

CHAPTER 4

THE WICKED

All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal.
1 John 5:17 (RSV)

¹⁴*Do not enter the path of the wicked
And do not proceed in the way of evil men.*

¹⁵*Avoid it, do not pass by it;
Turn away from it and pass on.*
Proverbs 4:14-15 (NASB)

*Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD;
Assuredly, he will not be unpunished.*
Proverbs 16:5 (NASB)

*Pride goes before destruction,
And a haughty spirit before stumbling.*
Proverbs 16:18 (NASB)

*He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous,
Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD.*
Proverbs 17:15 (NASB)

*On every side the wicked prowl,
as vileness is exalted among the children of man.*
Psalms 12:8 (ESV)

*Haughty eyes and a proud heart,
the lamp of the wicked, are sin.*
Proverbs 21:4 (RSV)

*“Scoffer” is the name of the proud, haughty man
who acts with arrogant pride.*
Proverbs 21:24 (RSV)

*He who digs a pit will fall into it,
and a stone will come back upon him who starts it rolling.*
Proverbs 26:27 (RSV)

*If favour is shown to the wicked,
he does not learn righteousness;*
Isaiah 26:10(a) (RSV)

Who are the wicked?

Before we look at the wicked more closely, firstly in this chapter and then, in much greater detail, in Book 6, we need to make clear at the start that the wicked can be divided into two main sub-groups:

a) the non-religious wicked

These are the people who *openly reject God*, despise His Word, and live for themselves. They are dishonest and hard-faced and would never be mistaken for Christians:

³ *For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul,
and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD.*

⁴ *In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him;
all his thoughts are, "There is no God."*

Psalm 10:3-4 (ESV)

b) the religious wicked

These believe in God, *or say they do*, and may be 'churchgoers'. However, they are not sincere or genuine and have not been born again. They are false, and their hearts are hard and unrepentant. They don't have reverence for the Bible and don't regard it as infallible or as having authority over them. Many don't even read it at all and prefer to get their beliefs from the secular world, the media, denominational traditions, or their own opinions. They may look and sound like Christians, but they are not real:

They profess to know God, but they deny him by their deeds; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed.

Titus 1:16 (RSV)

The same kind of people existed in the Old Testament. Some Jewish people were not sincere and did not truly believe, even though they sounded and acted as if they were believers:

*Hear this, O house of Jacob,
who are called by the name of Israel,
and who came forth from the loins of Judah;
who swear by the name of the LORD,
and confess the God of Israel,
but not in truth or right.*

Isaiah 48:1 (RSV)

God recognises that such people are wicked, no matter how much time they spend in religious rituals and liturgy. He does not accept them, or their prayers, because He knows they are *false* and have no regard for the Bible and that they "cast His words" behind them:

²¹ *"I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts
I will not look upon.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.*

Amos 5:21-23 (RSV)

¹⁶ *But to the wicked God says:
"What right have you to recite my statutes,
or take my covenant on your lips?*

¹⁷ *For you hate discipline,
and you cast my words behind you.*

¹⁸ *If you see a thief, you are a friend of his;*

*and you keep company with adulterers.
19 "You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.*

Psalm 50:16-19 (RSV)

So, the label 'wicked' is not limited only to those who do not believe in God or who even hate Him. Those who believe in God, or claim to, can also be wicked, or become so, if they disregard Him. Even to think such things of God, they would have to believe in Him in the first place. But, although they know He exists, *they do not honour Him or fear Him*. That is true of many people in churches who have no fear of God and, in particular, no fear of being judged by Him. They do not believe that God sees what they do and they don't care what He thinks anyway:

*He says to himself, "God has forgotten;
He has hidden His face; He will never see it."*

Psalm 10:11 (NASB)

*Why does the wicked renounce God,
and say in his heart, "Thou wilt not call to account"?*

Psalm 10:13 (RSV)

*Woe to those who go to great depths
to hide their plans from the LORD,
who do their work in darkness and think,
"Who sees us? Who will know?"*

Isaiah 29:15 (NIV)

If a person believes in God, and knows at least some of the Bible, then their responsibility for their sin is much greater than that of a person who does not. To know what God has said, *but then to ignore it*, is worse, and more wicked, than the sins of those who don't know anything about God or His Word. That is why God's judgment on Israel has been so severe, because they knew more, and had been given more, than the Gentile nations:

⁵ "Thus says the Lord GOD, 'This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her. ⁶ But she has rebelled against My ordinances more wickedly than the nations and against My statutes more than the lands which surround her; for they have rejected My ordinances and have not walked in My statutes.'

Ezekiel 5:5-6 (NASB)

King Solomon tells us that even where there is justice and righteousness, there is also wickedness. We are all a mixture and, therefore, there is an element of wickedness, or the potential for wickedness, in every one of us:

Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness.

Ecclesiastes 3:16 (RSV)

Solomon also says that it is even possible to offer a sacrifice to God, but for it still to be viewed as evil, because it is a "*sacrifice of fools*":

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil.

Ecclesiastes 5:1 (RSV)

Even though they believed in Him, God viewed most of the Exodus generation as wicked

A sobering passage in Numbers speaks of almost an entire generation of Israelites whom God describes as wicked. They were those who were adults when God miraculously rescued them from slavery in Egypt, bringing them through the Red Sea and into the wilderness. However, He declares that the vast majority of them will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land. They therefore lost their *inheritance*, though not necessarily their *salvation*. God then kept them wandering in the desert for 38 years waiting for all of those who were over the age of 20 at the time of the Exodus to die of disease or old age:

²⁶ *And the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,* ²⁷ *“How long shall this wicked congregation grumble against me? I have heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me.”* ²⁸ *Say to them, ‘As I live, declares the LORD, what you have said in my hearing I will do to you:* ²⁹ *your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, listed in the census from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me,* ³⁰ *not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.*

³¹ *But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected.* ³² *But as for you, your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness.* ³³ *And your children shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years and shall suffer for your faithlessness, until the last of your dead bodies lies in the wilderness.* ³⁴ *According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, a year for each day, you shall bear your iniquity forty years, and you shall know my displeasure.’* ³⁵ *I, the LORD, have spoken. Surely this will I do to all this wicked congregation who are gathered together against me: in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.”*

Numbers 14:26-35 (ESV)

God was angry with almost all of that generation because they had behaved wickedly. That is how He viewed their attitudes and their unbelief. Yet, what had they done? And why did their attitude anger God so much? This is the alarming part, because they actually sound rather like our modern Western churches. These are the kind of things they did:

- a) They *grumbled* against God because of their circumstances. They complained about their food and the initial lack of water and about being in the wilderness. But most of us grumble and complain about far smaller things than those and we can be equally ungrateful, if not more so.
- b) They *had a lot of knowledge*, for which God held them accountable. They had personally seen a series of extraordinary miracles such as walking through the Red Sea with the water stacked up as a wall to their left and right. Then they saw that water come crashing down on the Egyptian army. Yet once that series of miracles was over they quickly began to *doubt God’s promises* and to question whether He would even provide food and water. But the truth is most of us have had similar doubts. We have not seen such spectacular miracles, but we do have the Bible, in which these are written about. So, we have at least indirect knowledge, for which we are going to be held equally accountable, if not more so.
- c) They *criticised and blamed God* for their circumstances. They also slandered and misrepresented Him. Some even said that God must hate them because He was exposing them to such hardship and inconvenience. In saying such things they defamed God’s character. They also discouraged and misled younger people and tarnished their view of God.
- d) They *did not sufficiently value the promises* that God had made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of which they, as the Hebrew nation, were all beneficiaries. Like Esau, most of them had failed to value the promises and they did not appreciate the great privilege of being included within God’s Chosen People. Again, many of us do exactly the same, despising our birthright as Christians, and failing to value God’s promises in particular, and the Bible in general.

The point is that when the people of Israel behaved in these ways, or displayed these attitudes, God viewed them as wicked, especially that particular generation which came out of Egypt as adults. They had heard God's Word through Moses and had directly witnessed God's miraculous power. Therefore, they were judged very severely and held more strongly accountable for their attitudes in the light of the enormous *knowledge* and other *privileges* they had been granted. Few of us would think of them as an example of wicked people.

We would be more likely to have in mind drug-dealers and paedophiles. But that is not necessarily how God sees it. In His eyes, it is also wicked, and possibly more wicked, for us to have been given knowledge, understanding, blessings and advantages and yet to *ignore those things* and act like an unbeliever instead. God might well see such attitudes as more serious, and more wicked, than the actions of those who lie and steal. There is no basis for us to be complacent about any of this, because we have been given far more access to God's Word than the Israelites of that generation ever had.

At any rate, the point is that none of us can assume that because we know the Bible, and believe in God, we cannot therefore be viewed as wicked. Many of us may be surprised, and even appalled, when we face Jesus in judgment, to find that His appraisal of us is far worse than the way we see ourselves. That needs to concern all of us as we contemplate the Judgment that is coming which, by the way, we should all be thinking of regularly.

Likewise, God viewed it as wickedness when the people of Israel asked Samuel to give them a King, rather than have God as their King.

Another surprising example of where a group of people are described by God as being wicked is the generation of Israelites which asked Samuel to give them a King. God wanted for Himself to be their King. But the people wanted a man, so they could be like all the other nations. God considered their request for a king, and their implicit rejection of Him, to be wickedness:

And Samuel said to all Israel, "Behold, I have obeyed your voice in all that you have said to me and have made a king over you.

1 Samuel 12:1 (ESV)

⁶ And Samuel said to the people, "The LORD is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. ⁷ Now therefore stand still that I may plead with you before the LORD concerning all the righteous deeds of the LORD that he performed for you and for your fathers. ⁸ When Jacob went into Egypt, and the Egyptians oppressed them, then your fathers cried out to the LORD and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your fathers out of Egypt and made them dwell in this place. ⁹ But they forgot the LORD their God. And he sold them into the hand of Sisera, commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab. And they fought against them.

¹⁰ And they cried out to the LORD and said, 'We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD and have served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. But now deliver us out of the hand of our enemies, that we may serve you.' ¹¹ And the LORD sent Jerubbaal and Barak and Jephthah and Samuel and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and you lived in safety. ¹² And when you saw that Nahash the king of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, 'No, but a king shall reign over us,' when the LORD your God was your king. ¹³ And now behold the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; behold, the LORD has set a king over you.

1 Samuel 12:6-13 (ESV)

¹⁶ Now therefore stand still and see this great thing that the LORD will do before your eyes. ¹⁷ Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call upon the LORD, that he may send thunder and rain. And you shall know and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking for yourselves a king." ¹⁸ So Samuel called upon the LORD, and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day, and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel.

