doing so is to marry a U.S. citizen. This mother taught her child what she thinks is the smartest and best way to let him stay in U.S. From the eye of the world, his mother is quite smart. Wasn't this advice from his mother was an act of love? This is for the sake of his future. But if you think profoundly, is she loving her child or destroying her child?

We live in a world where good and evil are reversed. Many times, we think we are loving people and loving our children, but in fact we are harming them. Do you know what mistake this mother had made? When she gave this very evil advice to her own children, she is actually ruining the marriage of her own children. Ensuing of this advice, this child will just marry to obtain the U.S. citizenship. After marriage, he got what he wanted and this marriage has no meaning anymore. In other words, at a very young age, his concept of marriage was a stepping stone for him to achieve his goal. I always feel sad when I heard parents giving similar advices to their children. The hearts of the young people are not evil but instead they are relatively kind. They need your guidance, but we always graffitied their consciences. As a result, as they grow up, their hearts become increasingly insensitive and evil.

Many parents think they know how to love their children. For example, they don't let their children attending church. They claim to protect him from being brainwashed by the church. Who is actually brainwashing the children? The words of the Bible or the parents themselves?

In a parallel passage, Luke 11:11, Jesus said that some parents gave the snakes and scorpions to their children when the children asked for fish and eggs. Do you think it is humorous? How could any parents given venomous snakes and scorpions to their children? But in fact, this is happening in our real life including the example I gave just now. The child is looking for true happiness in his future, his parents indeed give him evil suggestions and destroy his happiness.

I absolutely agree that we need to be careful, prudent and wise when dealing with evildoers. However, this does not mean that we need to decline kindness, we must make this clear. When you losing goodness, you will naturally turn into evil.

I find the words of Jesus are important to help me understand myself and the reason I need God. I need God not because I desire for something but because I want to know the evil within myself. I need a God of kindness to help me because I long to live a good life. The words in the Bible not only help me to understand my own self, but also help me to understand others. Why did I say so? Usually, your close friends and your family members often want to do good for your sake, but it always ended up of harming you, right? Then we were hurt with a lot of resentment and complaints in our hearts. There are many Christians, including those who have been Christians for many years, they still often talk about how their parents and others hurt them many years ago, they still couldn't let go. But the words of Bible teach us how to forgive others. Through the words of the Bible, I can understand that my dear family and friends were not mean to harm me. They love me indeed, but unfortunately they did not know God and they did not know what goodness was, thus they ended up giving bad opinions that causing devastating consequences. From the Bible, I learn to forgive others from the bottom of my hearts, so I am free now. I won't deny that I suffered a lot from these consequences, but now, I can honestly say before God that I am free and these bad consequences unable to affect me anymore. Regardless what kind of pain or bad thing happened to me before, I know that they are actually loving me, it's just that they didn't know the way to do it.

I think the words in the Bible are important to help and to encourage us. We shouldn't turn into evil ensue from the badness and evil of others. Many Christians still have the evil mind to hate and grumble on certain people who had hurt them before. If you are still under the evil influence of others, it subsequently will lead you to become evil too.

How can we escape from evil? In fact, the contrast between good and bad mentioned in those verses was referred to the strong contrasts between the evil of man and the goodness of God. Jesus said very clearly in the Books of Gospels that the Father in Heaven is happy to give you good things, only He is the only one truly GOD who can change us to be good. But the precondition is that you must aware of your own evil before you have the urgency to seek help from God. This urgency allows you to see your true needs, once you see it, you will come to seek God and knock on the door as mentioned in verse 11.

Let's look at Paul's experience. In Romans 7:18-19: ¹⁸For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice." This is Paul's own real experience, and I believe it is a reflection of us and each of us has also experienced it. It is impossible for you to have goodness when you are apart from God. How do we manifest that we have no goodness in our life? It is true that you always want to be good to others but indeed you hurting others. You did it involuntarily. Your good intention turns out to be hurtful. Paul recognized his problem, so he desperately sought God's help (Romans 7:24).

Why do you come to church? Why do you want to believe in God? I hope today's verses will help you to clearly understand why we should believe in God and why we should be Christians. Many people come to church because they hope God will provide what they need through prayers. We must get rid of this idolatrous mentality, otherwise, we neither be able to truly know God nor live out a true Christian life. Therefore, I hope that you come to church

to know God is because you realize that you don't have goodness in yourself, so you are urgently seeking the help from God.

Before becoming Christian, I didn't understand it, but I did believe in God for this reason. When I first came to church, I really thought I was a good person. I wear glasses with a decent look and I didn't do anything bad. When I was studying Bible in church, I often debated with the pastor. I don't think I'm a bad person and I went to church just for debating. I didn't feel like I needed God, until I read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5, chapter 6 and chapter 7. These words seemed to illuminate the darkness in my heart. I found out that I have all the human evils as mentioned in the Bible. Suddenly, I realized that I wasn't as good as my appearance looked like, the real situation inside me was just like Jesus said, full of anger, jealousy and lust. I struggled in my heart that time, I wanted to know how to get out of it, how to live out the beautiful life as mentioned in the Bible.

You cannot be joyful when there is no goodness in you. As a Christian, can we still be joyful if we still hold on our passed suffering? You can't be. These sufferings are always affecting you, making you angry, dissatisfied, and complaining. Unless you can see through your real need and you realise your urgency, you will not come to God for help. God is more than willing to help those who seek Him, as just what Jesus told us in 7:7-11. This help here doesn't mean that God will provide all the material needs that you asked for. On the contrary, if you seek for goodness, He is more than happy to help you.

