

CHAPTER 1

SOME INTRODUCTORY POINTS ABOUT THE ‘WICKED’ AND HOW WE SHOULD DEFINE THE WORD

Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.
1 Corinthians 14:20 (NASB)

¹⁴ *Behold, the wicked man conceives evil
and is pregnant with mischief
and gives birth to lies.*

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

¹⁶ *His mischief returns upon his own head,
and on his own skull his violence descends.*
Psalm 7:14-16 (ESV)

*Thy commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is ever with me.*

Psalm 119:98 (RSV)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1 (RSV)

⁷*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸Look to yourselves, that you may not lose what you have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; ¹¹for he who greets him shares his wicked work.*

2 John 7-11 (RSV)

¹⁰ *Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand; but those who are wise shall understand.*

Daniel 12:10 (RSV)

The wicked are far more ordinary, and numerous, than most of us imagine.

It is a big mistake to assume that the wicked are all exceptional, like Hitler and Stalin, and that the ordinary people we know cannot be evil enough to be worthy of that label. Actually, the wicked are alarmingly plentiful and most of them are very ordinary. I can't give a figure for their numbers in absolute terms, or even as a percentage, but they are all around us. We work with them, and live alongside them, and they look and sound quite normal. They just have hard hearts and are false, devious, selfish, manipulative and malicious. King David often came across such people, and so will you:

*More in number than the hairs of my head
are those who hate me without cause;*

Psalm 69:4(a) (RSV)

We get an early indication as to how wickedness is defined, and of how common it is, from the account of Potipher's wife. She was attracted to Joseph and wanted to commit adultery with him. Note that Joseph says that this would be "great wickedness". Evidently, he did not think that wickedness consisted only of mass murder and genocide, but also of 'ordinary' things like adultery:

⁶ So he left all that he had in Joseph's charge; and having him he had no concern for anything but the food which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome and good-looking. ⁷ And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, and said, "Lie with me." ⁸ But he refused and said to his master's wife, "Lo, having me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my hand; ⁹ he is not greater in this house than I am; nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife; how then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?"

Genesis 39:6-9 (RSV)

If adultery would have been "great wickedness", what does that say about our society, where adultery, fornication, pornography, homosexuality, cross-dressing and even paedophilia are now commonplace? The fact that such things happen all around us doesn't mean they aren't wicked. It means there are a lot of wicked people. Whatever their exact number may be, it is large, and growing rapidly. At any rate, it is much higher than most of us assume. What Potipher's wife did afterwards was also wicked. She was enraged by Joseph's refusal and, in her spite, falsely accused him of attempted rape.

How many people today tell lies and make false accusations? If lying and deviousness are also wickedness, then the wicked must be alarmingly numerous. So, instead of thinking you will meet a wicked person every ten years, expect to meet some every day. Also, put in place new methods for dealing with the wicked and for protecting yourself, your family, your staff, your colleagues, your boss, your business and your church from them. Let's begin with a few 'case studies' of some of the wicked people I have known. That will be useful before we consider how to define "the wicked".

Andrew's story - a would-be teacher whose class-teaching assessment test was deliberately sabotaged by the very teacher who was supposed to be his mentor

'Andrew' was training to be a teacher and was in his "PGCE" year. He had to spend a number of weeks in a school, teaching classes and being monitored on his performance. Andrew had been allocated a teacher in the school who was meant to look after him and set him teaching assignments. We will call her 'Gladys'. However, she took such a dislike to him that she deliberately tried to cause him to fail. Andrew had to teach a particular lesson and be formally assessed on it by an examiner from the university. So, even at the best of times, it would be a stressful experience.

Gladys knew Andrew was nervous. She also knew there was a boy in that class with severe autism. He had to stick to his usual routine or he would become agitated. In particular, it was vital that he sit in his usual chair, as he could not cope with being moved. Gladys knew that boy well, having taught his class for a long time. So she was fully aware of what would happen if he was forced to move to another seat. Nevertheless, two minutes before the lesson was due to begin, while she was getting the class ready, but before the examiner arrived, Gladys forced the autistic boy to move.

She did this for no valid reason. Indeed, she never gave any reason, even afterwards, when Andrew appealed. Nobody had ever forced the boy to move before, because all the teachers knew he would become disruptive, which is exactly how it turned out. The boy protested, but Gladys still forced him to move chairs. Then, just before the examiner entered the room to assess Andrew's handling of the lesson, Gladys slipped out. She left Andrew on his own to handle the consequences of what she had just done. As the examiner walked in, the autistic boy was already causing chaos.