1 Samuel 12:16-18 (ESV)

The way God viewed this was that the Israelites were rejecting Him. To do that, despite knowing who He is, what He had done for them, and their unique role as the Chosen People, was seen by God as wickedness. He saw the Israelites of Samuel's day as being accountable for all the knowledge they had and for all their other privileges. So, for people in their position to prefer to have a human king, and to be like all the other nations instead of being God's special people, was a gross insult to God.

Again, that has got to make us consider our own position. Many of us are at least equally guilty of the same attitudes they had, and of rejecting God in favour of some other person or thing. Some of the religious wicked *know* that they are false. However, some of them are deceived about it themselves and are not necessarily aware of how wicked they are. Many do not even realise they are not real Christians and completely assume that they are saved when they aren't, or even that everybody will be saved. They will get a terrible shock when they die.

The religious wicked may seem to be saved, but God knows those who are His and those who are not.

This group can therefore be mistaken for Christians and they frequently are. However, *God knows those who are His, and those who aren't*. He makes no mistakes and cannot be deceived. In some ways, the religious wicked are actually the larger threat to the real Church as they are more likely to be listened to and believed by others when they preach myths and false doctrines of their own making. They then cause others to follow them and to reject the truth.

The judgment of God is going to fall heavily on those false teachers who reject the truth, and who lead so many others to do the same. However, His judgment will also come upon those members of lukewarm and apostate churches who prefer to hear false teaching and pleasant, positive sermons about things like prosperity rather than being taught the real truth from the Bible by genuine leaders and teachers:

⁹ *For this is a rebellious people, false sons,
Sons who refuse to listen*

To the instruction of the LORD;

¹⁰ *Who say to the seers, "You must not see visions";
And to the prophets, "You must not prophesy to us what is right,
Speak to us pleasant words,
Prophesy illusions.*

¹¹ *"Get out of the way, turn aside from the path,
Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel."*

¹² *Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,
"Since you have rejected this word
And have put your trust in oppression and guile, and have relied on them,*

¹³ *Therefore this iniquity will be to you
Like a breach about to fall,
A bulge in a high wall,*

Whose collapse comes suddenly in an instant,

¹⁴ *Whose collapse is like the smashing of a potter's jar,
So ruthlessly shattered
That a sherd will not be found among its pieces
To take fire from a hearth
Or to scoop water from a cistern."*

Isaiah 30:9-14 (NASB)

Please see below, and also in my Book 6, a discussion of some passages from the letter to the Hebrews. From these it emerges that even *real* Christians, who have been genuinely saved and *have begun to be*

sanctified, can fall away, *i.e. become apostate*, and join the ranks of the religious wicked. It is also made clear that they will end up in the Lake of Fire. Even more alarmingly, we are told that it is virtually impossible for such apostates to repent, and to regain a real faith, once they have degenerated in this way.

That is how seriously God takes all of this, and therefore it needs to make us tremble. We need to be clear then, that when we speak of the wicked, we are not always referring to outright *unbelievers*. Sometimes we mean people *who look and sound like Christians*, and who *may once have been real Christians*, but have since fallen away and become apostate.

Either way, whether they *ceased to be real Christians*, or *never were real* to begin with, they are now false, and are a danger to the real Church. In the pages that follow, and within Book 6 too, we shall repeatedly refer to 'the wicked', but you need to be aware, in each case, which type is being spoken of, *i.e. the religious wicked, or the non-religious wicked, or both.*

The wicked in general, whether religious or not

Another name which is frequently applied to the wicked in the Bible, and also to fools, is the *scoffer*. Such a person mocks and belittles the things that God considers precious. Therefore, at the very least, a scoffer is automatically a fool, but many of them are wicked as well:

***"Scoffer" is the name of the proud,
haughty man who acts with arrogant pride.
Proverbs 21:24 (RSV)***

Another feature of the wicked, which they also share with fools, is that *they do not fear God*. In particular, *they do not fear His judgment* and do not expect ever to be found out, caught or punished. They believe that they can do whatever they wish and that there will be no adverse consequences for them, either now or in eternity:

***¹ Transgression speaks to the wicked
deep in his heart;
there is no fear of God
before his eyes.
² For he flatters himself in his own eyes
that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.
Psalm 36:1-2 (ESV)***

We hear of the wicked even as far back as Genesis chapter six. By that time in the Earth's history God had become dismayed and regretted making mankind. Things had degenerated to such a low point that almost the whole population of the world was classified by Him as wicked. The only exceptions were Noah and his family:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
Genesis 6:5 (NASB)

The situation became so grave that God solved it by wiping out almost all of the people on the Earth, using a worldwide flood. That indicates how seriously God takes wickedness and shows that we cannot afford not to take it seriously ourselves. Moreover, He is going to judge the whole world again, albeit by fire next time, not water. To begin with, Jesus Himself will destroy all the wicked when He returns at His second coming:

For the ruthless will come to an end and the scorner will be finished,

***Indeed all who are intent on doing evil will be cut off;
Isaiah 29:20 (NASB)***

¹ *For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze,” says the LORD of hosts, “so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”*² *“But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.* ³ *You will tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day which I am preparing,” says the LORD of hosts.*

Malachi 4:1-3 (NASB)

After the 1000 year Millennial reign of King Jesus is over, the very surface of the Earth itself will be burned up and all wickedness will then be fully and finally removed:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up.

2 Peter 3:10 (RSV)

Moreover, all those who have rejected the Gospel will face their complete and eternal judgment at the Great White Throne Judgment, after which they will all be cast into the Lake of Fire:

¹¹ *Then I saw a great white throne and him who sat upon it; from his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them.* ¹² *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done.* ¹³ *And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done.* ¹⁴ *Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire;* ¹⁵ *and if any one’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Revelation 20:11-15 (RSV)

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.”

Revelation 21:8 (RSV)

God scorns, abhors, curses, and even hates, the wicked and He intends to wipe them all out

The wicked are at the bottom end of the spectrum. Not only are they fools, they go even further and are also arrogant, dishonest and *hard-hearted*. Many of them hate God, or at least despise Him, which is to say that they under-value Him, whether they realise it or not. That is the case whether they are religious or not. God actually hates the wicked, and all that they stand for. He considers them an *abomination* and treats them as His *enemies*.

If you are not convinced of all that, consider the following passages and note how strongly God feels and how resolved He is to confront and punish the wicked. I have included several such passages because so many people find it hard to believe that God really will deal with the wicked in this way. They have been told that He loves everyone, and hates nobody, and that He will forgive everyone and punish nobody. But there is no basis for those views in the Bible. God’s hatred for sin, *and of the wicked*, emerges clearly, however much our apostate generation might deny those facts:

⁴ ***For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil may not dwell with you.***

⁵ ***The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;***

you hate all evildoers.

*⁶You destroy those who speak lies;
the LORD abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.
Psalm 5:4-6 (ESV)*

*³¹Do not envy a man of violence
and do not choose any of his ways,
³²for the devious person is an abomination to the LORD,
but the upright are in his confidence.
³³The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous.
³⁴Toward the scorers he is scornful,
but to the humble he gives favour.
Proverbs 3:31-34 (ESV)*

*²⁰Men of perverse mind are an abomination to the LORD,
but those of blameless ways are his delight.
²¹Be assured, an evil man will not go unpunished,
but those who are righteous will be delivered.
Proverbs 11:20-21 (RSV)*

*²The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. ³The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet.
Nahum 1:2-3 (ESV)*

*⁷The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. ⁸But with an overflowing flood he will make a full end of his adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.
Nahum 1:7-8 (RSV)*

*God scorns the wicked,
but the upright enjoy his favour.
Proverbs 14:9 (RSV)*

*The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the LORD,
the words of the pure are pleasing to him.
Proverbs 15:26 (RSV)*

*⁸Your hand will find out all your enemies;
your right hand will find out those who hate you.
⁹You will make them as a blazing oven
when you appear.
The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath;
and fire will consume them.
Psalm 21:8-9 (RSV)*

*All the wicked of the earth thou dost count as dross;
therefore I love thy testimonies.
Psalm 119:119 (RSV)*

*But God will strike the heads of his enemies,
the hairy crown of him who walks in his guilty ways.
Psalm 68:21 (ESV)*

*He will bring back on them their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the LORD our God will wipe them out.
Psalm 94:23 (RSV)*

*¹God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered;
and those who hate him shall flee before him!
²As smoke is driven away,
so you shall drive them away;
as wax melts before fire,
so the wicked shall perish before God!
Psalm 68:1-2 (ESV)*

To be classified as ‘wicked’ does not require us to be famous or to do spectacularly evil things

Do not make the mistake of assuming that when the Bible speaks of the wicked it means only spectacularly evil people, such as murderers, drug-dealers and dictators. It also includes many people who are *entirely ordinary*, but who have *proud, hard, dishonest hearts*. In particular they have *no willingness to listen to God or to repent*. They obstinately close their ears until, eventually, they become deaf to God’s convicting voice. That includes the religious wicked who are not sincere, or who are even outright apostates.

They have no love for the truth, no genuine repentance and no fear of God. In fact, such falsely religious people are often the proudest and most hard-hearted of all. They are frequently also the most antagonistic to real Christians. The wicked are very willing to lie, whether they are religious or non-religious. They are also mean and selfish, and they have a contempt for God, i.e. for the real God, as opposed to the false god they create for themselves.

The wicked also have contempt for genuine Christians, who are hated by all of the wicked, but with particular venom by the falsely religious. Perhaps the main reason for the increased antagonism that the religious wicked display is that genuine Christians make false Christians feel convicted. Their very lives are a rebuke to them, even when they aren’t saying anything, and the wicked do not like to be rebuked, however politely or sensitively it is done.

Wicked people exist at every level of the social scale and make up perhaps 20% to 30% of the population. It may be a lot more. I don’t know, as only God knows their exact number. It will also vary from country to country, and from one generation to the next, but that is my personal guess. God is determined to resist the wicked and to bring them to judgment. Ultimately, He will destroy them all i.e. end their lives, because He classes them as His enemies. I emphasise that fact again, for the sake of those who still find it hard to believe. Consider these further verses:

*The LORD preserves all who love him;
but all the wicked he will destroy.
Psalm 145:20 (RSV)*

*God is a just judge,
And God is angry with the wicked every day.
Psalm 7:11 (NKJV)*

*The face of the LORD is against evildoers,
to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.
Psalm 34:16 (RSV)*

Evil shall slay the wicked; and those who

hate the righteous will be condemned.
Psalm 34:21 (RSV)

¹*Why do you boast, O mighty man,
of mischief done against the godly?
All the day ²you are plotting destruction.
Your tongue is like a sharp razor,
you worker of treachery.*
³*You love evil more than good,
and lying more than speaking the truth.*
⁴*You love all words that devour,
O deceitful tongue.*
⁵*But God will break you down for ever;
he will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living.*
Psalm 52:1-5 (RSV)

Some readers may be surprised that I spoke of false Christians as having *contempt* for God, or at least that they *despise*, i.e. devalue, the real God. I also spoke of them constructing a false god of their own because every false Christian I have ever met has *redefined* or *rebranded* God in some way to suit their own beliefs, opinions, preferences, likes and dislikes. Above all, they do it to make Him fit in with their own *denominational traditions, customs and practices*.

