

# Going to the Devil

Matthew 4:1-11

sermon digest

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larry dipboye

A dear friend and neighbor in seminary graduated a year ahead of me and ventured out into the real world of pastoral ministry. He had arrived at the first step in the life of ministry for which we had invested three years of professional preparation. The year was 1964, and his church was in Georgia. Racial tensions were at a peak especially in the Old South. My friend came back to seminary the next year for a conference and, I suspect, to take a break from the stress. I was anxious to pick his brain about the front lines. Noting all of the rumbling about race and rights in the church, he summed up his disillusionment with ministry in a sentence: "I have a lot of days when I am not too sure about God, but I never have a doubt about the reality of the devil."

I got his drift. He was not talking about some mythical, cloven-hoofed creature with red skin, horns, and tail as often portrayed in classic art. He was talking about the spirit of hatred hiding behind a bed sheet and hood burning crosses in front yards and threatening violence to people of color. He was talking about a spirit of fear in the church easily cowed into silence before gross injustice aimed at innocent children, the poor and oppressed. He was talking about religion that spiritualizes the mission of the church into the false dichotomy of saving souls while ignoring the suffering of human bodies. It is the spirit of evil behind the slaughter of six million Jews in Europe during the Nazi Holocaust, the identical spirit visible in the arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus in the Gospels. The ugly head rises in tyrants like Hitler and emerges in war and genocidal violence, but the reality of evil is usually not so obvious or so ugly. Walter Wink locates the biblical "powers" associated with the demonic not in ugly supernatural creatures but in governments of the nations and the executive offices and boards of global corporations. The devil is usually dressed in the latest fashion and equipped with the highest technology and is more likely to look like a church than an institution of secular humanism.

**The most fertile ground for evil is denial.** We need to take another look at the Temptation of Jesus. The danger for us moderns is that we will dismiss the epoch in the story of Jesus as a primitive, pre-scientific myth that has no application to any reality that we can identify. Famous psychiatrist Karl Menninger shocked his associates in his 1973 book *Whatever Became of Sin?* It just was not polite to talk in psychiatric circles about sin. According to Menninger, sin disappeared from the modern world assumed under illness and reasoned cause and effect. In 1953 President Eisenhower made his first proclamation of a national day of prayer in which he borrowed language from Abraham Lincoln, "It is the duty of nations as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon." An article in *Theology Today* observed that none of Eisenhower's subsequent calls to prayer and no president after Eisenhower ever used the S-word again. "Republicans referred to the problems of 'pride' and 'self-righteousness.' The Democrats referred to 'short-comings.' But none used the grand old sweeping concept of sin." (Menninger, p. 15)

Menninger saw a conspiracy of modern thought, especially in his own field of psychiatry, to dismiss evil as a reality in the modern world. Thus, Christians have often dismissed the embarrassing digression of the Temptation of Christ in the Gospels along with other unscientific biblical pictures of life on planet earth. Walter Wink, in *Unmasking the Powers*, p. 9, begins a discussion of Satan with a disclaimer: "Nothing commends Satan to the modern mind." Although polls indicate that belief in Satan is on the increase, Wink believes that this is a component of neurotic religion and the character of Satan has been collapsed into a two-dimensional bogeyman with only vague similarities to the biblical devil. We may giggle with comedian Flip Wilson when he says, "the devil made me do it," or wince at hearing our nation identified as the "Great Satan" by radical Islamic leaders; but most of us do not live under the shadow of some diabolical supernatural character who is orchestrating events in our lives. Many modern attempts at defining Satan end up in Persian dualism with two equal but opposite gods battling for control of the universe. Whatever else Satan may be, Christians have room for only one God. Others end up with a mythical cartoon character with horns and tail romping around terrifying children and unintelligent adults. Wink believes that Satan is more than an idea, the creation of the human imagination. The reality of the demonic is witnessed in the Bible and rooted in human experience.