Let's look at the parallel message, Luke 11:11-13, which is very similar to book of Matthew's, This verse says: ¹¹If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if *he asks* for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? ¹²Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will *your* heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

When Jesus was preaching, he needed to go to different places to repeat the same message, so when you read the Bible, you will find that some verses are similar but not identical. There were no recording technology to record Jesus' preaching. Hence, every time Jesus went to different places like Galilee, Nazareth, and Capernaum to preach, he needed to repeat the same contents. However, some sentences may be subtle different each time he preached. For example, when he saw someone or a child holding an egg when he was preaching, he would use the egg as a metaphor meanwhile he didn't mentioned eggs in other places. The differences in these details are understandable.

When we compare Luke 11:11-13 with Matthew 7:7-12, we can see that the good things as mentioned in Luke is actually the Holy Spirit. We have to look at two important points in Matthew 7:11. Firstly, the phrase emphasise on 'give to those who ask him' is very important. Jesus is encouraging us to have interaction with God rather than passively waiting for His help. Instead, you must actively ask from God when you know you have the need. God wants us to have an interactive relationship with Him. And this good thing - the Holy Spirit, can only be gained by asking, seeking, and knocking on the door. As I mentioned earlier, you must identify your problem and aware of your miserable situation prior to have this urgency to seek God.

In Matthew 7:7-12, why did Jesus suddenly talk about 'asking'? Before verse 7, it's talking about judging others whereas in verse 6, it said do not throw the valuables like pearl to pigs and dogs. Do pigs and dogs have anything to do with judging people? What do you use to judge people? Your mouth. When you judge people, you are biting people, just like pigs and dogs. Do you see your own evil? Jesus said don't give good things to pigs and dogs, they will bite you, because they can't discern between good and bad. What you think is good, for

them is bad and vice versa. As what Peter said, the pig will run back to roll in the mud after it was cleaned. For pig, rolling in the mud is good while cleaning is bad. Pigs and dogs are symbolize people who reverse the values. You give it something good and it will bite you. Are you this kind of person? That's why I say it's crucial to see your own evil clearly so that you can have this urgency to seek good. Moreover, Jesus told us that God wants us to interact with Him. If you seek it with all your heart, God will give it to you. However, God won't force you to have the good things unless you need it.

Let's look at the second point, the good thing that Jesus taught us specifically to ask from God is actually the Holy Spirit. From the book of Luke, we can conclude that there are many good things that God wants to give us, but the most important thing is the Holy Spirit. As long as you have the Holy Spirit in you, you have everything. God is willing to give us the best things and He wants to abide with us, empower us, help us break away from the bondage of evil, and teach us to discern good from evil. Do you yearn for this freedom? You can only have this freedom when your life is fully taken controlled by God.

Let's look at the next verse, in Nehemiah 9:20: " You also gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold Your manna from their mouth, and gave them water for their thirst." Even though the Israelites were unfaithful to God and rebelled against God, God still treated them kindly, continued to give them food and drink, and still allowed His Spirit to lead them. Nehemiah described the Spirit of God is a good spirit because he really can understand the nature of God's Spirit. Nehemiah emphasize goodness of God as God is good and His Spirit is good, thus, God's good Spirit will spontaneously teach us goodness. This is why God gives us His Spirit. A regenerated Christian with the Spirit of God will possess a unique characteristic, that is a sensitive conscience which hate evil and begin to be able to distinguish good from evil, especially sins in the words. When I was a non-Christian, I spoke casually, I liked to joke, I thought joking was humour, but I didn't realize that I was offending people. After becoming a Christian, I became very sensitive in what I said. At first, I didn't know why, but slowly I realized that it was the Spirit of God working in me. The Spirit of God will remind you and enable you to be sensitive and distinguish between good and evil, so you must hold on to this freedom and let God continue to lead you.

Finally, I use this scripture to encourage everyone. Paul said in Romans 8:14: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." The Spirit of God is the Holy Spirit. Why does God want to give us the Holy Spirit? This is because God wants us to live out the goodness that we want. This is the goal of being the sons of God. Our goal is to show the goodness of God in the world, so that people can see their own evil through us, and they are willing to long for this goodness and to ask before God. The Spirit of God will only be given to those who are willing to ask and obey. You must hold on to this point. When you first came to know God, your confession and repentance was your obedience to God. Why are we willing to confess our sins, repent and be baptized? In fact, this is our obedience to God, and because of our obedience, God gives us His Spirit. Therefore, I want you to hold on to the freedom and spirit that God has given you, follow Him and obey Him in your daily life.

I must stress on here that the Holy Spirit does not save us from any catastrophic situations or help to solve our problems. We must get rid of this idolatry mentality. If you have a chance, read the context of Matthew chapter 7, which is focus on teaching us in distinguishing between goodness and evil. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you definitely cannot walk on the path to eternal life, so Jesus said you must ask for this good thing. Heavenly Father is pleased to give it to you, because only the Spirit of God can help us to stay on this path that leads to eternal life. So I encourage every Christian to be clear about their goals. Once we

leave God, we have no goodness at all. Therefore, we must rely on God to help us and live out His goodness in this world, so that our lives can become light and attract people to God.

My sharing ends here, and we pray together: "Father in heaven, we come before you, please sow today's words, like a good seed in everyone's heart. Through these words, you renew us every day, leading us to walk this beautiful path. God, please help us to truly know You, because we really don't know how to distinguish between good and evil, and we ask for Your help so that we can stick to this correct path. Help the church as a whole, so that we can really live in one mind in our daily life to obey you. Let Your goodness be manifested through the church, become light, and attract all people to come to You, so we thank you for the spiritual food You have given. Please let these words live in our hearts forever, let these words continue to accompany us and guide our daily life even though we leave here today. We pray with one heart, please hear our prayer, Amen!