Any person whose focus is on *tradition* rather than on the Bible, and who seeks to uphold their own *denomination* rather than the truth, is in danger of creating their own false god in place of the real God. Such a false god is then likely to tell them that real Christians, who don't redefine God, but accept what He says about Himself in the Bible, need to be persecuted, and even killed, for the sake of defending that tradition or denomination. Throughout history, and also today, falsely religious people have found it easy to justify such persecution.

There was also wickedness amongst those who claimed to be believers in the days of the prophet Jeremiah. In the passages below, note the kinds of things which God regards as wicked. The sins described are not spectacular ones. They include things like not having any fear of God, being stubborn and rebellious, telling lies, and giving (and also accepting) false prophecies. The problem is that all of those things, and more besides, *are being done regularly in very many churches today* and on an even larger scale than in Jeremiah's time:

²¹ *'Now hear this, O foolish and senseless people,
Who have eyes but do not see;
Who have ears but do not hear.*
²² *'Do you not fear Me?' declares the LORD.
'Do you not tremble in My presence?
For I have placed the sand as a boundary for the sea,
An eternal decree, so it cannot cross over it.
Though the waves toss, yet they cannot prevail;
Though they roar, yet they cannot cross over it.*
²³ *'But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart;
They have turned aside and departed.*
²⁴ *'They do not say in their heart,
"Let us now fear the LORD our God,
Who gives rain in its season,
Both the autumn rain and the spring rain,
Who keeps for us
The appointed weeks of the harvest."*
²⁵ *'Your iniquities have turned these away,*

And your sins have withheld good from you.
²⁶ *'For wicked men are found among My people,*
They watch like fowlers lying in wait;
They set a trap,
They catch men.
²⁷ *'Like a cage full of birds,*
So their houses are full of deceit;
Therefore they have become great and rich.
²⁸ *'They are fat, they are sleek,*
They also excel in deeds of wickedness;
They do not plead the cause,
The cause of the orphan, that they may prosper;
And they do not defend the rights of the poor.
²⁹ *'Shall I not punish these people?' declares the LORD,*
'On a nation such as this
Shall I not avenge Myself?'
³⁰ *"An appalling and horrible thing*
Has happened in the land:
³¹ *The prophets prophesy falsely,*
And the priests rule on their own authority;
And My people love it so!
But what will you do at the end of it?
Jeremiah 5:21-31 (NASB)

To whom shall I speak and give warning
That they may hear?
Behold, their ears are closed
And they cannot listen.
Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach to them;
They have no delight in it.
Jeremiah 6:10 (NASB)

The wickedness that has always been, and still is, within the Roman Catholic Church

Consider what the Roman Catholic church has done over many centuries, *and is still doing*, to oppose genuine, biblical Christianity. Their power was at its peak for over a thousand years, from the fifth century until the sixteenth. During that time they dominated all of Europe and even kings submitted to the popes. All real Christianity was driven underground, reading the Bible was forbidden, and they hunted, persecuted and killed genuine Christians, all over Europe.

Such real Christians have always existed, in every century, and the Roman Catholic church has *always* persecuted them, wherever and whenever it had the power to do so. However, it was in the years before and during the Reformation, when the popes were fighting to preserve their power over the people, that we saw them at their most brutal, arrogant and devious. *John Wycliff*, who lived in the fourteenth century, from 1320 to 1384, was originally a Roman Catholic priest but he then began to study the Bible. That was strictly forbidden for lay people, but very few priests ever did so either.

Indeed, priests still don't study it much today. Most of the priests I have known, which is a lot, barely know the Bible at all, even at the shallowest level. As usually happens when Catholics begin to read the Bible, Wycliff saw that what he was reading did not match the doctrines, practices, traditions or standards of behaviour, that he had grown up with. From what he read, he began to understand the real Gospel, was born again, and became a true Christian. That did not go down well with those in authority, so they tried to silence him, using various forms of pressure, *including violence*.

But Wycliff refused to be silenced. Instead he trained up hundreds of lay preachers who came to be called ‘*Lollards*. They went round the UK, and also into Europe, preaching the real Gospel and telling people the truth about the Bible and also about the corruption in the Catholic church. Many of those men were then put to death simply because they preached the real Gospel, told the truth about Catholicism, and read the Bible out loud in public to the ordinary people. Those were three activities which the Catholic hierarchy were determined to stamp out.

The popes and bishops did not want any member of the public to read the Bible. They knew that if people did start to read it, they would soon realise that what Catholicism had *become* was totally different from what the Bible says the Church *should be*. Their entire power structure, and all of their pomp and vast wealth, would then have been threatened. There was no way they would ever permit that and they still don’t today. However, Wycliff continued to defy them and went ahead and translated the New Testament into English in the face of all their threats.

Wycliff had a huge influence, both in England and in Europe, where his ideas and teaching had spread. His influence even went as far as what we now call the Czech Republic and reached another great man called *Jan Hus*. Wycliff also laid the foundations for the work of *Martin Luther*, *John Calvin* and many others who later played key roles in the Reformation of the sixteenth century. That is why Wycliff is now referred to as “*the morning star of the Reformation*”. He would undoubtedly have been put to death were it not for the protection of a very powerful man called *John of Gaunt*.

He was a wealthy aristocrat, and was related to royalty, but he was also a Bible-believing Christian, and he arranged for Wycliff to be accompanied by armed soldiers everywhere he went. They were needed to protect him from being assassinated. Without them, the Pope would certainly have killed him. That is how venomous they were towards him and the real Gospel. One day Wycliff was discussing the question of martyrdom, which many of his followers had suffered, and he said: “*Why do you talk of seeking the crown of martyrdom afar? Just preach the gospel of Christ to haughty prelates and martyrdom will not fail you*”.

So, moving back to our main point, would it be right to describe as *wicked* the Roman Catholic popes and bishops, and those working for them, who opposed Wycliff and killed his followers? Am I exaggerating if I do? I don’t think so. Let’s summarise just some of what they did and then you can decide for yourself:

- a) They forbade the translation of the Bible into any language other than Latin, so that only educated priests could read it (not that many of them ever bothered to read it either, and very many priests were not educated men anyway).
- b) They destroyed any English Bibles they found.
- c) They put the Lollards to death for preaching the real Gospel and telling the truth about Roman Catholicism.
- d) They wanted to put Wycliff himself to death and tried hard to do so.

It would surely be difficult to describe the actions and attitudes of those popes and bishops as anything other than wicked. They were proud, arrogant, devious and cruel. They were also selfish, greedy for money and power, and had no respect at all for the truth, or the Bible. It was not just *Wycliff* and his followers that were persecuted. They did the same, and worse, to the Czech reformer, *Jan Hus*, who preached the true Gospel fearlessly and was burned alive at the stake for doing so.

Likewise, in the early sixteenth century, *William Tyndale* (1494-1536) translated a large part of the Bible into English from Greek and Hebrew, despite the violent opposition of the Pope and bishops of his day. He also preached the truth about the Gospel and about the corrupt nature of the Roman Catholic church and its leaders. One day a Roman Catholic bishop said to Tyndale:

“Well then, it [is] better to be without God’s laws than the Pope’s”.

Tyndale boldly replied:

“I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spares my life I will take care that a ploughboy knows more of the Scriptures than [you do]!”

That aim was not as hard as it sounds, because Catholic clergy, both then and now, know very little about the Bible and do not read much of it. *Tyndale* was eventually lured to his death by tricks and lies. His only ‘crimes’ were to speak the truth, to preach the real Gospel, and to translate the Bible into English. How can we call what they did to him anything other than wicked? This brutality did not only occur at the time of the Reformation. It is the way the Roman Catholic church *has always behaved, throughout its entire history* and it still does, wherever it has the power to do so.

One common response, if one speaks of these atrocities, is for Catholics to say *“That was all in the past. Things have changed now, especially since the 2nd Vatican Council of the 1960s”*. However, Roman Catholicism *has not changed* in any material sense. Its essential *character and nature* are just as they have always been. Moreover, they have never, at any stage, renounced or condemned any of the wicked things they have ever done, or the actions of any of their present or former leaders.

The only real change that has taken place is that the Reformation freed many European nations from the *power* of the Popes and thus reduced the influence of Catholicism over them. But that was contrary to their wishes and, if they still had the power today to put people to death, they would assuredly do so, *as they always did when they had got that power*. If you aren’t convinced that the character of the Roman Catholic leadership is the same as it always was, you need only look at the worldwide scandal of the sexual abuse of children by paedophile priests.

On top of that there is also the systematic cover-up of that abuse by the bishops, cardinals and popes. Most of them, and probably all of them, were *well aware of what was going on*, and of the extent and gravity of what was being covered up. Yet they all looked after their institution and did whatever was needed to protect it, rather than the thousands of children who were being abused, on an industrial scale, by priests. For example, Pope John-Paul II, who ‘reigned’ from 1978 to 2005, and was recently made what they call a ‘saint’, consistently covered up reports of child abuse and took no action against his clergy.

When anyone spoke out about paedophile priests, they were silenced rather than helped, and the priests concerned went completely unpunished. If there was any trouble locally, the offending priests were simply moved to another parish, where they could continue, as before, unchallenged and unsupervised. If we look at just one very small country, Austria, we see that, at the time of writing, the Roman Catholic church there has paid out token compensation to 1800 victims of abuse. However, they did so on the strict condition that those victims *must remain silent* about what was done to them.

Moreover, *not even one Austrian priest or bishop has been removed from his position*, either for the abuse itself, or for failing to tackle the abusers. How can one find that anything other than appalling, not only the initial abuse, but also the way it was then covered up? And how can they possibly justify taking no action whatsoever against *any* of the guilty priests? And why should the victims be required to stay silent when it might well help them to speak about it?

The way the Catholic authorities have acted proves conclusively that there is no genuine repentance on their part, or even remorse. They care only for their own reputation, the preservation of the institution, and maintaining their own power base. However, I am not just picking on Austria, as if they were somehow worse than the rest. What happened there is entirely typical of how this scandal has been handled. This paedophilia and its subsequent cover-up has not just happened once or twice, here and there.

