Chapter Two
Who is God?

Everyone has at least one social circle, and most people have more than one. When we are growing up, our social circles are likely those others who live near us, those we meet at school, and perhaps those we get to know through activities outside of school – church, sports, clubs, etc. As we age, our social circles aren't much different except for work often taking the place of school.

In those social circles we get to know people. We find folks that are "like us," and we find those whose life seems to beat to a different drum. Historically, people have gotten to know and grown close to people who were similar in tastes, interests, morality, education, and even economics. The expression, "Birds of a feather flock together," is not new. We know its English usage as early as 1545 in a piece by William Turner. (Well, it wasn't precisely used then as now. Turner actually wrote "Byrdes of on kynde and color flok and flye allwayes together." (See *The Rescuing of Romish Fox*.) But the idea is older than 1545. We read it in Plato's *Republic*, "Men of my age flock together; we are birds of a feather, as the old proverb says." It was an old proverb to Plato who died around 348BC.

Interestingly, social scientists have seen a developmental shift in the American generation that came of age in the 21st century. Scientists' studies indicated that more than any other modern time, people were not seeking out those like them as their friends. Instead, people were seeking those they *wanted to be like* as their friends. A subtle shift, perhaps, but a notable one among those who study such.

A by-product of this deeply ingrained aspect of human nature is how we see God. Over many decades of talking with people about God, I have found a few patterns. If you ask most people what they truly believe about God, who and what he is, you will get a set of answers tied to the same human instinct about social circles. If people like God, or like the idea of God, they will describe God in the glowing terms of what they themselves are, when at their best. (Or at least of what they would want to be.) On the other hand, if people don't like God, or the idea of God, they will associate him with those things people don't like or care for.

Either way, people tend to define God by what people like or don't like. We define God by what we are or want to be. Or alternatively, we define God by what we *aren't* and *don't want to be*. Biblically, this is a recognized way of humanity, but it isn't an approved one! The Biblical teaching is much different.

The Bible teaches that humanity tends to make God a supersized portion of whatever we think of as the best (or perhaps worst) that is in humanity. We readily see this in the Greeks and Romans, whose gods had human emotions and frailties, just in a being with superpowers and relatively unlimited life. Israel's neighbors did much the same thing with their panoply of gods.

The Bible, however, steps into this human tendency with a loud revelation. The Bible says that humans cannot adequately construct on their own an understanding of who God is, and that God himself has to reveal it. The Bible is that revelation.

Reading this, some might wonder, "If it takes the Bible and God to reveal himself, then is believing in God illogical or nonsense? If God is logically true, then could we logically deduce that truth?" If you are one wondering that, then you are in good company! The French philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes (1506-1650) laid foundations that formed the modern rationalist mode of thinking by approaching life's questions from the ground up. Descartes decided that he would only embrace as truth that which he could logically deduce as true from the world around him processed through his logical brain.

Descartes began with one singular truth, "I think, therefore I am." (Descartes wrote this in French and Latin, so some are also familiar with the line in those languages: "*Je pense, donc je suis*;" or "*Ego cogito, ergo sum*.") From this Descartes tried building up to prove the existence of God step at a time. I believe an inherent flaw in Descartes system is the belief that humans think rationally and objectively. The last forty years of social science work has illustrated that humans have built in biases that affect how we interpret evidence and how we "logically" think through things. A quick Internet search on "confirmation bias" readily illustrates what I mean. This means that when we try to use Descartes approach of building up to a knowledge of God, we tend to construct the god of our own imaginings, rather than seeing the true God that is present and real.

This raises two issues. First, we must ask whether any belief in God is therefore irrational. As some put it, is belief a "blind leap of faith"? Absolutely not! It means belief follows a different model or paradigm from which we find truth. Let me use an example from biology.

Inside most human cells are submicroscopic proteins called "PPARs" (short for "peroxisome proliferator-activated receptors"). These PPARs play a critical role in regulating genes. Scientists have determined at least three types of PPARs exist

in the human cells, but this determination was not made by a microscope or some physical observation. Nor was it made by logically building up from what science already knew.

PPARs were deduced logically from what *made sense* of what was seen. You can't see PPARs, but they must exist because without them, what we do see doesn't make sense.