He then ruined the whole lesson by shouting, moving about and being impossible to deal with. This made it appear that Andrew could not handle a class. The assessor didn't know anything about what

had just happened before he entered the room, let alone why. Andrew therefore failed that assessment and, when he appealed, Gladys made weasel-worded excuses. But it was plain that she had done it all deliberately, to sabotage Andrew's assessment. What Gladys did clearly deserves to be labelled as wicked, as it was devious, vindictive and cruel.

It was also a betrayal of trust. She had the task of mentoring Andrew while he was at that school. So, she had a clear duty to help, not to undermine him. If you don't realise that the wicked are usually ordinary people like Gladys, then you won't recognise them when they appear in your life. You will not be looking in the right places, or for the right signs. You'll be mistakenly watching out for people who look and sound strange, or who do exceptional things. Instead, you should be on the lookout for entirely ordinary people, doing ordinary things, but with malice, deviousness and manipulation.

We need to stop being surprised by the nature and activities of the wicked. They are all around us and are to be fully expected.

King Solomon, the author of the book of Proverbs, lamented the fact that so many of us are naïve or 'simple' and he repeatedly urges us to stop being so:

*¹⁵ The naive believes everything,
But the sensible man considers his steps.
Proverbs 14:15 (NASB)*

*²² "How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded?....."
Proverbs 1:22(a) (NASB)*

*⁵ "O naive ones, understand prudence;....."
Proverbs 8:5(a) (NASB)*

*⁶ Leave simpleness, and live,
and walk in the way of insight."
Proverbs 9:6 (RSV)*

A sign that a person is naïve is their inability even to grasp the fact that so many other people are wicked, let alone to identify and resist them. Thus, a naïve person will be surprised by the nature and activities of the wicked. They will not be aware beforehand that those people are wicked, or that their motives are sinister. That said, if you are 'surprised' by a discovery of wickedness, it is at least a small step forward. It shows you are starting to recognise that wickedness exists and have identified an example of it in operation.

Nevertheless, the very fact that you are surprised by such a discovery shows you still think there is something rare or exceptional about wicked people. For example, a Christian lady called 'Imelda', told me about the actions of her former boss. He had undermined her and also lied to her and about her. She expressed amazement at "*how they can lie so easily*". I had to smile. She sounded exactly like I did before I discovered how normal it is to be wicked, and how easy they find it to lie.

Imelda's story - a senior administrator who was driven out of her job by a deceitful, manipulative manager

'Imelda' had worked for a government department for over 30 years and was good at her job. She was also exceptionally sincere, which is partly why she found it so amazing that other people lie. She had worked for many years under an honest boss who treated people well. He was then replaced by a younger boss, 'Daphne'. She had less experience than Imelda in the work of that department. That

was when Imelda's problems began. Daphne began to pick on her and to find fault with her work, even though it was excellent. At any rate, it had never been considered deficient before.

The victimisation got worse and a formal evaluation was carried out by the HR department. Imelda was interviewed and monitored and Daphne continued to criticise her work. She also told lies about Imelda's work and manipulated the evaluation procedure. Indeed, she had bullied the HR department into getting involved in the first place. Imelda eventually felt so worn down she stopped fighting. She passively accepted a formal disciplinary, even though she was in her fifties and had an exemplary record. Shortly afterwards, she took early retirement.

Having got what she wanted, Daphne was in a good mood. She even invited Imelda for drinks at an office get-together. Imelda found it remarkable that, having been so hostile, and having told so many lies, Daphne could suddenly be so relaxed and friendly with her now that she was leaving. She also expressed surprise that Daphne felt no guilt or shame at how she had behaved. That was a mystery to Imelda, but it was all quite clear to me. Daphne felt threatened at having a person working for her who knew more about that department than she did. In that area, Daphne was a novice, as she was from a different department.

I told Imelda that what had happened to her was actually commonplace. It is referred to as "*managing somebody out*". Daphne wanted to get rid of Imelda and was willing to tell whatever lies were necessary to achieve that. There were three main reasons for that. Firstly, she was insecure in her new supervisory role. Secondly, she didn't want a person below her who knew more than she did. Thirdly, she had also realised that Imelda was unusually honest and she was threatened by that too. She saw Imelda's honesty as a potential hazard, not a virtue.

A dishonest person won't want any honest people working under them, or alongside them. They are likely to get in the way and expose things that they don't want exposed. Therefore a dishonest boss will drive out their most honest staff and keep the dishonest ones. That may sound irrational, but it makes perfect sense to a dishonest person. Imelda could eventually see these things, when I pointed them out, but they were all new to her. She had never imagined that any of those things could be happening.

She had assumed throughout that Daphne was being 'hostile', for no apparent reason. In fact, her boss's emotions had never really come into it. Daphne had simply wanted to achieve her objective, which was to remove someone who was a threat, and to replace her with someone who wasn't. It wasn't personal. It was just a piece of business that needed to be done. It was cool and calculating, and was not done in any heat of emotion.