It has been *happening systematically, in thousands of places, all over the world*. In fact, even now, we are generally only getting to hear of a fraction of the abuse that went on, and is still going on. The organisation called SNAP – *Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests*, represents 18,000 people from 79 countries who were sexually abused by priests. But those who have chosen to do something about it are only a small fraction of the true number of victims who are still alive today.

Even that huge number, 18,000, is just the tip of a vast iceberg that remains hidden. Moreover, we are only really getting to hear of it in countries in which the majority of the population is *not* Roman Catholic. In the countries where they do have a majority, and especially in the developing world, they find it much easier to cover things up, suppress criticism, undermine witnesses and stop the police enquiring effectively into complaints.

The wickedness that has been, and still is, within the Reformed, Lutheran and other Protestant churches and in the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches too

If anyone thinks I am singling out the Roman Catholic church alone for criticism, I assure you I am not. It simply contains more doctrinal errors, has a falser gospel, has more paedophiles, and has done more wicked things, than any other denomination. But, it is far from being alone in any of these things. Many other churches have also acted in ways which can only be called wicked, albeit on a smaller scale. For example, some of the Reformers (by no means all) oppressed those people who wanted to take the Reformation even further.

Those reformers promoted their own opinions and practices by punishing and even executing those who disagreed with them. They displayed the very same pride, haughtiness and cruelty that the Popes had shown to them. Some of the leadership of the new Protestant denominations began very quickly to impose their views by force. They abused their positions of power in very similar ways to how the popes and bishops had always operated. One example is their oppressive treatment of the Anabaptists, who preached believers' baptism instead of baptism for babies, which most Reformed leaders continued to practise.

Likewise, in Geneva, *John Calvin* and his followers were creating a city which was supposedly *made up entirely of 'the elect'*, an absurd idea which they invented. They therefore became the leaders not only of the church in Geneva, but also of the city itself. They took over the councils, and also the civil and criminal courts, and began to make the laws and to enforce them brutally. They became appallingly domineering and forced people to go to church, as well as imposing dictatorial rules about conduct and speech.

They were proving, by their own oppressive actions, that the craving to control and dominate other people is deeply ingrained in the fallen human nature. It is by no means limited to Roman Catholicism, or to any other denomination. Any person who achieves absolute power, as some of the reformers did, just as the popes and bishops had done, is likely to end up a dictator. One of the many savage things which happened in Geneva, was that *John Calvin* had a part to play in the execution of a good man, *Michael Servetus*, who was put to death merely because he would not accept Calvin's teachings.

Today, the supporters of Calvin try to play down the extent of his personal involvement in Servetus being *burned alive at the stake for his beliefs*. However, it is clear that Calvin was *personally* involved and that he acted just like a pope. An even starker example is Martin Luther. He began well and said many true things as he stood up to the Roman Catholic church and its false practices and teachings. Consequently, he is revered by those who admire his early actions and beliefs and there is therefore a reluctance to hear about how he ended up.

However, the truth is that, in many ways, even Luther became a heretic. He rejected the book of James, calling it a "*letter of straw*" and taught that it should not even be in the Bible. He did the same with the book of Revelation and urged people not to bother with it. However, the lowest point for Luther came

at the end of his life when he turned against the Jews and publicly taught, and wrote, *that they should be persecuted and killed*. These were not just unscripted off-the-cuff remarks, which he did not really mean, and later regretted.

He *deliberately and clearly taught that people everywhere should kill the Jews*. Therefore, the sermons and writings of Martin Luther were later used as the theological justification for the Nazi holocaust. Indeed, *Adolf Hitler* quoted Luther's teachings in his book, '*Mein Kampf*', in which he set out the manifesto of the Nazi Party. Moreover, Hitler was not misquoting, misunderstanding or exaggerating any of Luther's words. Neither was he taking them out of context. It was an *accurate* representation of what Luther had said and was in its *proper context*.

One very rarely hears about any of this, because it is not considered polite to speak ill of a "great man" like Luther, who is an idol for many. But the facts are what the facts are. What Luther taught, at least in his later years, was evil, quite apart from his heretical views about the authority of some of the Scriptures. Therefore, if we have any regard for the truth, we need to be willing to admit such facts and to speak of them openly, without hiding anything. We must not make an idol of any man, however famous he might be, and no matter how much good he might also have done in other ways.

What therefore, do the brutal actions and policies of men like Luther and Calvin amount to? Would it be fair to call it wickedness? I think it would. Some of the reformers (not all) took on the very same haughty, autocratic ways as the popes and bishops, albeit not to the same extent. However, that was probably only because they never achieved the same levels of unlimited *power* that the popes had. If the reformers had had more power, some of them would have used it and would have been even more vicious than they already were.

We see the same dictatorial features today, although in less dramatic ways, but that is probably only because the churches no longer have the power to execute anybody. However, there are still controlling, manipulative and dominating leaders in almost all the denominational churches, at least in all the ones I have ever been in. In some cases that abuse of authority is only at a low level. Fleshly, insecure men jockey for position and do whatever they feel they need to do to preserve their own position.

However, that behaviour often reaches the level of outright wickedness. For example, many church leaders lie. Moreover, they do so entirely deliberately, and regularly, not just by mistake or only on rare occasions. They also manipulate and dominate people to get their own way. I know several Evangelical and Charismatic church leaders who have gone way beyond just being carnal. Some have undoubtedly acted wickedly and with deliberate intent. Yet that is just my own experience. Far worse things have been done elsewhere, that I have only read of or heard about.

The religious wicked have the same desire to rule, in every denomination, and are not willing to be questioned or contradicted.

All of the religious wicked, of whatever denomination, are proud and haughty, especially those who are '*ordained*' as '*clergy*'. They display this in many ways, for example by their love of the trappings of office and the power it gives them. They like their special clothes and to be set apart, deferred to, and held in honour. In particular they hate to be challenged or questioned, especially by 'lay' people. I describe such leaders as having a '*clergy mentality*'.

They come to believe that God has elevated them to a special status above ordinary members of the church, and that He has appointed them to rule. They see it as their natural place to *teach, not to be taught*, and to *correct, not to be corrected*. Few ever say any of that out loud, in express words, but that is how they think, and it shows in their actions and tone, especially when you begin to look for it. An example of this kind of haughtiness can be seen in the Pharisees who spoke to the man born blind, whose sight Jesus had restored:

²⁴ So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner."²⁵ He answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see."²⁶ They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"²⁷ He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?"²⁸ And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses."²⁹ We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

³⁰ The man answered, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes."³¹ We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.³² Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind.³³ If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."³⁴ They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

John 9:24-34 (RSV)

These Pharisees were incensed at the idea of an ordinary man having the impertinence to tell *them* something. They were not willing even to be questioned, let alone instructed or corrected, by 'non-clergy'. I have come across that attitude consistently, in *virtually every church I have ever attended*. There has been that same assumption of superiority wherever I have tried to question leaders, and even more so if I have tried to tell them something. They have seen it as *their role to teach me, not mine to teach them*.

Moreover, the more accurate my point was, the more bitterly they resented it. So, they were not objecting to me making *inaccurate or unjustified* remarks, but to the fact that they were *true*. However, they were mainly objecting to the idea that someone would have the nerve to 'answer back' at all and not to show them the deference that they expected to receive. Yet, the truth is that we are *all* supposed to teach, correct, question, challenge and inform each other. It is meant to be done *by everybody and to everybody*, regardless of rank, role or status.

The only position of authority the Bible recognises within a *local* church is that of an 'elder' (*presbuteros*). But that just means a mature man, who is recognised as a leader within a local church. They were not 'clergy' of the kind that we have today. They were not 'ordained' either, and they did not wear fancy clothes, or have any special status or powers. Therefore, they were not considered to be high and lifted up.

On the contrary, an elder was meant to submit, defer, and listen to, *all other members of the church*, not just to those of a particular role or status. In short, we are *all* meant to submit to *all* other believers and *to all* fellow workers whenever they have something to say to teach or correct us. Thus, when the circumstances require it, an elder is just as much under a duty to submit to non-elders as they are to submit to him. We are all meant to be humble, gentle and cooperative and also to be open to being corrected, questioned and instructed, whether we are leaders or not.

Therefore, from time to time, we are all called upon to submit to each other, "*and to every fellow worker and labourer*", even to the youngest and lowliest of Christians. Age, status and rank don't come into it. For example, if a 16 year old is in charge of the sound desk at church, then we would all be under a duty to submit to him and to cooperate *while he attends to those tasks*. The same applies to the man who puts out the chairs, or those who serve tea and coffee afterwards. Submit to *all* of them, when they have some request to make or some instruction to give. Consider these verses:

¹⁵ Now, brethren, you know that the household of Steph'anas were the first converts in Acha'ia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; ¹⁶I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer.

1 Corinthians 16:15-16 (RSV)

submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)

It is interesting also to note apostle Peter's attitude, not only to himself, but also to every other Christian. Firstly, he saw himself as a *servant*, rather than as a celebrity or superstar. Secondly, he saw other Christians as having a faith "*of equal standing with [his]*". There was not even a trace of pride, arrogance or what I call 'clergy mentality' in him:

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

2 Peter 1:1 (ESV)

Having said all that, there is still a valid role for elders as leaders and 'shepherds' and we are also meant to submit to them, or be subject to them. That means we are to make their role of leadership easier by cooperating and not being stubborn, awkward or argumentative. Anyone who has been appointed as an elder has an important job to do in the local church but they are meant to do it honestly, unselfishly, humbly and unpretentiously, without seeking to gain anything financially, and without being domineering or controlling.

So, the elder cares for the people, and he also leads, but he must do so in the right way and with the right attitude. The members of the church are then to "be subject" to such elders, but only in the sense of honouring them and cooperating, not with any kind of unquestioning obedience or subservience. At the same time, as we saw above, we are all meant to act with humility towards one another, i.e. to everyone whether we, or they, are elders or not. Apostle Peter also writes helpfully on this:

¹ So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,

1 Peter 5:1-6 (ESV)

Whenever you come across haughtiness and pride in a leader it should immediately put you on your guard. It does not necessarily mean that that leader is wicked. He may just be foolish, immature and carnal. Perhaps he will grow out of such attitudes as he gets older. That is possible, though unlikely. It is far more likely that such a leader, having already developed an attitude of seeing himself as being above correction or instruction, may degenerate further and eventually become properly wicked.

That is one reason why you need to beware of, and draw back from, proud, arrogant, *clergy-minded* leaders. For more detail on this theme please refer to Book 8 in this series, entitled '*Biblical and unbiblical churches*'. Also see Book 6, entitled "*How to identify and handle wicked people*". This is a very important issue, and one which you are bound to come across, especially if you ever start to question their teaching or decisions.