In like matter, God reveals himself, and without God's revelation, we don't satisfactorily come to an understanding of who he is. Yet when we consider him in light of his revelation, he makes sense with everything else we see in the world, as well as in our own lives and hearts. As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Weight of Glory*, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else." God makes sense in this way. The revelation of God, the way God reveals himself in the Bible, makes the most sense as explaining the world, the way the world is, and the way people are.

The second issue is how this "ground up" versus "revelation down" approach affects our understanding of God. Here the difference is huge. We can see that there is a God, but that doesn't mean we accurately understand who he is. We need his revelation to more clearly see and perceive him for who he is. Otherwise, our imagination and desires will become our reality.

So with that background, the question can be addressed: Who is God? For our answer, we look to the Bible for the revelation. Over the centuries, scholars have used a number of terms to explain Biblical teaching about God. I have a number of them in God's CV, and I will use them to pursue the various lines of thought about God's identity.

The section about God's identity is found under "Personal":

God's Curriculum Vitae

Personal:

- **Traits:** All-loving, holy, true, moral, merciful and righteous, omnipotent, omniscient and wise, social, and communicative.
- One God in three persons. A "trinity" or "triune" God in the persons often called "Father," "Son," "Holy Spirit."
- **Address:** Outside the material universe (transcendent), inside the material universe at all places at all times (immanent), inside of this children (indwelling).
- **Progeny:** One unique Son who always existed plus countless adopted children who have entered the family through an established righteousness provided by God.

Our exploration of "Who is God?" begins with the traits of God revealed in Scripture.

Traits:

God is All-loving

A lot of people know the Biblical verse 1 John 4:8, even if they aren't aware of it. In that verse is a simple yet deeply significant phrase: "God is love." We read that affirmation and like it. After all, who doesn't want a loving God? If we pause for a moment, however, we might begin to wonder exactly what that phrase means. The comment that God is love is tucked into a larger verse about how we should treat each other:

> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

The passage is written as if God's love is almost contagious. Because God is love, I love others. This causes me to examine what might be meant by the word "love." This word stands front and center of God's traits on his CV.

"Love" is an interesting word in the 21st century English language. I love my wife. I love my friends. But I don't love my friends in the same way I love my wife.

I also love our dog Tizzy, but I certainly don't love my dog the same way I love my wife and friends. Anyone who knows me well knows that I love apple pie! Yet my love for apple pie isn't remotely in the same realm as my love for my family. Such is our English word "love."

The ancient Greeks had a better system. They had a number of different words that we often translate as "love." These words had different nuances of meaning, however. Because the New Testament section of the Bible was written in Greek, examining the Greek words for love is helpful to understanding God's CV as a "loving" God.

Phileō – the friend love

One Greek verb for love is *phileō* (φιλέω). If lived in Biblical times and spoke everyday Greek, the kind of Greek used in the New Testament, this is a word I would use a good bit. When I spoke of a good buddy, someone I felt a kinship or bond with, I might speak of my *phileō* love for him or her. This word is the root of the city "Philadelphia," whose motto is "the city of brotherly love" – the "Phila" part of the name is the "brotherly love" part of the motto.

In the Bible, this kind of "love" is used not only in the sense of love for a friend, but also of certain things one might have an "affection" for. Some people "loved" the better seats at the synagogue. *Phileō* was used for that love ("They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For … they *love* [*phileō*] the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues" Mt. 23:5-6). Then, as today, some people loved being popular. An example of such popularity was having folks recognize you and greet you in public. If I were to say, "I love it when people see me and say, 'Hi Mark!' in public, I could use the *phileō* word for love (Lk. 20:46).

Jesus used this idea of "love" when speaking of the priority of our affections. If I have a greater affection (*phileō* love) for my family than I do for God, I have misplaced affections (Mt. 10:37). If I have a greater affection for my own life than I should, then I will suffer and "lose" my life (Jn. 12:25).

SUMMARY FOR *PHILEO* LOVE: This kind of affection is something God has towards us and something we are to have for him (Jn. 16:27). It is squarely on his CV. This affection-type love is one used by Jesus when speaking of how God "loves" Jesus as a son. Jesus said this love was evidenced by God showing Jesus what God is doing in the world. (Jn. 5:20 "For the Father loves [*phileō*] the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.")