The Old Testament makes reference to Satan only four times and then as a servant of God. By the time of Christ, the evidence of personified evil had developed into a strong concept of the demonic. Following his baptism, Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, and the trial continues throughout the Gospels. Following Peter's great confession of faith and his adamant rejection of the idea of suffering and death for Jesus, Jesus declared to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Are we to take literally this declaration to mean that Peter is Satan? Is the Satan of the

Gospels a recognition of the many faces of evil and the unceasing trial that began in the wilderness?

**The lure of evil is universal.** Old Dr. Humphries at Baylor commented one day on the Temptation of Jesus: "You can't keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." His point was simple. The lure of evil is constant and universal, but temptation is not sin. All of us are lured by the

promise of dominance and power to sacrifice self to false gods, and history is full of examples of those who sell out. But temptation is not sin. Some, like the story of Jesus, find the power and reality of God to be more important in life than the promise of success.

The clearest message in the Temptation is that Jesus was not immune to the lure of evil in this world. There is a related truth: neither am I. Careful reading suggests symbolic options in turning stone to bread, leaping from the pinnacle of the Temple, or exchanging misdirected worship for global power. If we take this as a “once upon a time” story, we miss the point entirely. The crisis of choice obviously continued throughout Jesus’ ministry, but somewhere he had to start in the right direction. This is not a baseball game where you get three strikes and you’re out. Early Christians painted a picture of life as it is in the experience of Jesus. The lure of evil is a repeated crisis in our lives. I don’t know the companion story in the life of Adolf Hitler, but all of us are aware that somewhere Adolf took the wrong road and refused at every junction to try to find his way to the high road. At some point in his quest for world power and recognition, Hitler faced choices that were to determine the direction of his life right into the bunker in which he finally took his own life to rob his enemies of the satisfaction of a trial. The same kind of choices were at stake.

*Turn stones into bread.* Put the basic needs of life, like the necessity of food and water, above questions of righteousness. The stewardship of life means that I have to give up something in order to meet justice in this life. Why should I have everything, while my brother or sister has nothing? Jesus made a material choice about giving up something in order to give. Where are you in this picture?

*Leap from the Temple.* One might even get the impression that the Temptation describes a primary election year for the presidency. How do you win the popularity contest? Do you not say what people want to hear and do what people want to see? Promise anything for a vote with the assurance that eventually integrity does not matter.

*Worship that which is less than God.* You don’t have to give up “god-talk.” You can still drip with piety. But the objective of religion is to gain power over others. Utilize religion as a springboard into domination.

Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, published in 1988, was banned in several Islamic countries as an insult to the Islamic faith. The novel evoked an Islamic death sentence (*fatwah*) on Rushdie and everyone connected to the publication of his novel. His subtle criticism of religious extremism has been viewed positively by Islamic moderates, but his satirical picture of the Ayatollah Khomeini and somewhat irreverent treatment of the Koran was condemned by the Ayatollah and the reward for his execution grew to five million dollars. After the death sentence Rushdie immediately went into hiding and has been under the protection of British police for more than a decade. At first he attempted reconciliation by meeting with offended clerics and issuing a public apology and declaration of his commitment to Islam. He eventually came to defend not only the right but the necessity of free speech and free thought in matters of religion. The Satan in *The Satanic Verses* was less the content of Rushdie’s novel than the threats on his life. The evil was less in his parody on religion than in the arrogant reaction of religious tyrants. He commented: “When criticism is placed off-limits as ‘disrespectful,’ and therefore offensive, something strange is happening to the concept of respect.”

Every temptation described in the Gospels focuses upon putting self at the center, God on the periphery, and the world under foot. The lure of evil in this world is somewhere in the center of your and my ego. We think that we can beat the system, that we can own the world, or at least a piece of it, and that finally we can take it with us. Reinhold Niebuhr rediscovered the reality of sin in theology as an observer of humanity in World War II. He identified the anxiety that comes of discovery of one’s mortality. In the quest for personal immortality people are willing to sell their souls for a moment of power over others. The reality of universal sin, however, is not in the personal quest. Evil is manifest in the group-think of mob mentality, where we relinquish all right of decision or sense of justice in order to follow blindly to go with the flow of the crowd.