The wicked are brass-faced, defiant and bold, even when they are exposed and ought to be ashamed.

One of the most consistent features of the wicked is that they are *brass-faced*, even when it has been proved that they were lying or acting wrongly. Indeed, that is usually when they are at their most defiant. Therefore, brazen, unrepentant defiance and petulance are some of the classic signs of wickedness that we should be looking out for:

*A wicked man puts on a bold face,
but the upright gives thought to his ways. Proverbs 21:29 (ESV)*

*This is the way of an adulterous woman:
She eats and wipes her mouth,
And says, "I have done no wrong."
Proverbs 30:20 (NASB)*

*O LORD, do not thy eyes look for truth?
Thou hast smitten them,
but they felt no anguish;
thou hast consumed them,
but they refused to take correction.
They have made their faces harder than rock;
they have refused to repent.
Jeremiah 5:3 (RSV)*

I have confronted many wicked people, both religious and non-religious ones, partly because God gave me jobs that required it. I was a police officer and then a solicitor (lawyer) and I have also been an employer of a great many staff over the years. So I often needed to confront wicked people, firstly criminals, and then employees, who had been behaving badly. However, I had to do the same *within churches*, and was appalled to discover that *exactly the same techniques and attitudes* are found in wicked, false churchgoers, and even wicked church leaders, as in wicked staff, or even criminals.

If anything, the dishonesty and pride of falsely religious people is worse than that of the non-religious, which is actually not surprising, if one thinks about it. Their greater knowledge of God, and of the Bible, makes their behaviour all the more blameworthy, and makes them all the more accountable. It is also indicative of *hypocrisy* rather than just *ignorance*. The hardest thing to get used to is their inability to feel shame, even when they are publicly exposed. Not only do they not repent, *they do not even feel embarrassed*.

The only emotions they are likely to feel when they are caught red-handed are anger and resentment, not shame. They do not blush or hide themselves away in disgrace. On the contrary, most of the wicked people I confront, whether religious or non-religious, go the other way. Even after being exposed in their wrongdoing, they show their faces immediately, without any embarrassment at all, and continue to strut about as if nothing had happened. They also socialise openly, even amongst those who know what they have done, and display no trace of shame:

*"...but the unjust knows no shame".
Zephaniah 3:5 (b) (RSV)*

*Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?
No, they were not at all ashamed;
they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among the fallen;
when I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
says the LORD.*

Jeremiah 8:12 (RSV)

The difference between being wicked and merely being sinful, as we all are

When the Bible speaks of the wicked it does not mean that those who are not *wicked* are therefore not *sinful*. Everybody is sinful, even the godliest, wisest person you know. King David makes it quite clear that no one is righteous or, in other words, that we are all sinners:

*Enter not into judgment with your servant,
for no one living is righteous before you. Psalm 143:2 (ESV)*

Therefore, even the prophet Daniel was a sinner, as were Moses, Job, Joseph, David and the apostle Paul. We all continue to have a flesh nature, even if we are a real Christian, and anything that we do in, or through, our flesh nature is sin:

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:5-8 (RSV)

Basically, anything we do that does not proceed from faith is sin and therefore cannot please God, because it falls short of His perfect standard. Also, if it does not come from faith, then it must come from our own flesh, which automatically makes it sin, even if it looks good to us:

*“.....for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin”
Romans 14:23 (b) (RSV)*

However, there are some levels and categories of sin which go farther than the ordinary sins we all commit, and which would require us to be reclassified as wicked, rather than ordinary sinners:

*All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal.
1 John 5:17 (RSV)*

So, when we speak of wickedness we do not mean the ordinary sin, of which we are all guilty. It goes beyond that. The wicked sink to a lower level and yet, having said that, the things they do are still not necessarily spectacular. Most of the wicked look and sound very ordinary. Their key features are that they are *hard-hearted* and *devious* and that their *consciences are seared*. Moreover, they are not moved by pity, and they speak arrogantly:

*They close their hearts to pity;
with their mouths they speak arrogantly.
Psalm 17:10 (RSV)*

The wicked are dishonest and devious and tend also to be two-faced flatterers. They often say one thing to a person's face and another thing behind their back:

*They speak falsehood to one another;
With flattering lips and with a double heart they speak.
Psalm 12:2 (NASB)*

The wicked oppose both God and real Christians and they will react adversely to the Gospel, or even to being in the presence of a godly person. Frequently the wicked have no conscious understanding of *why* they do that. Their flesh nature, or 'old man', simply doesn't like the reborn human spirit in the godly person and therefore reacts against it by lashing out. However, it goes beyond just the flesh. A wicked person is also likely to be strongly influenced by demons.

The more wicked they become, the more they open themselves up to be influenced by demons. Therefore, when a wicked man meets a godly person then, even as they enter the room, before anyone says a word, irrational hostility may spring up in him. The demon accompanying him, or living within him, alerts him to the nature of that godly person and whips up his antagonism by getting his flesh to react more than it would ordinarily.

The wicked therefore go further in their sin than ordinary sinners and are much more hostile to the godly. Another key identifying feature is they are *not ashamed* of their sins, so they display them

brazenly. In the end, if the wicked gain the upper hand in a society, their sin will be paraded openly, as we see in our day, where homosexuality is thrust at us aggressively and treated as if it was something to be proud of, rather than unnatural and perverted:

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Romans 1:26-27 (RSV)

Likewise, abortion is aggressively and shamelessly proclaimed as a so-called ‘*human right*’ when it is actually a terrible crime in God’s eyes. The wicked therefore strut about assertively at times in history, such as our own day, when their evil values prevail and vileness is exalted. They can quickly sense when they are in the ascendant and that realisation emboldens them to go further, and do more, than they would in less wicked times:

*The wicked strut about on every side
When vileness is exalted among the sons of men.
Psalm 12:8 (NASB)*

If evil is on the rise in a nation, or in a business, the wicked have the confidence to show themselves openly, but in better times, the influence of godly people and of righteous laws restrains them and they keep a lower profile. So the wicked tend to come out when it is ‘dark’, like cockroaches, as the more committed Nazis, and their sympathisers, did in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. When it was evil’s hour in Germany, the wicked developed a greater willingness to come out into the open.

They therefore joined the Nazi Party, SS, Gestapo and so on and publicly embraced Nazi ideology because they saw advantage in doing so and that they could gain from it. However, in May 1945, they all vanished overnight when Germany lost the war. It then became impossible to find anybody who would admit that they had ever been a Nazi, as if Germany had always been a nation of Hitler-opposers. The reality was that, from 1933-1945, there were advantages to being openly wicked, so those whose hearts were already wicked, or going that way, seized their opportunity.

The wicked are also recognisable by their capacity for hatred

Another identifying feature of the wicked is the fact that they have such a strong tendency to *hate*:

*Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me.
Psalm 25:19 (RSV)*

*Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head.....
Psalm 69:4(a) (NASB)*

The wicked particularly hate the real God, the real Gospel, any real Christian and anything else which is genuinely biblical. Therefore, when any person is telling the truth about God or the Bible the wicked will instinctively lash out with irrational hatred and anger. You need to watch out for that, because it is one of the main ways in which you can identify them:

*¹⁹ But my foes are vigorous, they are mighty,
and many are those who hate me wrongfully.
²⁰ Those who render me evil for good
accuse me because I follow after good.
Psalm 38:19-20 (ESV)*

*The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows,
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those who walk uprightly;*

Psalm 37:14 (RSV)

The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him.

Psalm 37:32 (RSV)

Ordinary sinners tend to be opportunistic, whereas the wicked conspire, scheme and plan their wicked deeds in advance.

The wicked also go beyond the ordinary sin that we all display in that they tend to *scheme and conspire* and much of their wrongdoing is *premeditated*. They plan their sins in advance and come to situations with a plot already worked out, by which they can more effectively lie, cheat or do harm. An ordinary sinner, who is not wicked but only foolish, simple, or even wise, tends to sin spontaneously, in unplanned ways, as and when opportunities or temptations arise. That is still sin, but it does not have the same devious or conspiratorial quality that the wicked display:

*For, behold, the wicked bend the bow,
They make ready their arrow upon the string
To shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.*

Psalm 11:2 (NASB)

¹⁴*Behold, the wicked man conceives evil,
and is pregnant with mischief, and brings forth lies.*

¹⁵*He makes a pit, digging it out,
and falls into the hole which he has made.*

Psalm 7:14-15 (RSV)

The wicked are hostile to the godly, partly due to the hatred they feel for them, but also because it suits the purposes of their demon guides to harm God's people. That is one reason why we need to pray for God's protection from the wicked. In the Psalms this is a frequent subject for prayer, especially in those that David wrote. He was a mighty man, but fully aware of the harm the wicked can do and of his need for God's protection from them. Accordingly, we need to pray as David did:

¹*Deliver me, O LORD,
from evil men; preserve me from violent men,
² who plan evil things in their heart,
and stir up wars continually.
³They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's,
and under their lips is the poison of vipers.
⁴Guard me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked;
preserve me from violent men,
who have planned to trip up my feet.
⁵Arrogant men have hidden a trap for me,
and with cords they have spread a net,
by the wayside they have set snares for me.*

Psalm 140:1-5 (RSV)

*Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man.*

Psalms 71:4 (ESV)

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause

*against an ungodly people,
from the deceitful and unjust man
deliver me!*

Psalm 43:1 (ESV)

It is far from obvious who the wicked are, especially those who are inside churches

The wicked are not always easy to recognise, especially if you are not yet a mature Christian, but even if you are. I have come across many people in my work as a policeman, and then as a lawyer, who were crude and foul-mouthed. Some were even persistent criminals. *Yet, they were not necessarily wicked*, contrary to what one might assume. As I got to know them better, underlying qualities of kindness, generosity and decency often emerged.

Conversely, there have been others who seemed respectable at first, such that I never guessed that they were wicked. But it later emerged that they were, because they were so hard-hearted, stingy, devious, malicious, and contemptuous towards God. Ironically, some of the criminals I have prosecuted have actually had better attitudes, and been more genuine, and certainly more humble, than some of the 'respectable', professional people I have dealt with.

You have to look beneath the surface and not be misled by mere appearances based on the person's status, wealth, education or cultured manners. Such things can easily cause you to misjudge them. One's view of a person can therefore alter, in either direction, as more facts emerge, and one certainly cannot judge by mere appearances, such as by a person's *job*, or *where they live*. Those things are irrelevant, and Jesus warned us against judging by such superficial factors:

Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

John 7:24 (RSV)

Thus, one cannot just assume that a criminal or a prostitute is necessarily wicked. They might well be, but equally, *they may well not be*. On the other hand, we could meet a lawyer or banker, or even a church leader, and assume, by virtue of his role and status, that he cannot possibly be wicked, only to find out later that he is. Indeed, I can think of a number of church leaders I have known who turned out to be extremely wicked.