Erōs – the passion love

Another Greek word for love is the noun *erōs* (ἔρως). *Erōs* love is the root of our modern word, "erotic." The word doesn't mean erotic, but it comes close! *Erōs* refer to a deep fondness or passion for someone or something. It comes from a verb (*erōmai*) that implies a lust or passionate desire for someone or something.

While *erōs* wasn't used in the New Testament, the Jewish writers of the time just before Jesus used it twice in translating the Old Testament into Greek. In Proverbs 7, the prostitute calls to the naïve to come to bed with her and to "delight ourselves with love [*erōs*]." Later in Proverbs 30:15-16, the writers lists, "Three things are never satisfied; four never say, 'Enough.'" The Hebrew lists four things that aren't ever sated:

1. Sheol (aka death)
2. The womb, which desires to bear children
3. Land in need of rain, and
4. Fire, which constantly needs more fuel to keep burning.

This is what we read in our English Bibles. So the English Revised Version reads,

> Three things are never satisfied; four never say, "Enough": Sheol, the barren womb, the land never satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, "Enough" (Prov.30:15-16).

However, when the Jews in Alexandria translated the Hebrew of Proverbs into Greek, they changed "the barren womb." The Greek translation of the Old Testament reads gives the four things that are never satisfied as:

1. Hades (aka death)
2. The *erōs* love of a woman
3. Land in need of rain, and
4. Fire.

SUMMARY FOR *EROS* LOVE: This lustful love is not one that is spoken of as God's love for humanity nor of a human type of love for God. When we read on his CV that God is "love," we misunderstand if we think that God has some kind of lustful personal attraction to us.

Agapē – the interested love

A third Greek word for love is commonly known in its noun form – *agapē* (ἀγάπη). Modern writers often define *agapē* love as "unconditional love." That makes for some good ideas of how we should love others, and can even be found in ideas behind the word, but it isn't the fairest of definitions for the word itself.

The idea behind the Greek *agapē* love is based on a regard for others that is demonstrated in being interested in the other's welfare or good. *Agapē* love can still denote affection as well as a special bond between those sharing the love.

When Jesus told his disciples that they would be known by their love for each other, he spoke of *agapē* love. ("By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love [*agapē*] for one another" Jn. 13:35.) Jesus spoke of a bond of caring that shows interests in the welfare of others. This is the kind of care for others interests that is shown in its most extreme measure through an ultimate sacrifice. Thus, Jesus said,

> Greater love [*agapē*] has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends (Jn. 15:13).

Or as Paul put it in Romans 5:8,

> God shows his love [*agapē*] for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Agapē love is Paul's choice for the fact that in spite of anything the world may throw our way, we can be confident that Christ is still interested in our good.

> For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love [*agapē*] of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:38-39).

Paul uses *agapē* love a lot in his writings. Paul is laser-focused on God's interest in us, as well as the interest we should have for each other. *Agapē* love is Paul's choice for the love he writes of so famously in 1 Corinthians 13. Read the entire chapter with "*agapē*" inserted where it is written, rather than the English

"love." Do so with the idea of "*agapē*" as a "deep and sincere interest in the welfare of others."

> If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not *agapē*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not *agapē*, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not *agapē*, I gain nothing.
>
> *Agapē* is patient and kind; *agapē* does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. *Agapē* bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
>
> *Agapē* never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.
>
> So now faith, hope, and *agapē* abide, these three; but the greatest of these is *agapē*.

SUMMARY FOR *AGAPĒ* LOVE: This care and concerned love for the best interests of others is deeply rooted in the character and essence of God. Not surprisingly, when John wrote that "God is love," John used *agape*. God's essence is one of interest and care for his created and beloved children, and that care is one we should model in how we are towards others.

Storgē –

Another word from ancient Greek that can be translated as "love" or "affection" is *storgē* (στοργη). This word was especially used when speaking of the

love of a parent for a child. It denoted the kind of feelings and heart a parent typically has (and should have, although not all parents are normal!)

While *storgē* is found in an "intertestamental book" (one that was written between the Old Testament and New Testament), it is not found in the Bible. Still, the concept of God loving us as a parent loves a child is readily present in the Bible.

In Old Testament prophet Isaiah, we read of God speaking to Israel. God addressed the people who were wondering whether or not God had forgotten them. In reply, God explained his love and commitment to his people ran deeper than the love of a mother to her child.

> Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands (Isa. 49:15-16).

This recognition of God loving his people as a parent is found also in the New Testament. Paul spoke frequently about God's people being "adopted" children who call God the familiar "Abba," the familiar word for a father used also by Jesus in addressing God.

> For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15).
>
> And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" (Gal. 4:6).
>
> And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Mk. 14:36).

SUMMARY FOR *STORGĒ* LOVE: The Bible doesn't use this ancient Greek term in describing God or his love, but the idea of a parent loving her/his child is readily used as an illustration for how God loves.

Before leaving this section of God's CV, an important aspect of love, especially used in the Biblical sense of God's love needs to be noted. This is rooted in the real-life truth that every coin has two sides. The love of God seems and feels nice to us. It fits into our desires of who we want God to be. But almost every trait we "like" in

God has a side that we might perceive negatively. It is the proverbial "other side of the coin."

Hatred - The Other Side of the Coin

Can we speak of God as a "hateful" God? Can we say that the "All-loving God" is also a hating God?

If we are speaking from the Bible in trying to learn who God is, then the answer becomes quickly apparent: Yes. We may not like it. It might not be the image of God we would create for him, but it is a true reflection of who he is. We have this warning in Ecclesiastes 3:1, 8 that recognizes,

> For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven…a time to love, and a time to hate.

This understanding is personalized in Scripture as true about God as well as people. Consider passages like Psalm 5:5,

> The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

Here we read of God hating "all evildoers." In Isaiah 61:8 we read of God's hatred hand-in-hand with his *agapē* love,

> For I the LORD love [*agapē* in the Greek Old Testament] justice; I *hate* robbery and wrong…

The Old Testament prophet calls on God's people to emulate this trait saying,

> Hate evil, and love [*agapē* in the Greek Old Testament] good (Amos 5:15).

Lest one think this an "Old Testament concept" left behind once Jesus arrived, consider that Paul wrote much the same thing,

> Let love [*agapē*] be genuine. Abhor ["hate"] what is evil (Rom. 12:9).

For Paul, a genuine love that is concerned about others (*agapē*) is a love that abhors evil. This concept of evil as something worthy of our hatred is explored more carefully in the next section of God's C.V. It is notable now, however, because it is part and parcel of God's genuine love.

While we in 21st century America might view love and hate as opposites, they can actually be two sides of the same coin. If I genuinely love my children, I will want what is best for them. I will hate that which harms them, that which misdirects their lives to poor ends, and that which ruins their lives. My love isn't opposite hate. My love is for what is best, and it hates what isn't.

In this context, one can better understand why Jesus explained that we are to love our enemies, not hate them. We are to do good to them.

> I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. … If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. … But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful (Lk. 6:27-36).

God teaches us to love others. Luke uses *agapē* throughout the passage. Jesus is telling us to have a genuine concern for others. Part of this genuine concern is a hatred of what damages others. Hence, we pray for those most people would hate. We seek their good, including the removal of evil from their nature and actions. The evil we can hate, but the individual we are called to love.

Why is this so? Part of that answer is found as we examine the next set of traits on God's C.V.

God is holy, true, and moral

In Socrates's day (c.470-399BC), being "impious" or "morally corrupt" was a crime in Athens. An appointed judge (called the "King-Archon") presided over matters of impiety. Late in his life, Socrates was prosecuted before the judge for being morally corrupt. Before his appearance in court, Socrates had an encounter with a young man of Athens. Around twenty years after Socrates's death, Socrates's student Plato wrote of the exchange between Socrates and the young man.

The story is frequently referenced in dialogues about morality and ethics to this day. In the story, Socrates confronts head on the question of what is holy and moral. The story presents an argument that still today is referenced as "Euthyphro's dilemma." This story is important, and I will discuss it in due course, but first, it is important to note the significance of holiness, truth, morality, and righteousness to God.

When many people think of the coming of Jesus, they think of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In most English Bibles those four books contain "gospel" in their title, i.e., "The Gospel of Matthew." The word "gospel" translates the Greek word *euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον), a word that we could more literally translate as "good news." This meaning should not go unnoticed. What makes the coming of Jesus, his ministry, his death and resurrection "good news"? The answer lies at the root of the "bad news" that exists otherwise. The answer is rooted in the attributes of God as one who is "holy, true, moral, and righteous."

