

# The Law of Flesh and the Heart of Stone

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

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I recently watched a TED talk by impact investor Tom Chi, ultimately about how robots are being used to restore nature. But he begins by describing what he calls a “profound paradox,” that almost everyone responds positively when asked how they feel about nature. “Nature is inspiring.” “Nature is the most beautiful thing that exists,” they say. “They’ll put it as a backdrop on their desktop and their phones,” Chi says. “Every single person you ask, you’re going to get a positive response.” And “therein lies the paradox,” he says. “How did a group of individuals that love nature, somehow create a civilization and industrial economy that is effectively a planetary assault on nature?” Chi’s answer is that we’ve all adopted the belief that economic wins are “traded off” against the ecology. “And if you care about the ecology and want to make that better, unfortunately you’re going to have to trade off economic wins.”<sup>1</sup>

I invite you to listen to Chi’s TED talk to learn why he thinks robots are part of the solution. I mention it here because this paradox is the same one I want to explore today, although more broadly than he does. For humanity’s highest aspirations have always been to create a world of peace, justice, equality, care, compassion, kindness, and respect for others. These aspirations are at the core of all our major religions, going back hundreds and thousands of years. So why haven’t we been able to live up to them? Why are so many in our modern world still suffering from unnecessary war, violence, discrimination, poverty, hunger, homelessness, and so forth? Why, if we all know what kind of world we want, don’t we have it? Why, if we all know deep down what it means to be good, aren’t we?

Socrates once said, “No person knowingly does evil.” If we tweak this statement with a little psychology, we might instead say, “No person *consciously* does evil.” In other words, we convince ourselves we’re doing good even when we aren’t. We achieve this by unconsciously justifying our bad behavior; by projecting our own evil onto those we harm and exploit—convincing ourselves they deserve it, by reserving good only for those like us whom we believe do deserve it precisely because they are “good” like us; and by supporting other worthy causes to compensate for wrongdoing elsewhere in our lives.

When we knowingly do evil, it’s difficult, as social beings, to face others, let alone look at ourselves in the mirror. Yet the frequent conflict between self-interests and the welfare of others is genuine, including our economic welfare versus that of the environment, as Chi points out. This conflict is one we ought to acknowledge and address, not deny. For it’s okay and necessary to love ourselves. Some would say it’s not possible to truly love others if we don’t. This is why the opposite situation often arises when we always choose the welfare of others over our own interests. We justify permitting their bad behavior toward and exploitation of ourselves as a demonstration of our own

selflessness and love—to avoid consciously acknowledging our fear, weakness, shame, and our own value as a person who deserves better.

Our own interests are often, though not always, in competition with the interests of others. Yet, because few, except the most socio- and psychopathic among us, knowingly or consciously do evil, many of us deal with such conflict unconsciously. This allows us to maintain the delusion that we are “good” persons, living up to the moral ideals humans have uplifted for centuries, like compassion, care, kindness, justice, equality, and so on. Yet this unconscious approach to dealing with such conflict—between our self-interests and the interests of others, between being selfless or selfish, thoughtful or thoughtless—is no solution because it allows us to convince ourselves we are “good” people, and that the persistent evils in the world—suffering and injustice—are caused by all the “bad” people out there who don’t share our interests, resulting in a world where our ancient and highest human aspirations cannot be wholly achieved. If we could just get rid of all those “evildoers” who aren’t like us, we imagine, what a wonderful world it would be.

Let’s consider abortion, for example. Most people agree that abortion, although necessary at times, is not a good means of birth control. Hence, to reduce the number of abortions performed, one side on this divisive issue has concentrated on providing family planning, sex education, and contraception. I won’t go into all the research indicating this approach reduces the number of abortions with tremendous success. Advocates of this approach are called “prochoice,” but they are more prolife than anyone. Their approach is prolife because it understands human welfare is far more than just being born, and that by providing women’s health, education, contraception, and by reducing unwanted pregnancies, they are creating a greater quality of life.

Those who call themselves “prolife,” however, by and large, demonstrate little concern for quality of life, by which I mean the welfare of those who have been born. Their heavy-handed solution to abortion is to make it completely illegal and to charge anyone involved in its practice with murder. These antiabortion advocates bear no responsibility for human welfare, including those whose births they have insisted must happen. They advocate for unwanted embryos but do nothing for all the unwanted people suffering hate and injustice in the world, including in our own country.

The political party that has for decades used abortion as a wedge-issue to obtain power, and that has finally succeeded in outlawing abortion in many U.S. states, is the same party that routinely strives to eliminate any government funded social service programs, and for years has blocked any efforts to make medical care more affordable and available to anyone, including for infants before and after they’re born. It resists and resents adequately funding public education for children. It resists and resents giving them food assistance. It resists and resents funding daycare programs for those not yet old enough to go to school.