They were insecure and even paranoid, were motivated by personal ambition, had cold, hard hearts, and a lying tongue, and they regularly manipulated others. Moreover, so far as I could see, they had no fear of God. Thus they could comfortably preach a sermon, or lead worship, and then go on to lie, use and control people, and abuse their leadership position, without feeling any shame, or being the least bit uncomfortable. It is nothing new. Such men did exactly the same in Jeremiah's day:

¹¹"Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the LORD. ¹²Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall; for I will bring evil upon them in the year of their punishment, says the LORD. ¹³In the prophets of Sama'ria I saw an unsavory thing: they prophesied by Ba'al and led my people Israel astray. ¹⁴But 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 wickedness; all of them have become like Sodom to me, and its inhabitants like Gomor'rah." ¹⁵Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets: "Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and give them poisoned water to drink; for from the prophets of Jerusalem ungodliness has gone forth into all the land."

Jeremiah 23:11-15 (RSV)

Such carnal and apostate believers fall very clearly into the camp of the wicked, however 'respectable' they may appear to be and whatever leadership position they may occupy. Indeed, their wickedness is

all the more intense, given that they know so much more than others and they are, therefore, more accountable, because they have transgressed more directly. In other words, they have sinned more in *knowingly disobeying God's Word* than an unbeliever does, who possibly had no knowledge to begin with, and had never even seen a Bible.

The sins of an outright unbeliever might well be more visible and obvious, but the sins of a false Christian or an apostate are probably more serious, from God's perspective. Therefore, we need to be more discerning and try to see people *as God sees them*. Otherwise we will miss the signs. For example, the gospel accounts show that not one of the other disciples of Jesus ever realised that Judas Iscariot was false. Not only did they not realise the scale of the problem, they did not seem to notice any problem with him at all:

²¹ When Jesus had said this, He became troubled in spirit, and testified and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that one of you will betray Me." ²² The disciples began looking at one another, at a loss to know of which one He was speaking.

John 13:21-22 (NASB)

One cannot even say that Judas had only degenerated into that condition of wickedness very shortly beforehand. On the contrary, we are told that he was already a thief, and had been stealing regularly since long before the time when he betrayed Jesus:

⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said, ⁵"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?" ⁶Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

John 12:4-6 (NASB)

The clear impression from Scripture is that Judas Iscariot had been false from the very outset and had never been a genuine believer at any stage. If so, we have to face the fact that he was, nevertheless, able to *appear* to be a believer and a disciple, and to keep up the act for three and a half years. And he was able to do that so convincingly that none of the disciples suspected him of anything. Note that when Jesus said that one of them would betray Him, none of them said or thought "*I bet it's Judas – I've always thought there was something not quite right about him*".

Far from it. We are told above that the disciples were "*at a loss to know of which one He was speaking*". Thus, we can conclude that they saw nothing wrong or unusual about Judas' speech or actions. He seemed to be one of them, and to be genuine. Therefore, if even the apostles could be so effectively deceived by Judas for three and a half years, and so unable to see that he was false, why should you assume that you are going to be able to identify false/bogus/apostate Christians easily? Sometimes they can be spotted straight away, because they stand out a mile. But very often they don't.

Perhaps the clearest indication of all that we see in Scripture as to the real nature of Judas is seen in John 6:70 when Jesus refers to him as "*a devil*". That was said approximately two years into Jesus' public ministry. So there was still at least a year left to go and yet, even at that early stage, Jesus plainly considered Judas to be false:

⁶⁶ After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; ⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." ⁷⁰ Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" ⁷¹ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was to betray him.

John 6:66-71 (RSV)

We cannot always easily, or immediately, discern the real nature of those with whom we are dealing, whether in churches or outside in the world. If we think we can then we are deluding ourselves. We

can all get it very wrong, especially if we are too quick to form a view. Sometimes it takes a long time to correctly weigh up a person's character. Nevertheless, that is still what we need to *aim* to do and to begin to *learn how* to do. The only sure way of knowing what someone is like is to assess the *fruit* that their lives produce, and over a period of time, not a single day.

When you are eventually in a position to do that, you can end up being surprised in either direction. In the end, a man's wickedness shows itself in every part of his life. It is what he is. It defines him and the fruit that he produces can be identified and assessed, *provided you are looking for it*. If you aren't looking at all, then you won't see anything. But if you are sufficiently alert and vigilant you will eventually see the evidence, because the wicked cannot stop themselves from producing fruit that reflects what they really are. Their nature inevitably manifests itself in their actions:

***"As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness';
1 Samuel 24:13(a) (NASB)***

As with the fool, the wicked man ignores, and even rejects, God. Every wicked man starts off simple, even if only when he is a child, and then he gradually becomes a fool. But his decision to ignore God eventually leads him to slide further and further downwards into other kinds of sin. Eventually he moves into open and blatant rebellion. That is how a fool eventually 'graduates' into being a wicked man, which is where every man's life is heading if he ignores or rejects God, as it will always lead to degeneration.

For some people the pace of that decline intensifies at the point when God "*gives them up*" A time may come where they become so hardened and unresponsive that He effectively hands them over and allows them to sink as low as they wish to go. God eventually does that when He sees, after trying repeatedly to get them to repent, that they are determined not to acknowledge Him or to turn from their sin:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,

Romans 1:24 (RSV)

²⁸And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips,

Romans 1:28-29 (RSV)

These types of behaviour set out above are, in brief, the kind of things that the wicked do. But the point is *it all begins with ignoring God* and not *acknowledging* Him. That is all it takes for any of us to get on to this terrible downward spiral from being simple, to being a fool, and then eventually becoming wicked.

The non-religious wicked very rarely become Christians.

Experience indicates that there is very little hope for the wicked to be saved. By the time they have sunk to that level, they rarely ever choose to repent, because they have already travelled a long way downhill by then. However, no matter how low they sink, they could still repent *if they wished to*. They just *don't usually want to*. Therefore, the people who do choose to repent are mostly drawn from the ranks of the simple and, to a lesser extent, fools. But those who have gone so far as to join the ranks of the wicked seldom repent or change their ways. Neither will they understand God's Word, especially prophecy:

"Many will be purged, purified and refined, but the wicked will act wickedly; and none of the wicked will understand, but those who have insight will understand. ***Daniel 12:10 (NASB)***

Also, their lack of receptivity to the Gospel is partly because the wicked have no interest in, or respect for, the Bible, such that *“their ears are closed”*:

*Salvation is far from the wicked,
for they do not seek thy statutes.
Psalm 119:155 (RSV)*

*To whom shall I speak and give warning,
that they may hear?
Behold, their ears are closed,
they cannot listen;
behold, the word of the LORD is to them an object of scorn,
they take no pleasure in it.
Jeremiah 6:10 (RSV)*

The wicked man does not often choose to listen or respond, even when he is shown God's kindness, partly because he does not understand or respect goodness or mercy. These are alien concepts to him and he despises them. He wrongly assumes that they are signs of weakness and thus he will mistreat and disrespect those who show him kindness or generosity. The wicked man therefore deals wickedly, even when he is with the upright (the wise and godly) and he is oblivious to God's majesty, even when it is straight in front of him, as when we see the beauty of His Creation, or of His written Word:

*Though the wicked is shown favour,
He does not learn righteousness;
He deals unjustly in the land of uprightness,
And does not perceive the majesty of the LORD.
Isaiah 26:10 (NASB)*

Because of the way the wicked think and act, they are far away from God. However, it is also true to say that He is far from them, as He keeps the wicked at arm's length. That makes it even less likely that they will ever find God and be saved:

*For though the LORD is high,
he regards the lowly;
but the haughty he knows from afar.
Psalm 138:6 (RSV)*

Nevertheless, the fact remains that, until the moment we die, the offer of the Gospel is always available, even to the wickedest of people. If they want to, they can still repent and be saved, no matter how evil they have become. So, even though very few of them ever actually choose to accept that offer, it is still made. Therefore, we do need to share the Gospel with the wicked and must not keep it from them or assume that they would never respond. Occasionally they do repent and God is entirely willing to receive them, and save them, if they do. In fact, He is very eager to do so:

*Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him return to the LORD,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon.
Isaiah 55:7 (NASB)*

²¹ *“But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²² All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he*

has practiced, he will live. ²³ *Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Lord GOD, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?*

Ezekiel 18:21-23 (NASB)

³⁰ *“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct,” declares the Lord GOD. “Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. ³¹ Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord GOD. “Therefore, repent and live.”*

Ezekiel 18:30-32 (NASB)

Perhaps the most famous example of wicked people being willing to repent comes from the book of Jonah. He went to Ninevah to tell the people of that city that God was about to destroy their city because of their wickedness. Surprisingly, the King of Ninevah chose to listen and to repent and he urged the whole city to do so as well. Amazingly, many of them did:

⁴ *Then Jonah began to go through the city one day’s walk; and he cried out and said, “Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown.”⁵ Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them. ⁶ When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered himself with sackcloth and sat on the ashes. ⁷ He issued a proclamation and it said, “In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water. ⁸ But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands. ⁹ Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw His burning anger so that we will not perish.”*

¹⁰ *When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it.*

Jonah 3:4-10 (NASB)

The religious wicked rarely become real Christians, or regain their faith if they become apostate. They like their positions of power within churches and are too proud to repent.

In all my personal experience, I cannot think of even one falsely religious or apostate person that I have dealt with who has ever repented, changed and become a real Christian. The chances of a genuine repentance seem to be even lower amongst the religious wicked than with the unbelieving wicked. However, that ought not to surprise us. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that false religious people very rarely repent, or find their way back to having a real faith after having become apostate:

⁴*For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. ⁷For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.*

Hebrews 6:4-8 (RSV)

In case anybody thinks that the wickedness of the religious wicked is less serious than that of the unbelieving wicked, or that God will not punish the religious wicked, consider this passage from Hebrews:

²⁶*For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. ²⁸A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two*

or three witnesses. ²⁹ *How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?* ³⁰ *For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people."* ³¹ *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Hebrews 10:26-31 (RSV)

The passage above is clearly speaking of the Lake of Fire as being the punishment that awaits these people. Yet it is referring to people who *used to be Christians*. Indeed, there is every reason to conclude that they were *real Christians*, because we are told that they had '*receive[d] the knowledge of the truth*' and also that they had '*profaned the blood covenant by which he was sanctified*'. That last point is crucial. Nobody can even begin to be 'sanctified' until after they have previously been justified, i.e. forgiven and made righteous.