Jesus' life and death, the good news, is God's solution to sin. Over the centuries as we swing into our current culture, the significance and stink of sin has somewhat diminished in the eyes of many. We live in a culture that views sin as an unfortunate reality, something we all do, but something that is readily forgiven and so has not much punch. We live in a culture where many religions are based on "fairness." These fairness religions teach that sins are bad, but as long as one's good deeds outweigh ones bad deeds, then in the balance of things, everything is okay. After all, everyone is going to do some bad. So we should be emphasizing the importance of doing good as much as we can and be happy with that.

This "fairness" that keeps account of sin like a scale or a bank account is not the Biblical teaching of sin. The Greek word for sin (*hamartia* - ἁμαρτία) is to depart from a standard, specifically for sin, God's standard. One might think that no big deal, after all, when our kids depart from our standards as parents, we guide them into better behavior, but we don't roast them over an open fire and rain destruction

upon their souls. But sin is very different in terms of God and who he is. This is why the Biblical concerns over sin are what they are. It is why Jesus would teach,

> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell (Mt. 5:29).

Notably, this pronouncement by Jesus follows his redefining the sin of adultery as one of simply looking at a woman with a sexual desire. Sin is serious business that brings serious consequences.

The way for Jesus was prepared by John the Baptist. John didn't prepare the way by talking about how sin can be a problem. His language was much more significant than that. John used harsh words for what sin meant and what it merited. John would call the people the "brood of vipers" and tell them "wrath" was coming. People were to repent, for Jesus would come with,

> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire (Mt. 3:12).

Sin is not to be taken lightly. Sin does not make one "sick." Paul would write that people are "dead" in their sins (Eph. 2:1). If sin is merely a sickness, then one might land in the world of those religions that teach one is okay if one's good deeds outweigh one's bad deeds. This view is actually the one most prevalent among the Jews of Jesus' day.

But Jesus taught that sin was something much worse. Sin brought death, and God demanded perfection, not a balance of goodness.

> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:46-48).

As Leon Morris described this teaching,

> So long as they have evil about them they cannot enter God's heaven or be numbered among God's people here on earth. Sin is a serious business indeed.[1]

Why is God so hung up about immorality and sin? What is it about impiety that brings such harshness in the Biblical thinking? I believe that we do not like to dwell on such things. Even among the religious, we like the idea of peace, love, forgiveness, and then live and let live.

This returns to the premise earlier in this chapter that we tend to think of God in those terms that we find we most like. Rather than learn who he is, we think of him as who we would like him to be. We think of God as us at our best, simply more powerful and eternal. This is our grave mistake.

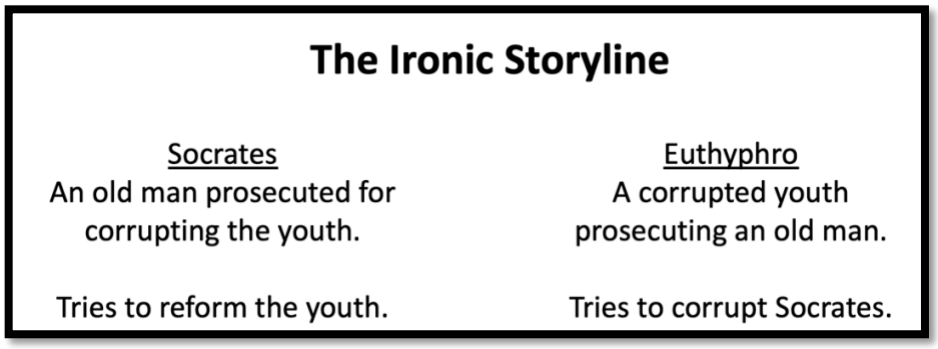
I think we best understand this if we decide what is sin, immorality, impiety, unholiness, or any other word that we might use in this discussion. Here we return to the story of Socrates and Euthyphro for making us think through these things.

Euthyphro's Dilemma
(What makes moral moral?)