And for those who are grown, it resists and resents welfare programs for anyone, doesn't address the housing crisis, or serious life-threatening crises like climate change. And those "prolife" advocates who support these regimes are mute when the man they helped elect makes racist statements about entire groups of unwanted born people and initiates policies to sweep them off our streets, locking them away in or sending them away to hellish circumstances without due process. They don't talk about how sacred life is when they see their government bomb fishing boats, giving orders to "kill them all," without producing an ounce of evidence those aboard were involved in any crimes, not that extrajudicial murder is justified if they were.

Without descending deeper into this dark line of reasoning, we begin to see why, though we all want to be good, or, at least, to see ourselves as good, there's still so much cruelty and injustice in the world. In the case of abortion, those who want to simply make it illegal, which places the moral responsibility on others, not themselves, deceive themselves into thinking they are the moral heroes of the story, the protectors of life, for having pointed their fingers at all the evildoers in the world. Yet they've done nothing nor risked anything to make the world better for others by helping to improve their lives.

Many of them use Christianity to help justify their position, even though their scriptures say nothing about abortion, and certainly don't elevate life above all other concerns. Jesus is reported to have said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Or, as the New Living Translation puts it, "My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life."<sup>2</sup> This was written in the *Gospel of John* in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, which means Jesus probably never said anything like it. But the author of John, probably not his name, is the narrator who, more than anyone, suggests love is what was most central to Jesus' teachings and theology. "God is love," I John 4:8 tells us, and "if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."<sup>3</sup> It also admits that "No one has ever seen God; [but] if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us."<sup>4</sup>

That's how we know if we're good—at least according to this particular Christian author—by incarnating our most cherished beliefs by caring for the welfare of others. It's not about simply getting pregnant, staying pregnant, and giving birth, but helping everyone who has been born to have abundant, satisfying lives. It's not about making an idol of life. There are many things far more important in God's eyes than life, at least according to the writer of John, who also reports Jesus saying, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>5</sup> Again, it's unlikely Jesus ever truly spoke these words, but, at the very least, the author of John believed it to be a statement representative of his religion, that there are many matters far more important than just being born and staying alive.

Let's consider another example. During last Sunday's Q&A period, the rise of White Christian Nationalism was brought up. Just this past week I heard a CNN report about Christian White Nationalist minister Doug Wilson, based just down the road in Moscow, Idaho. With over 150

congregations as part of his growing movement, and inroads into the White House through Pete Hegseth, his influence ought to be concerning. Although Wilson denies being a White Nationalist, he strongly advocates for a merger of Church and State, for eliminating a woman's right to vote, for criminalizing homosexuality, and has spoken positively about some forms of slavery. As the saying goes, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck ...

Here, again, we see an individual and his movement believing that they are "good" people even though they are advocating for inequality, injustice, and the suppression of those they disagree with—those who don't think, look, or act like themselves. Yet their selfish desire to oppress and exploit others is unconsciously suppressed under the guise of religion—the notion that they are just doing God's work. Or, as Wilson says in the report, "because that's what it says in the Bible."

Examples like these enable us to resolve Chi's quandary over how a world of nature lovers can at once be a world where environmental destruction. It also helps us understand my broader question regarding how, if we all want so desperately to be good, we continue treating others so horribly? The answer is that too many of us have unconsciously fooled ourselves into believing we're good when we're not.

If you don't like the answer the measuring stick gives you, change the measuring stick. If "good" behavior is, as the world's religions agree, as do other ethical systems, measured by how much peace, justice, equality, care, compassion, kindness, and respect for others we create, then we cannot prioritize our own needs and desires at the expense of others. That's an inconvenient truth. So, rather than live with it, we find new measuring standards that cost anyone but ourselves. "We've outlawed abortion! Yay! What good people we are! Meanwhile, zip-tie the hands of those immigrant children over there before pulling them from their families and tossing them into a cage with no more than an aluminum-foil blanket to cover themselves with. Go prolife!"

Today, most people in the world still claim to believe at least one of the ancient religions that emerged beginning almost 3,000 years ago; Confucianism and Taoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; philosophical rationalism in Greece; and, later, Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, all of which were originally born in response to social injustice and oppression. Yet, along the way, in order to bypass the personal sacrifices these religions demand of us in relation to others, we made them about something else, dead words in chiseled stone, heartless doctrines, unyielding creeds, purity codes, obeying your masters, going to church, saying your prayers at night, or any other pious acts meant to absolve us from devotion to the true heart of religion that is born, not of gods, but from the goodness in mankind, in our longings for peace, and justice, and kindness for and from one another.