So the person being spoken of in Hebrews 10 must have been genuinely saved or born again to begin with. The point is that, even after they had received God's grace and blessing in that way, they then '*spurned the Son of God*' and '*outraged the Spirit of grace*'. Therefore we are dealing here with a situation where a genuinely saved Christian chooses to turn away from the truth and to become apostate by speaking and acting in a manner which despises God's grace and dishonours His name.

But what makes it even more alarming is that there is nothing unusual or rare about this. *It is happening on a massive scale today in the Western churches*. More than any other thing, the falsely religious harden their hearts towards the Bible. Many of them ignore it and even those who do read parts of it are unmoved by it. They cannot see, or do not care, that it is calling on *them* to repent and change. They probably assume it is aimed at someone else. Then they harden their own hearts towards it, so that God's Word bounces off them and is not understood, or even noticed:

¹² *They made their hearts like adamant lest they should hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.* ¹³ *"As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear," says the LORD of hosts,*

Zechariah 7:12-13(RSV)

This passage too is clearly *speaking of people who claim to be believers*. That must be so, because we are told that their hardness towards God's Word results in Him refusing to hear their *prayers*. But they would not even attempt to pray in the first place unless they were religious, at least in some sense of the word, either genuinely or falsely.

What God will do to the wicked, both the falsely religious and the non-religious, in the present and in the future

Whether the wicked are falsely religious or non-religious, they will all come under God's judgment in this life. He will intervene in their lives to oppose them and to bring judgment and retribution on them, even while they are still alive:

⁵ *Him who slanders his neighbour secretly*

I will destroy.

The man of haughty looks and arrogant heart

I will not endure.

⁶ *I will look with favour on the faithful in the land,*

that they may dwell with me;

he who walks in the way that is blameless

shall minister to me.

⁷ *No man who practices deceit*

*shall dwell in my house;
no man who utters lies
shall continue in my presence.
⁸ Morning by morning I will destroy
all the wicked in the land,
cutting off all the evildoers
from the city of the LORD.*

Psalm 101:5-8 (RSV)

¹Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. ²They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. ³Therefore thus says the LORD: behold, against this family I am devising disaster, from which you cannot remove your necks, and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster.

Micah 2:1-3 (ESV)

The wicked will inevitably receive God's opposition, but they generally have no idea that it is Him who is opposing them and bringing them to ruin and disaster. So, the wicked will eventually fall, in all sorts of ways, but they do not usually realise *why* they are stumbling:

*But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness;
they do not know what makes them stumble.*

Proverbs 4:19 (NIV)

To a very large extent it is the wicked person's own evil deeds which ensnare him and keep him trapped. In other words, he brings judgment upon himself by his own actions. I have witnessed that on countless occasions with people I have dealt with, especially employees. The things they do build up and eventually catch up with them and they are then ruined:

*²² The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them;
the cords of their sins hold them fast.*

*²³ For lack of discipline they will die,
led astray by their own great folly.*

Proverbs 5:22-23 (NIV)

*But a man who commits adultery has no sense;
whoever does so destroys himself.*

Proverbs 6:32 (NIV)

Although very few people realise this, and even fewer speak of it, God also specifically *curses* those who steal and lie. He makes sure that they are opposed and obstructed. In the end they will be cut off completely as a result of God's intervention in their lives:

³ Then he said to me, "This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole land; for everyone who steals shall be cut off henceforth according to it, and everyone who swears falsely shall be cut off henceforth according to it. ⁴ I will send it forth, says the LORD of hosts, and it shall enter the house of the thief, and the house of him who swears falsely by my name; and it shall abide in his house and consume it, both timber and stones."

Zechariah 5:3-4 (RSV)

With some wicked people, God even chooses to end their lives early. An example of this is a man called Er, who was Judah's son. He was wicked and the Bible says the LORD "*slew him*":

*But Er, Judah's first-born, was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him
Genesis 38:7 (RSV)*

We are not told what Er did, or how wicked he was, or how exactly God killed him. Perhaps it was through some illness. But the point is that *God did it* and He might choose to do the same with others too. It is certainly true that the wicked have shorter lives on average, because God deliberately shortens their lives, whereas He says that He prolongs the lives of those who fear Him and keep His commandments:

***The fear of the LORD prolongs life,
But the years of the wicked will be shortened.
Proverbs 10:27 (NASB)***

**¹ My son, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,
² for length of days and years of life
and peace they will add to you.
Proverbs 3:1-2 (ESV)**

That reduction of life span is partly a direct judgment upon them, but also it is a natural consequence of the ways in which they choose to live. For example, those who are violent will also encounter violence against themselves. People's own *lifestyle choices* have a major bearing on their life expectancy. We can clearly see that *sexual sin* is highly correlated with the contracting of serious diseases and cancers which can be fatal in themselves or shorten lives indirectly. The most striking example of all is *homosexual activity between men*.

The data gathered by insurance companies, based on health service figures, shows unmistakably that, on average, men who engage in homosexual sex have over 20 years taken off their life expectancy. Many die in their twenties, thirties and forties, such that, *on average* they tend not to live beyond their late fifties or early sixties. You might imagine that would be spoken about continually in the media, together with public information campaigns, just as we hear of research projects and surveys on the dangers of white sugar, fat, aspartame or smoking.

However, politicians and the media, and even doctors, do not have enough courage or integrity to say *anything* about the health consequences for homosexuals of their chosen lifestyle. There is a wall of silence and a news blackout, especially about their reduced life expectancy. These alarming statistics do not fit in with the politically correct ideology of the media or our governments and so they are simply not willing to publicise it. However, apostle Paul spoke of it very directly and identified it as a judgment from God. Paul says that homosexuals are:

***"....receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error"
Romans 1:27(b) (RSV)***

We can do the maths for ourselves and see how the life expectancy of the wicked is shortened by simply adding up the average length of reigns of the wicked Kings of Israel and Judah, as compared to those of the good kings. There is a stark difference. The wicked ones almost all had short reigns and died young. It would seem that one of God's reasons for shortening their lives was to limit the amount of harm that they could do.

The biggest exception to that general rule was the wicked King Manasseh of Judah, who reigned for 52 years. However, he repented close to the end of his reign and was saved. He was also the grandfather of Josiah, the most faithful King of Judah. Those two facts may help to explain why God spared his life during the many years when he was doing so much evil. As we watch them now, it may not seem to us that the wicked are doing badly or suffering much in this life. In fact, it often seems that the opposite is the case:

**³For I was envious of the arrogant,
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

⁴For they have no pangs;
 their bodies are sound and sleek.
⁵ They are not in trouble as other men are;
 they are not stricken like other men.
⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace;
 violence covers them as a garment.
⁷ Their eyes swell out with fatness,
 their hearts overflow with follies.
⁸ They scoff and speak with malice
 ; loftily they threaten oppression.
⁹ They set their mouths against the heavens,
 and their tongue struts through the earth.
¹⁰ Therefore the people turn and praise them;
 and find no fault in them.
¹¹ And they say, "How can God know?
 Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
¹² Behold, these are the wicked;
 always at ease, they increase in riches.
¹³ All in vain have I kept my heart clean
 and washed my hands in innocence.

Psalm 73:3-13 (RSV)

However, it is the way that things work out *in the end* that really counts. Whatever may happen in the short term, while God's judgment is being delayed, the end result is inevitably the same, and the wicked are swept away. Again, I will set out several passages, because so many Christians, even real ones, find it very hard to believe that God could really be so severe:

¹⁶But when I thought how to understand this,
 it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God;
 then I perceived their end.
¹⁸ Truly thou dost set them in slippery places;
 thou dost make them fall to ruin.
¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment,
 swept away utterly by terrors!
²⁰ They are like a dream when one awakes,
 on awaking you despise their phantoms.

Psalm 73:16-20 (RSV)

For lo, those who are far from thee shall perish;
 thou dost put an end to those who are false to thee.

Psalm 73:27 (RSV)

¹¹ I will punish the world for its evil,
 and the wicked for their iniquity;
 I will put an end to the pomp of the arrogant,
 and lay low the pompous pride of the ruthless.
¹² I will make people more rare than fine gold,
 and mankind than the gold of Ophir.
¹³ Therefore I will make the heavens tremble,
 and the earth will be shaken out of its place,
 at the wrath of the LORD of hosts
 in the day of his fierce anger.

Isaiah 13:11-13 (ESV)

*For the LORD is enraged against all the nations,
and furious against all their host;
he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter.
Isaiah 34:2 (ESV)*

³¹ *The clamour will resound to the ends of the earth,
for the LORD has an indictment against the nations;
he is entering into judgment with all flesh,
and the wicked he will put to the sword,
declares the LORD.'*

³² *"Thus says the LORD of hosts:
Behold, disaster is going forth
from nation to nation,
and a great tempest is stirring
from the farthest parts of the earth!"*

³³ *"And those pierced by the LORD on that day shall extend from one end of the earth to the other.
They shall not be lamented, or gathered, or buried; they shall be dung on the surface of the ground.
Jeremiah 25:31-33 (ESV)*

²³ *Behold the storm of the LORD!
Wrath has gone forth,
a whirling tempest;
it will burst upon the head of the wicked.
²⁴ The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back
until he has executed and accomplished
the intentions of his mind.
In the latter days you will understand this.
Jeremiah 30:23-24 (ESV)*

However, much it may seem that the wicked get away with things, and even profit from their wrongdoing, there will inevitably come a time when God will confront them and give back to them what they did to other people:

*Woe to you, destroyer,
who yourself have not been destroyed;
you treacherous one,
with whom none has dealt treacherously!
When you have ceased to destroy,
you will be destroyed;
and when you have made an end of dealing treacherously,
you will be dealt with treacherously.
Isaiah 33:1 (RSV)*

There is a 'cup of judgment' which is being prepared for the wicked. Usually they get to drink at least some of it in this life, though not always. However, absolutely all wicked people will, in the end, have to drink every last drop of it:

² *At the set time which I appoint
I will judge with equity.
³ When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants,
it is I who keep steady its pillars.
⁴ I say to the boastful, "Do not boast,"
and to the wicked, "Do not lift up your horn;
⁵ do not lift up your horn on high,
or speak with insolent neck."*

⁶ *For not from the east or from the west
and not from the wilderness comes lifting up;*
⁷ *but it is God who executes judgment,
putting down one and lifting up another.*

⁸ *For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup,
with foaming wine, well mixed;
and he will pour a draught from it,
and all the wicked of the earth
shall drain it down to the dregs.*

⁹ *But I will rejoice for ever,
I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.*

¹⁰ *All the horns of the wicked he will cut off,
but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.*

Psalms 75:2-10 (RSV)

The Bible is even blunter than that about what will happen to the wicked in the end. They will be sent to Sheol/Hell when they die. Moreover, there is no reason to suppose that this is only referring to the non-religious wicked. It would seem clear that false, unrepentant, hard-hearted, apostate churchgoers, and especially insincere church leaders, will also face this dreadful fate:

¹³ *This is the fate of those who have foolish confidence,
the end of those who are pleased with their portion.*

¹⁴ *Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;
Death shall be their shepherd;
straight to the grave they descend,
and their form shall waste away;
Sheol shall be their home.*

Psalms 49:13-14 (RSV)

*The wicked shall be turned into hell,
And all the nations that forget God.*

Psalms 9:17 (NKJV)

They will then be sent onwards from Hell to the Lake of Fire:

¹¹ *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.*

¹³ *And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵and if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Revelation 20:11-15 (ESV)

Having said that, unless we repent and believe in Jesus Christ, that same end awaits *all of us, whatever category we may currently be in*. We are all sinners, even if we aren't wicked. It is a man's sin, and his rejection of Jesus, that takes him to Hell, and from there to the Lake of Fire. Nevertheless, the wicked are in that group and are all on their way to Hell, unless and until they repent. Their problem is that they do not care about that fact, even if they are told of it.