As written by Plato, the story has a strong twist of irony in the storyline, as it speaks profoundly on the subject of God and morality. The irony lies in the characters and events. Socrates is an old man who is called to court to defend himself for morally corrupting the youth of Athens. Before the proceeding begins, Socrates encounters a young man names Euthyphro who is coming to court to prosecute an old man. Euthyphro's name means either, "gatekeeper of the good" or "good gatekeeper." Yet as the story unfolds, Euthyphro is anything but the good gatekeeper. Euthyphro is going to court to wrongly prosecute his father!

With Plato's great ironic touch, we see that Socrates is being wrongly pursued for corrupting the youth, while the already corrupted youth is being allowed to pursue and corrupt the old. To compound the irony, in the story, Socrates tries to "uncorrupt" the youth!

[1] Morris, Leon, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1965), at 22.



In the encounter, Socrates directs the conversation to what the young man is doing in the court. As the explanation issues about prosecuting his father, Socrates begins questioning Euthyphro to illuminate the impiety in prosecuting his father. (Euthryphro accused his father of apprehending a murderer and tying the murderer up while going into town to find out what to do. While the father was gone, the murderer died.) Socrates asks Euthyphro whether his actions were "pious." Euthyphro affirms that he is absolutely doing what is right.

Socrates asked Euthyphro how one determines what is moral or right. The storyline becomes humorous as Euthyphro tries one explanation after another, each unsuccessful:

- First try: Rather than answer directly, Euthyphro merely says his own actions (prosecuting his father) are pious. Euthyphro gave an example from Greek mythology of Zeus dealing with his father Cronos for doing wrong. Socrates pressed him further, not satisfied with the answer. Euthyphro never explained what made his actions righteous or sinful. Euthyphro had simply given what he believed to be an example of a pious action. Socrates was asking the baseline question: *Explain what makes the action pious*.

- Second try: Euthyphro then explains that "pious" is whatever is dear to the gods while that which isn't dear to them is immoral or sinful. Socrates quickly points out the flaws in Euthyphro's reasoning by illustrating that the Greek gods don't always agree on moral issues. Hence, what the gods view as moral or immoral can't be the ultimate truth.

- Third try: Euthyphro offers a slight variation on his second try. Euthyphro says what is moral or immoral is that which all the gods

love, i.e., that on which they all agree. Socrates then asks the question that is still know today as "Euthyphro's dilemma."

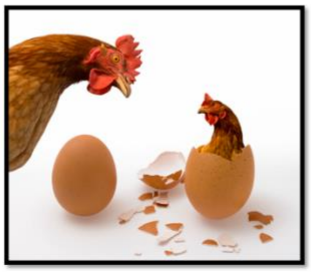
The Dilemma: Is right loved by the gods because it is holy? Or is right holy because it is loved by the gods? This is the moral equivalent of, "What came first, the chicken or the egg?" (Side note: this is the background story for Kanye West's line in *No Church In the Wild* – "Is Pious pious 'cause God loves pious? Socrates asks, 'Whose bias do y'all seek?' All for Plato, screech.")

Euthyphro's Dilemma:
What makes something holy and just?

The moral equivalent to, "What came first, the chicken or the egg?

Option 1

Some actions are "holy" in themselves and for that reason the gods love those actions.



Option 2

Some actions loved by the gods, and that is what makes those actions "holy.".

- Fourth try: Euthyphro goes for "Option 1" in the dilemma. He tells Socrates that the gods love what is holy and moral because it is holy and moral. In response to this Socrates points out that Euthyphro then is failing to define what is truly moral and holy. If the gods all love that which is moral and holy, then what makes something moral and holy such that the gods will love it?

- Fifth try: The discussion turns to the human decisions of what is just and holy. Euthyphro explains that human piety and holiness is doing what is pleasing to the gods. He includes what people say, what people do, and especially prayers and sacrifices.

- Sixth try: Socrates points out that no one can really give anything to the gods such that it makes the gods better than they were before. So if giving to gods (sacrifices) and getting from gods (prayer) is pious and holy in human activity, then Euthyphro has just switched to option 2 of

the dilemma. It is merely because the gods love something that we determine that something to be holy.

Socrates, through Plato, makes one think seriously about the character of right and wrong. If it seems difficult to wade through, don't get lost in the effort. I have lived with and read Euthyphro's dialogue with Socrates in English and Greek more times than I can count over the decades and it is still a chore to work through.