I said to Imelda: "She did what she needed to do to get you to resign. Daphne wasn't upset herself. She was just inventing ways to upset you, in order to drive you out. Once she had achieved that, there was no need to keep up the act any longer." Imelda had assumed that Daphne had taken an irrational, emotional dislike to her. In fact, it was the opposite. Daphne's antipathy was at the level of her will, not her feelings. Her actions were planned, from beginning to end, not spontaneous, or due to losing her temper.

Joshua's story - a school teacher who had to endure ten years under a malicious, devious Principal/Headmaster

A similar story, but with a different ending, happened to 'Joshua'. He was a schoolteacher in the USA and was subjected to a much longer campaign of bullying. It actually continued for ten years! The difference was that, unlike Imelda, he *could* see what was going on and why. His problem was he did not know how to deal with it properly, or how to defend himself. Nevertheless, he was determined not to give in. He endured it all and refused to resign at any stage, partly because he knew that that was exactly what the Principal (Head Teacher) wanted him to do.

Similar ingredients were involved as in Imelda's case. The Principal wanted to get Joshua out of the school and tried every dirty trick in the book in the hope that he could wear Joshua down and get him to resign. However, Joshua had a stubborn streak, which the Principal had not been expecting. Therefore he would not be intimidated. However, as Joshua dug his heels in and refused to be driven out, the Principal and other managers kept on taking the persecution to higher and higher levels. They told lies about him and made bogus complaints and persuaded others to do so too.

He had to attend regular disciplinary hearings before the Principal, at which trumped-up charges would be made. Each time he proved the allegations were false but, every single time, the Principal would find him guilty. The Principal hoped this series of injustices would eventually break Joshua's spirit and that he would resign. But he always refused to do so. Therefore the school tried a new approach. Joshua was suspended, for months on end, but without being sent home. Instead, he was told to go and sit all day, doing nothing, at the offices of the Schools Board for the County.

Despite all the humiliation, month after month, Joshua still refused to resign. In the end, he had the victory. They reduced the age at which a teacher could retire and gave him a pension, when he was only 48. He then went into ministry as an assistant pastor in a Messianic Jewish church. He feels God used those ten years of vicious personal attacks to test him and develop his character. I am sure those were some of God's purposes in allowing all this to happen. But it would have been better if Joshua had also known how to defend himself, rather than just endlessly enduring things.

Be that as it may, the point is that the Principal and his deputy waged a 10 year campaign against him, which stooped to the depths in its dishonesty and malice. In fact, they were acting under the influence of demons. Even so, Joshua just kept on praying for God's help to endure it, and he got it. In the end, when he was allowed to retire early, an official in the County education department spoke to him privately. She knew all about the campaign of dirty tricks and said "*Well, you beat the system!*" There was amazement in her voice, because she knew how rarely that happened.

How two wicked women who were responsible for a training day lied about an innocent person to cover their own failure

I was told this story by 'Albert', who worked in the UK Civil Service. He went on a training course led by two women, 'Beryl' and 'Catherine'. The course was badly prepared, with poor content, and was not well presented. Throughout the day Albert and the other delegates felt increasingly frustrated at having to sit through such low-quality training. They all knew it was the fault of Beryl and Catherine, who were employed full time by the Civil Service to provide such training.

On such training days all the delegates are given an appraisal sheet with a series of questions about their view of the quality of the course, its content, presentation and so on. As the day wore, and their discontent grew, Albert suggested that they each tell the frank truth about how useless the course had been. However, Albert anticipated that Beryl and Catherine would ask them to fill out the forms in the final session and peer over their shoulders to pressurise them into giving higher scores. So he suggested they all fill in their forms at the final tea break, while they were not present.

That is what they did and they gave scores of 2/10 or 3/10 for most of the categories. Then, when the final session came they all just handed in their forms, in a pile, already completed. Beryl and Catherine had no alternative but to hand them in to be scrutinised by their managers. During the day, Beryl and Catherine had also said various things which alerted Albert to the fact that they were devious. Even when they mentioned their dealings with their husbands, they revealed that they used manipulation to get what they wanted. Albert noticed that and it made him even more wary of them. He was right to be so, because their subsequent behaviour was very dishonest.

He learned, some weeks later, that they had told a pack of lies to their own managers to explain away the critical appraisal forms that the class had filled in. They both said that the lectures had been

disrupted by one of the delegates. They made this accusation against a quiet, timid young woman, whom we will call 'Deirdre'. The two of them colluded together and then pre-empted matters by complaining to their bosses about Deirdre. They said she had been argumentative and kept distracting everyone by her constant interruptions.