So, questions like those Tom Chi and I are asking have been around a very long time. Why if we love nature, do we destroy it? Why if we want peace, do we make war? Why if we long for a world

of peace, and compassion, and justice, and kindness, is it still so often hostile, careless, unfair, and cruel?

There are a profound couple of verses in the Hebrew Scriptures that were written around 600 BCE. *“I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes and to carefully observe My ordinances.”*<sup>6</sup> These verses, from Ezekiel, tell us there is something far more important to follow than those cherished commandments chiseled permanently into stone, something more important than following our own made up rules to the letter of the law just so we can feel good about ourselves while behaving contemptibly toward others. *“I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”* It is not what is written on a rock outside you, but something within that you already know that ought to be your guide, that which Ezekiel calls a “heart of flesh.”

The heart of flesh follows a different law, not one birthed by divine command, but that comes already packed within each of us the moment we’re born, knowing the difference between pain and pleasure. To be good people only requires us to recognize the humanity of others, understanding that they experience the same pains and pleasures as ourselves. The only rule we need to truly follow is the universal Golden Rule, *Don’t do to others what we would not want done to ourselves*. At least this is how it has been stated in most cultures, as a prohibition against harming others in ways we would not wish to be harmed. Jesus, as with many such sayings, flipped it into a prescription, that we ought to intentionally “do for others what we want done for ourselves.” This is to say that we have a moral obligation to attend to the welfare of others. We don’t simply respond to their suffering, but proactively establish systems the prevent suffering to begin with. I call this the “law of the flesh” because it’s not something external to us, like stone tablets, church doctrines, written laws, municipal codes, etcetera. It’s simply following our hearts by creating the world we’ve always longed for by living with others in the ways we want them to live with us, with peace, justice, equality, care, compassion, kindness, and respect.

This is in contrast to the misguided piety of people like Doug Wilson who hide behind their cold interpretation of the written word to justify taking from others what they want for themselves. Wilson wants to turn back the clock on gay rights “because that’s what the Bible says.” While I question his interpretation of the very few verses available to justify this claim, I’ll cite one I’m guessing he’s not considered, also from Ezekiel, the prophet who wishes to remove our legalistic, pious hearts of stone to make room for hearts of flesh that are moved by a compassionate and caring inner spirit. Wilson, like many, conveniently interprets the fictional destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as punishment for some of its citizens wishing to brutalize and rape the strangers among them. He uses this story to justify his dislike of gay couples who engage in consensual, mutual, and loving relationships. Yet Ezekiel says, *“Now this is the sin of Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.”*<sup>7</sup> That was the city’s evil, an unwillingness to care for one another, if, that is, you believe the Bible.

Dear Mr. Wilson, if you're by some chance listening, the Bible also says animals with paws are an abomination, but I don't see anybody persecuting dog and cat lovers in the name of Christ; not in the way you advocate discriminating against other human beings. So, here's another verse from your holy book you don't seem to be aware of; "The Lord has told you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? Only this: to do what is right, to show mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."<sup>8</sup>

Sadly, those who are not committed to creating this ever-flowing stream of justice and kindness and love, those who turn to letters chiseled, etched, or ink-stained onto idolatrized documents, but do not have this heart of flesh, do not abide but what we all come into this world understanding, the difference between pain and pleasure, have allowed their hearts, instead, to harden. They have developed hearts of stone, a tragic condition exemplified in another story from the Hebrew scriptures, that of the Egyptian Pharaoh who, no matter how terrible things get for his entire kingdom, refuses to release the Israelites from bondage and slavery. First came water contaminated with blood—an apt metaphor—followed by an onslaught of frogs, swarms of flies, sick and dying livestock, a breakout of boils, destructive storms, locusts, darkness, all leading to the deaths of their own children. Still, after each calamity, even after promising to finally free the them, the scripture says, "the heart of the Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps that's the problem with our world today, there are still too many hard hearts to crack. Too many who don't yet understand that being good is not a matter of believing the right things or defending the right rules, but of how gently and justly we treat one another. When we replace our false hearts of stone with our true hearts of flesh—when we choose kindness over cruelty, mercy over judgment, and care over contempt—we become the good people we already believe ourselves to be.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0R\\_CJjGRX7o&t=772s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0R_CJjGRX7o&t=772s)

<sup>2</sup> John 10:10

<sup>3</sup> | John 4:11

<sup>4</sup> | John 4:12

<sup>5</sup> John 15:13.

<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 36:26-27

<sup>7</sup> Ezekiel 16:49

<sup>8</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>9</sup> Exodus 9:39