Here is the key (if you are still reading): We need to understand what makes something right or sinful if we are to understand the Biblical significance of sin. The answer to the question was neither Option 1 or Option 2 of Socrates. Socrates failed to consider and include the Biblical answer.

There are not a plurality of gods; there is only one. That one God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as will be discussed later – is a moral being himself. Being truthful in his character and make up, rather than one who lies and is false, is a way that God is "moral." These traits of morality are what we in human terms call "good." Those traits that are not godly are what we call "evil."

Euthyphro had his dialogue about what is good with Socrates and it left the world with the moral dilemma we read above. Jesus also had an encounter on the same issue, but the dialogue took a much different direction.

Jesus was going through his day and people were interrupting him by bring him children to touch and bless. Those close to Jesus tried to stop the interruptions, scolding the parents for their actions. Jesus overheard the disciples pushing the parents away and called out, "Quit sending them away! Let the children come to me! God's kingdom belongs to children, and those like them!" Into this scene a local ruler (quite the contrast to the children that will receive the kingdom of God), comes up to Jesus and asks Jesus what deeds the man can do to live eternally with God in his kingdom. When the ruler addressed Jesus, he called him a "good rabbi" or "good teacher."

Jesus quizzed the man on why he would call Jesus "good." Jesus explained that no one is "good" except God. God alone is what merits the definition of "good, righteous, holy, pious," etc.

Jesus explained and taught the Biblical teaching that underlies all of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. God is a moral being. God's morality is what we call

good. That which God isn't is immoral. This is the problem with sin. It is outside the character and *essence* of God. No one can inhabit the presence of God with sin.

If we use a mathematics illustration it might help. If we think of God as 100% pure, then we can better understand that no one can be "in God" unless such a person is also 100% pure. Take the best of the best of the best humanity has to offer, and with only one sin, only one impure thought, only one misstep, then one is no longer 100% pure. Give someone 99.999999% purity, and such a one cannot exist within a 100% pure God. It would make God less than 100% pure.

God takes impurity and destroys it. Impurity gets judgment. There are fires of Hell and judgment ready to destroy anything tainted with sin. As Jesus said,

> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Mt. 7:19).

If we begin to see sin as something that destroys the beauty and truth of what God made, we begin to understand why God hates sin and evil. Sin and evil bring death.

The destruction left in the wake of sin is found not only in God's eternity but also in the here and now. As humans, we are made in God's image. God revealed this to us in his earliest scriptures. Genesis makes it plain,

> Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness… So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Ge. 1:26-27).

In part this means that we are hardwired with God's morality. Hence, we have embedded deep in our essence, an understanding that there is right and wrong. Right and wrong matter to us. We may disagree, debate, and even fight over what is right or wrong, but we know such things exist.

Right and wrong become something more than "what pleases God" or "what God seeks to be" (Euthyphro's dilemma). Right and wrong flow from the essence of God into humanity and becomes what makes our world work best. I am at my best when I am doing what God made me to do. My world will function best when I live consistent with the hardwiring in my makeup. Right and wrong become the best course of action in helping me develop fully and live a life under the blessings of the moral God.

Related to this is an interesting word in the New Testament – *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον). This word references the trigger that activates a trap. Jesus and Paul both used this word picture to talk about inducing or causing one to sin. In the teachings of Jesus an example is the parable of the weeds in Matthew 13. In verses 41 and 42 Jesus explained that at the end of time,

> The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin [*skandalon*] and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Causing one to sin is to activate the trap that, for trapper hunters, leads to death of the prey, but in Jesus' analogy, leads to death of the ensnared.

Paul taught that Christians are to avoid those who are inducements to sin. In Romans 16:17 he explained,

> I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles [*skandalon*] contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

Sin is an obstacle to growth and blessing in this world, in addition to its assured destruction in the final judgment.

In light of these two tragedies that assuredly accompany sin – death and destruction in the world to come and unfruitful life in the current world, it is not surprising that the moral God hates sin. Sin destroys the beauty of God's creation. Sin is the impediment to fellowship with God. Sin keeps humanity out of God kingdom and presence. Sin brings pain and hurt even in this world.

The interesting part of God's C.V. is the relation between God's all-loving trait and God's hatred of sin and evil. How do these two traits merge when dealing with humanity? The answer is found in the meeting of God's next two traits: merciful and righteous.

To be continued…