Ironically, the truth was the exact opposite. Deirdre was introverted and had said virtually nothing all day. When the complaint was made the management took it at face value and began an investigation. Deirdre was interviewed, and denied all the accusations. But the evidence against her was consistent and was coming from two lecturers, both of whom were senior to her. It almost resulted in Deirdre losing her job. The only thing that prevented that was that she was unexpectedly tenacious in defending herself and in consistently denying the charges.

I believe that came as a surprise to Beryl and Catherine. They had picked her out as a victim precisely because she seemed to be the one who was least likely to defend herself. However, they were at least correct about how ineffective the enquiry would be. They anticipated that their managers would not contact the delegates and ask *them* whether it was true that Deirdre had wrecked the course. I suspect that was mainly because the managers investigating it could not be bothered to go to those lengths, as it would mean more effort on their own part.

They made no enquiries beyond questioning Deirdre herself. When she denied it, they decided to leave it unresolved. It now hangs on her personnel file as an unproven accusation and could affect her future in the Civil Service. Those senior managers neglected their duty. They should not have automatically believed Beryl and Catherine. They should also have carried out a proper investigation, to find out who was lying, even if it meant a lot more work for themselves. It should have been just as important to them to find out whether senior staff were telling lies as it was to deal with Deirdre.

Of course, Deirdre should also have had enough common sense, and confidence, to insist on other course delegates being interviewed, or even on contacting them herself. But she didn't. She either didn't think she could, or was afraid to do so, or it never occurred to her. Albert therefore only found out about this after it was all over. Thus Beryl and Catherine got away with it. Their explanation for the poor feedback was accepted, even though the case against Deirdre was unproven.

What is most striking is that these two wicked women felt able to make a *completely invented accusation*, against a person whom they *knew to be wholly innocent*, purely to improve their own position. That requires a cold, calculating and heartless person. Sadly, there are a great many such people in this world. Indeed, they are all around us. What was even worse is that one or other of them must have been sufficiently brass-faced to be the first one to suggest the idea.

That is either Beryl or Catherine must have thought of the scheme and said to the other "*Let's say that Deirdre disrupted the lessons all day. Then we won't be blamed*". It is one thing to tell a bare-faced lie to someone who has no knowledge of the real facts. But to be the first to suggest it to a person who knows it to be a lie, and to feel no shame when doing so, is on a different scale. But that is what they did and, though it is evil, there is nothing remarkable or rare about it. This sort of thing happens all the time.

Reasons why the wicked are so effective at identifying the naive and gullible

The wicked have a natural shrewdness, whether they are falsely religious or non-religious. Either way, they have the same feral type of cunning, like wild animals have. They also operate in the flesh and are thoroughly worldly. Therefore they are well tuned-in to this world's system and all its values. Above all, they are highly skilled in the art of self-preservation and self-promotion. Indeed, that is often their only real talent even if, in every other way, they are of limited ability. I have known people who were stupid in every other area of their life, yet they still had this remarkable craftiness when defending or promoting their own interests.

For example, a number of staff I have employed were incapable of thinking intelligently or imaginatively on behalf of a client. Yet they could do so to a very high level on their own behalf, whenever they needed to protect their own position or advance their own interests. I have seen this so consistently that I have come to regard it as the norm. Craftiness is, therefore, one of the distinguishing features of the wicked, and you can use it as one of the ways of identifying them. To a certain extent, their ungodly features give the wicked a competitive advantage over genuine believers.

In one sense, the less worldly we are, the less we are able to compete against worldly people, at least until we grow in maturity, experience and godly wisdom. (See my Book 5) In other words, we are not on a level playing field with the wicked. They have an advantage over the godly, because the game is always being played at their 'home ground', within this world system. Therefore, in this life, most battles are fought on the basis of the wicked person's own familiar rules and values. Jesus spoke of this worldly wisdom, guile, or feral shrewdness, that wicked people have, but the godly do not:

The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

Luke 16:8 (ESV)

A sincere but naive person, when up against someone wicked, is like a tourist who is outside of his usual environment. The wicked person sees the simple person's lack of awareness and realises they are not familiar with the rules of the battle. Therefore, just as a tourist is easy to identify, the simple person stands out and can be quickly spotted by the wicked. Once he has been identified, the battle is already half over. The wicked man will generally win from then on, because he knows what type of person he is dealing with, whereas the naive man doesn't.

This feral discernment operates in only one direction. The wicked man knows the nature of any person with whom he is dealing, but the simple person doesn't. Therefore there is an inequality, at least until that naive believer has grown in maturity and gained some godly wisdom. However, that maturing process can take years, during which a naive Christian will get kicked around and outmanoeuvred by the wicked. That is just the way it is. But there is a silver lining to that dark cloud. The mistreatment that we receive from the world, and from false Christians, can also help us to grow in wisdom, if we *allow it to do so*, by seeing it for what it is and by responding in the right ways.