The wicked do not generally enjoy their lives, especially in middle age and old age, and they usually end up miserable. Though a wicked man's life may bring him some temporary pleasure, it never brings

joy or peace, because a man's wickedness provokes God into opposing him. Therefore, God will not allow the wicked to have any real peace and deliberately intervenes in their lives to ensure that they don't:

*"There is no peace for the wicked," says the LORD.
Isaiah 48:22 (NASB)*

*The LORD has made himself known; he has executed judgment;
the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.....
Psalm 9:16 (ESV)*

*Many are the pangs of the wicked;
but steadfast love surrounds him who trusts in the LORD
Psalm 32:10 (RSV)*

God is watching everything and testing everybody and He will make sure that the wicked encounter His opposition and judgment, either in this life, or after death, or both:

*⁴The LORD is in his holy temple,
the LORD's throne is in heaven;
his eyes behold, his eyelids test,
the children of men.
⁵The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked,
and his soul hates him that loves violence.
⁶On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and brimstone;
a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup.
⁷For the LORD is righteous, he loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face.
Psalm 11:4-7 (RSV)*

*I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of
the arrogant, and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless.
Isaiah 13:11 (RSV)*

*¹⁰The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.
¹¹ Men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."
Psalm 58:10-11 (RSV)*

Righteous Job, when speaking to his friends about the fate of the wicked, put it this way:

*¹³"This is the portion of a wicked man with God, and the heritage that oppressors receive from the
Almighty: ¹⁴If his children are multiplied, it is for the sword, and his descendants have not enough
bread. ¹⁵Those who survive him the pestilence buries, and his widows do not weep. ¹⁶Though he heap
up silver like dust, and pile up clothing like clay, ¹⁷he may pile it up, but the righteous will wear it,
and the innocent will divide the silver. ¹⁸He builds his house like a moth's, like a booth that a
watchman makes. ¹⁹He goes to bed rich, but will do so no more; he opens his eyes, and his wealth is
gone. ²⁰Terrors overtake him like a flood; in the night a whirlwind carries him off. ²¹The east wind
lifts him up and he is gone; it sweeps him out of his place. ²²It hurls at him without pity; he flees from
its power in headlong flight. ²³It claps its hands at him and hisses at him from its place.
Job 27:13-23 (ESV)*

The wicked will tend to hate people who are righteous and godly.

The wicked frequently have a hatred for the wise and godly:

*Bloodthirsty men hate one who is blameless,
and the wicked seek his life.*

Proverbs 29:10 (RSV)

*They hate him who reproves in the gate,
And they abhor him who speaks with integrity.*

Amos 5:10 (NASB)

This hatred is often unconscious, because there is something about a godly person that sets a wicked person's teeth on edge, without him even knowing why he feels like that. A wicked man will often take an instant dislike to a godly person, for no apparent reason. In fact, a wicked man sees a righteous, godly person as an abomination, in just the same way as a righteous man sees an unjust or wicked man as an abomination:

*An unjust man is an abomination to the righteous,
but he whose way is straight is an abomination to the wicked.*

Proverbs 29:27 (RSV)

Therefore, ironically the more blameless and innocent a person is, *the more they will be hated* by the wicked. Moreover, a wicked man cannot usually be won over or softened by kindness. On the contrary, he will have contempt for it. Goodness makes no sense to the wicked. They see it as weakness and it only increases their malice.

*The wicked plots against the righteous
And gnashes at him with his teeth.*

Psalms 37:12 (NASB)

The starkest example of how the wicked hate the righteous is the treatment given to Jesus as He died on the cross. He was surrounded by wicked men and He could see their malice towards Him, even as He was giving His life for them. No person has ever been more blameless, but nobody has ever been more hated than He was. If they treated Jesus that way, they will hate you too. If even His goodness could not melt their hard hearts, yours is unlikely to. In my own life I have treated some people well, and have helped them, but they hated me in return.

Part of that could be explained by my being an employer and a boss, but not all of it, and certainly not the extreme intensity. Besides, it had already arisen many times, long before I ever became a boss. It comes from deep within the heart of the wicked person. They "*hate the light*" because it exposes their own evil nature and because the very life of a godly person transmits an unspoken rebuke to them. Therefore, if a person is wicked they will react against anybody whose life is a light.

However, every Christian is meant to be a source of salt and light. If they are, then the way they live lights up the darkness, whether at home or at work. The light that their life gives off is, in itself, a kind of unspoken rebuke to the wicked. It convicts him of his wickedness and he sees that as an affront. The wicked do not want their evil deeds to be exposed, or for them to be shown to be in the wrong. Therefore, they avoid Christians if they can, and attack them if they can't:

¹⁹And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

John 3:19-21 (ESV)

*¹⁵But at my stumbling they gathered in glee,
they gathered together against me;
cripples whom I knew not slandered me without ceasing;
¹⁶they impiously mocked more and more,
gnashing at me with their teeth.*

Psalm 35:15-16 (RSV)

A righteous person being in the room can cause the wicked man to feel rebuked, *even if he doesn't say a word*. The wicked man feels told off because the contrast between his own life and that of the godly person is so apparent that it irritates him and he may therefore lash out in an unprovoked verbal blast.

A false, apostate Christian hates the true Gospel and any real Christian who speaks of it, or demonstrates it in his life.

If anything, the hostility manifested towards real Christians by false Christians is greater than that which comes from outright unbelievers. I have been in many discussions and debates with unbelievers, including atheists and I have generally found them to be less discourteous. When I was involved in an evangelistic ministry to students, in my twenties, I knocked on literally hundreds of doors on campus and had countless conversations.

Most atheists were quite happy to talk and argue, whereas I have often found that falsely religious and apostate people cannot cope with any debate. They are more likely to lose their temper and shut the discussion down than unbelievers are, especially where they are out of their depth or are losing the argument. Falsely religious people also cannot cope with being challenged or corrected about what they believe. Therefore, in the main, I have found them less open-minded, and more proud, than atheists are.

That said, things have been changing over the past 20 years or so and there is a growing wave of militant political correctness which has the same aim of silencing any opposition to itself. But those who act in that way, even if they are not religious, are only doing the same as the religious wicked have always done. Even the worst of them are no worse than the popes who burned the evangelical believers who chose to leave the Roman Catholic church when they realised how corrupt and unbiblical it is.

Do not 'cast your pearls before swine'.

Here is a hard lesson about dealing with fools, and especially the wicked, that I have had to learn. This is how Jesus put it:

"Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Matthew 7:6 (NASB)

Though it sounds a little harsh, this is a practical and realistic statement. Jesus is telling us to recognise that some of the people with whom we come into contact are going to be callous scoffers and mockers, with no sensitivity or respect. They care nothing for God, or the Bible, or for the precious things that Jesus came to do for us or to teach us. They are therefore fools, and Solomon tells us that fools will despise your words of wisdom:

*Do not speak in the hearing of a fool,
for he will despise the wisdom of your words.*
Proverbs 23:9 (RSV)

So, we must not go out into the unbelieving world in a naïve manner, sharing every precious truth with wicked people whose hearts are as hard as stone and who have no respect for the Bible. They will take the truth that we speak and trample it under their feet, as a pig would do if we threw pearls on the ground in front of it. So how does this principle work out in practice? What should we say and what should we avoid saying and to whom? It doesn't mean that we should never discuss Jesus or never share the Gospel with unbelievers. We need to do that, or they can never be saved.

It means that there are certain truths or experiences which are *so intimate and precious*, we should not discuss them in front of scoffers whose hearts are hard and flippant. Reserve such precious things for that minority of people who are wise, or at least simple. When speaking to scoffers, whether wicked or foolish, our message needs to be less intimate. It needs to focus on sin, judgment and the Lake of Fire, and on how to repent and be saved through what Jesus did on the cross. Unless people are willing to listen to such things as those, don't go any further. Don't share more intimate truths unless the situation is exceptional.

If you do so, they will only abuse you, disrespect what you say, and even leave you feeling violated. However, we certainly *should* share the Gospel with the wicked and tell them of their need to repent and be saved. Never write them off or assume they will never respond. There is always that chance, however small, that they might. Neither should we ever fear them or be intimidated into silence. On the contrary, the wicked need to hear the Gospel just as much as every other person does. Moreover, God will hold us accountable if we do not warn the people whom He wants us to warn, which includes the wicked:

⁸ When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. ⁹ But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity, but you have delivered your life.

Ezekiel 33:8-9 (NASB)

How should we handle the wicked and in what ways should we pray about, or even against, them?

In this chapter we have merely begun to examine and define the wicked, and to describe how they operate. The question then is how to handle them, and defend ourselves from them, without becoming like them ourselves. In particular, one question I have grappled with for years is how we ought to pray about the wicked. Can we pray *against* them using 'imprecatory' prayers, whereby we ask God to defeat, and even destroy, them as Moses and many others did? Here is an example of how Moses did this, but King David also prayed in the same way, as did many others:

And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Arise, O LORD, and let thy enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee."

Numbers 10:35 (RSV)

These are all very big questions which require detailed responses. I have attempted to provide some answers in Book Six entitled "*How to identify and handle wicked people*" and would refer you to that to take this subject further. It sets out a fuller explanation of what the Bible says about dealing with the wicked, as well as a lot of practical examples and advice from my own personal experience. There is also a lengthy chapter on 'imprecatory' prayer, which is yet another of the many taboo subjects that are hardly ever mentioned, let alone taught on, in most churches today.