The wicked also have the 'help' of demons who guide, warn and 'assist' them, in a perverted sense, by giving them knowledge and perception supernaturally. That is why the wicked can have an amazing foreknowledge of what you are planning. The wicked cannot read your mind. Indeed, there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that even the demons can do so. But demons can hear your conversations and read your letters and emails. They can also find ways to pass those facts on to the wicked. That is one of the ways in which the wicked get their information and it explains why they are so frequently ahead of the game.

They can often anticipate your intentions before you disclose them to anybody and know things that nobody knows except you. If so, the likelihood is they have had a tip-off from a demon. I have seen that happen even with people who were far from being naturally intelligent. Yet they knew things, or could sense things, without needing to be told by any human being. On many occasions when I ran a law firm, I would discover some misconduct by a member of staff and come in the next day intending to deal with them. There was no way, in the natural, that they could know of my discoveries, or of the confrontation that was coming.

Yet, somehow, they still knew, and would be staring at me as I entered the building. When our eyes met I could tell they already knew they had been exposed. Before I said a word, they were aware that I had found out what they were doing and that I was going to tackle them. They had been supernaturally forewarned. In part it is also that the wicked are just more naturally astute than the simple. They are therefore able to read our facial expressions and body language for themselves, in addition to any

demonic guidance they receive. They discover a lot in that way, just by using their own innate cunning. That will often also include snooping in your private papers, and speaking to others who know you.

How the godly discernment exercised by the wise differs from the feral cunning and shrewdness of the wicked

The godly discernment which God wants Christians to exercise is entirely different from the feral shrewdness of the wicked. It also takes much longer to learn. When the wicked are shrewd it is as if they are speaking in their own native language, which comes naturally to them. But when the wise are shrewd, it is as if they are operating in a second language, which they have had to learn slowly, and with much effort. Godly discernment is not inborn or natural. It can only be developed by studying God's Word and learning to apply biblical principles and also by being taught how to discern by others, who have more discernment than we have.

It also comes, thirdly, from hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit and, fourthly, from our own painful experiences of dealing with difficult situations and wicked people. None of the above things come to us naturally, easily or quickly. Godly wisdom is not in line with the standards of this world, or the ways of our sinful, fleshly nature. On the contrary, it is in line with God's nature, as set out in the Scriptures, and as expressed by the voice of the Holy Spirit. But, whether we receive wisdom via our study of the Bible, or directly from the Holy Spirit, it is equally alien to our own fleshly nature.

Godly values and principles cannot be understood or accepted by our carnal nature, or *old man*. However, they make perfect sense to our *new man*, who is born within us when we become a Christian. Thus, until we become mature, and perhaps not even then, the wicked have certain advantages over real Christians, even over a wise one. A wicked man listens to his own flesh nature (i.e. the old man) and/or to the demon(s) guiding him, and/or to the values and principles of this world. Therefore the wicked man has available to him three 'software packages' which are all fully integrated and compatible with each other.

The flesh, the world and the Devil all speak the same language. They all operate on the same evil principles, such as selfishness, manipulation, domination and control. However, a Christian has to operate on the much less familiar basis of the nature of his new man, rather than the old man or flesh. He must listen to, and be guided by, the quiet, gentle voice of the Holy Spirit, rather than the loud, penetrating voice of a demon. He also has to absorb the principles in the Bible, which take time and effort to learn, rather than the ways of this sinful world, which come so naturally to us.

Therefore the wicked have a head start. The perverted values of this world are already well known to them, having been thoroughly learned, even in childhood. Thus the godly man, however old he may be, is still at a disadvantage, at least in this limited sense. He has to operate through his new nature or new man, with which he is unfamiliar, rather than through his much more familiar old man or flesh nature. Operating in our new nature does not come naturally. It requires effort and persistence and is only learned slowly. Even for a wise man, listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, is like operating on a radio frequency which is not perfectly tuned in and is therefore 'crackly', quiet and hard to hear clearly.

The Bible, and also the voice of the Holy Spirit, can only be properly understood and heard by our new man or new nature, not by the flesh or old man. Thus we can only operate on the basis of God's ways and principles while our new nature is being allowed to take the lead and to exert its influence over us. If we are operating in the flesh, as we are so prone to doing, even after we become a Christian, we will not hear God's voice clearly. Therefore we will get things wrong. Apostle Paul speaks in Ephesians of the new way of life, and the new way of thinking, that a Christian must develop:

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because

of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!—²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus,²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice.³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 4:17-32 (ESV)

The wicked man never has to learn how to change ‘radio frequencies’ or make any effort to operate in a way which is unfamiliar or contrary to his sinful nature. He can just do whatever comes naturally to him, i.e. all the things he is used to doing. That is one reason why the wicked so frequently outwit the wise and defeat them, and even more so when they are up against an immature believer. But that is no reason to give up. We must persist, for as long as it takes, until we become effective in operating according to God's principles and through our new nature. Then, having learned these things, we must persist until they become a habit.

Another factor which gives the wicked a competitive advantage is that the non-wicked have never experienced being wicked. Therefore they can't identify with how the wicked think, act and react.

Another factor which gives the wicked a further competitive advantage is that a godly person, whether he is simple or wise, usually has no personal experience of ever having been wicked. The thoughts and ways of the wicked are therefore foreign to him, and even unimaginable. He has never personally thought along those lines. Thus he cannot easily identify with a wicked man, or think the kind of thoughts which they think. It requires a major leap of imagination, even to get on to the wicked person's wavelength at all, let alone to understand their ways thoroughly.

For many of us that mental adjustment is very difficult. It may even be impossible initially. However, if you look at it from the perspective of a wicked man, the same does not usually apply. There was a time, even if only in the distant past, when he was not yet wicked. For a time, he was only a fool. Before that he was naive. At the very least he will be able to think back to his childhood and remember what it was like to be innocent, unaware and capable of being tricked. He can therefore identify, to some degree, with the naivety and vulnerability of the simple person, with whom he is now contending.

Thus, when a wicked man is dealing with a Christian, he can see through him, and anticipate his thoughts, far better than the Christian can understand him. That is partly because that wicked man once had some of that same innocence or naivety himself. However, the average Christian has never had any personal experience of operating with the hardness and deviousness of the wicked man. So, again, there is an inequality of experience, knowledge and understanding, which gives a temporary competitive advantage to the wicked man.

Genuine Christians, as opposed to false ones or apostates, tend to be late developers in acquiring discernment. They usually only become a match for the wicked as they get older, if at all. We ought to be much quicker learners but, it has not been like that in my own case, and for many others I know. I have been a slow learner. It took me until my forties to learn how to deal effectively with wicked people, even where they were only in their early twenties. They could understand me quickly, and

accurately anticipate my actions, but I could not do the same in return. It took me decades to understand them, see their falseness, and predict what they would do.

The wicked will stick together and help each other against the godly. However, if it suits their own interests, they will also betray each other.

The wicked will frequently stick together and help each other, especially against the godly. Yet they will also betray each other, wherever it suits them, or if their own position is in any danger. I can think of two young women who worked for me, whom I will call 'Noreen and Rita'. They were dishonest, selfish and worldly and were both either already wicked or getting close to it. One day Rita got some paid time off work by lying to her supervisor. She pretended that her grandfather had just died and that she needed to go to his funeral.

Unfortunately for Rita, on the day when she was off work, her 'dead' grandfather rang the office and asked to speak to her. He had no idea of what she had told us about him. I was later told of his phone call and I realised she was lying and that her grandfather was still alive and well. That being so, I took the view that he did not require a funeral. In fact, he wasn't even ill. She just wanted to take a day off, possibly for an interview, and telling that lie seemed to her to be a good way of getting it.

When news of what Rita had done began to leak out amongst the staff, Noreen thought her own position might be in danger, as she had known of the lie all along. She feared that her own knowledge of it would be discovered. Therefore she came to me and disclosed what Rita had done, but only to protect herself, not because she disapproved of the lie. Noreen pretended to be concerned on the firm's behalf, but she had actually been aware of the lie all along and had not disapproved of it at all.

She just wanted to get in first and distance herself from Rita before the news reached me. That incident illustrates the way that the wicked will not risk their own necks to help each other. On the contrary, when the chips are down, they "*look after number one*", and will not hesitate to betray each other whenever it suits their own purposes. That said, provided there is no danger to themselves, and if it does suit their own purposes, they will also go to great lengths to cover up each other's wickedness and to hide it from you.

Cowardice is, in itself, a form of wickedness. It is also the cause of many other forms of wicked behaviour, in particular the failure to listen to our conscience and obey God's commands.

It will surprise many people to speak of cowardice as a form of wickedness in itself and also as a cause of other forms of wickedness. Some would not classify cowardice as a sin at all, let alone a serious one. It is widely seen as a mere weakness, if that. Indeed, many would even see it as sound common sense and essential for self-preservation and avoiding danger to oneself. That is not how the Bible portrays cowardice. For example, in the book of Revelation, where John gives examples of the types of people who will be sent to the Lake of Fire, we see "*the cowardly*" in first place:

⁸ *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)

Have you ever thought it odd that the cowardly are at the head of the parade, leading the procession into the Lake of Fire? Why is the sin of cowardice given such prominence? I believe the answer is that cowardice is actually just a form of selfishness. Fear, in itself, is not cowardice. We all feel fear from time to time, but we are not all cowards. Some fears are real and well-founded, and others are imaginary. Even more are based on demonic lies and whisperings, as they seek to create fear and anxiety in us. Cowardice is the refusal to *face up to our fear* and overcome it.

It is the choice, at any given moment, and on any given issue, to do what is easiest and safest for oneself, rather than what is right. It means choosing whatever will get us off the hook and avoid difficulty. Many would view that as sheer common sense, as it assists with self-preservation and the avoidance of trouble for ourselves. The problem is that we are not permitted to promote our own interests, or to protect our property, job or reputation in sinful ways. Our duty is to do what is right and, in particular, to obey God's commands, not to look after our own interests, or even to stay alive.

That duty comes way ahead of avoiding controversy, financial loss, unpopularity or danger. However, that is not how most people see it, even Christians. The majority of us, when under pressure, will do whatever makes life easier or safer for ourselves, not what is right. Indeed, that choice is such an obvious one that little or no thought goes into it. The average person has already decided, long ago, that he will always favour himself over others, and his own self-interest over his duty. That automatic 'default-setting' was put in place early in life and then reinforced by countless small incidents, in which selfish, cowardly choices were made.

Such an attitude is a major sin in itself. But it also illustrates a person's general selfishness. They are, in effect, making themselves into a god, whose interests they serve. That 'god' is then always put ahead of other people, and even ahead of God Himself. That choice to look after number one will be made when any test arises in which any pressure has to be withstood, or risk taken, in order to be faithful and do what is right. However, cowardice is all the more wicked because of all the other sins it leads a person into, as they seek to avoid pressure and defend their own interests.

Cowardice leads a person to lie, cheat and manipulate and to control, dominate and exploit others. It also causes people to break promises, neglect their duty, cover up their wrongdoings and look the other way when they ought to intervene. They then pretend not to have seen anything when they could, and should, give evidence, either at work or to the police or other authorities. Worst of all, cowardice causes church leaders, who are meant to be shepherds, to refuse to put themselves at risk for the sake of the flock.

So, instead of running *towards* the danger when there is a threat to the people in the church, a cowardly leader runs *away* from it. Such a man is a 'hireling', who cares only for himself, not the sheep. So these tests of his courage reveal that he is not a true shepherd. The Bible commands us not to fear, but it also commands us to *be* courageous, as God said to Joshua before he led the Israelites into the Promised Land. Joshua knew this would involve years of hard fighting against the Canaanites and so God focused on the need for Joshua to be *strong and courageous*, even if he was afraid:

⁶ Be strong and of good courage; for you shall cause this people to inherit the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. ⁷ Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go.

Joshua 1:6-7 (RSV)

Courage is not a talent. It is something we choose to have.

Have you ever thought it odd that God *commands* Joshua to be courageous? He doesn't just suggest it or advise it. God sees it as a matter of *choice*, not of *ability*. Many assume courage is a quality that one is either born with, or not. If that was so, it would not be our fault if we didn't have it. They equate it to being tall, or having blue eyes, as if there is nothing that anyone can do to make themselves courageous if they aren't born that way.

That is the 'logic' by which some people excuse themselves for their own cowardice, but it is wrong thinking. The Bible does not command anybody to be tall, or to have blue eyes, but we see many people, not just Joshua, being commanded to be courageous. So, courage is plainly viewed as a choice,

and one which is equally available to all of us. That said, Jesus does link courage to faith, or rather He links fear to the lack of faith.

We see this in the passage from Mark, where the disciples are afraid on Lake Galilee because of the storm. Jesus implies that if they had faith, they would not be afraid. The point is that He had just said, shortly beforehand, that they would *go across to the other side* of the lake. That meant it was going to happen and that they would arrive safely. Therefore they should have trusted His word, and felt sure that they would arrive safely, because no storm was capable of stopping him:

³⁵ *On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side."* ³⁶ *And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him.* ³⁷ *And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling.* ³⁸ *But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"* ³⁹ *And he awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm.* ⁴⁰ *He said to them, "Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?"* ⁴¹ *And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"*

Mark 4:35-41 (ESV)

None of us can say we aren't to blame for our own failure, or refusal, to do our duty in the face of risk or pressure, such that we chose to look after ourselves, rather than do what God wanted. An example of outstanding courage is the Ten Boom family in Nazi-occupied Holland. They were not born with special genes that made them brave enough to shelter Jews in their home. Neither were their neighbours unable to do so due to not having the 'courage gene'. The Ten Booms sheltered Jews because they *chose to*. They took that risk because they decided to, not due to any special ability.

Even if the Ten Boom family were braver than others when the war began, it was only because they had 'practised' being brave, long before the war, in all sorts of small ways. Thus, by 1940, courage had become a habit which they had *chosen to form*. It had nothing to do with genetics. However, we still need to ask God to help us to increase our courage, and it is still our duty to pray for it. Therefore, even praying that prayer is a matter of choice. But how many of us ever pray that God will give us more courage or strengthen our resolve, so as to make right choices and do our duty?

God will hold us accountable for our cowardice.

We should all pray for courage, but most of us don't, and we are accountable for our decision not to. We are also answerable for the people whose own courage is undermined by our cowardice, such that they lose their willingness to fight because of us. There is a sobering passage in Deuteronomy on this issue. It concerns the episode at Kadesh-barnea, where the Israelites hear of the reports of the 12 spies who had been sent to spy out the land prior to beginning the war of conquest.

Moses begins by reminding the people of what God had wanted, and why the 12 spies had been sent:

²⁰ *And I said to you, 'You have come to the hill country of the Amorites, which the Lord our God gives us.* ²¹ *Behold, the Lord your God has set the land before you; go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has told you; do not fear or be dismayed.'* ²² *Then all of you came near me, and said, 'Let us send men before us, that they may explore the land for us, and bring us word again of the way by which we must go up and the cities into which we shall come.'* ²³ *The thing seemed good to me, and I took twelve men of you, one man for each tribe;*

Deuteronomy 1:20-23 (RSV)

Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, were courageous. They came back with a positive report and encouraged the people to believe the Canaanites could be defeated. The other ten were cowardly and defeatist, and gave a pessimistic report, even though they had seen the same things. Their words sapped

the confidence of the people. Therefore they lost their courage too, and became afraid to enter the land and to begin the war of conquest. But God had commanded them to fight this war and had promised to help them. Moses then rebuked the Israelites for their lack of courage, particularly the ten cowardly spies, whose cowardice had spread throughout the nation:

²⁶ “Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God; ²⁷ and you murmured in your tents, and said, ‘Because the Lord hated us he has brought us forth out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us. ²⁸ Whither are we going up? Our brethren have made our hearts melt, saying, “The people are greater and taller than we; the cities are great and fortified up to heaven; and moreover we have seen the sons of the Anakim there.”” ²⁹ Then I said to you, ‘Do not be in dread or afraid of them. ³⁰ The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, ³¹ and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God bore you, as a man bears his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place.’ ³² Yet in spite of this word you did not believe the Lord your God, ³³ who went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night, to show you by what way you should go, and in the cloud by day.

³⁴ “And the Lord heard your words, and was angered, and he swore, ³⁵ ‘Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land which I swore to give to your fathers, ³⁶ except Caleb the son of Jephun'neh; he shall see it, and to him and to his children I will give the land upon which he has trodden, because he has wholly followed the Lord!’ ³⁷ The Lord was angry with me also on your account, and said, ‘You also shall not go in there;’ ³⁸ Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter; encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it. ³⁹ Moreover your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall go in there, and to them I will give it, and they shall possess it. ⁴⁰ But as for you, turn, and journey into the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea.’

Deuteronomy 1:26-40 (RSV)

God was so concerned by the cowardice of the ten spies, and those whom they influenced, that He postponed the war of conquest for nearly 40 years. He made that generation stay in the wilderness, so they could all die off, one by one. Then He used the next generation to fight the war instead. This shows the responsibility we all have not to cause others to lose their courage as a result of seeing our cowardice. That responsibility is especially heavy for church leaders. Their spinelessness can lead a whole church astray. That helps to explain why God sees cowardice as a major sin, and even as wickedness.

The foolish and the simple are the only groups who lack discernment.

The simple have little or no discernment of any kind. That is also true, to varying extents, with fools. It depends where they are on the spectrum, i.e. closer to being simple, or closer to being wicked. If a man is mostly simple and only partly foolish, then he will have little or no discernment. But if he has lost most of his naivety and is now a fully-fledged fool, even edging towards being wicked, then he will already have developed quite a lot of shrewdness. But it will only be of the feral, worldly type, not godly discernment. So, when assessing yourself, or other people, it is important to be realistic about where you, or they, really are on the ‘spectrum’. In particular, you need to admit that you lack discernment, if that is the case. Denying the fact will not prevent it from being so. Accordingly, an essential first step in the process of developing more discernment is to be frank enough to admit to yourself that you don’t currently have much of it, if indeed any at all.