

May 21, 2006
Deliver Us From Evil
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A couple of months ago now, following her Tuesday morning bible study, Beth Kitchell stuck her head into my office and half laughing, but also quite seriously, said, “I need your help.” Apparently, as they were closing class for the day, Beth asked, as I imagine she usually does, are there any other questions? As Beth relayed the story to me, a hand shot up and a voice said, “Yeah, what’s the deal with the devil?” What’s the deal with the devil...? Not exactly a question one can address in the last couple of minutes of a class!

For the last month now Steve and I have been going section by section through the Lord’s Prayer, discussing its significance for us as Christians in the world today. We began by talking about the importance of understanding the parent-child relationship we have with God when we pray to our Father in Heaven; We then talked about what it means for us to line our lives up with God’s will for ourselves and for the world when we pray that God’s will might be done here on earth as it is in heaven; on the third Sunday we talked about the idea of praying that God would provide daily bread for all of the world – a world in which so many eat way too little and so many others eat way too much; and last week we talked about the difficult challenge of forgiveness and our call as Christians to forgive others for the things they do to us as we pray that God will forgive us for the things that we have done to God and to others.

And today we turn our attention to the next petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Deliver us from evil. As we look at this statement today there are three big things I want to spend some time on. First of all, let’s

take a look at some of what Jesus had to say about evil. Then let's take a couple of minutes to address the question from Women's Bible Study – "What's the deal with the devil?" And finally, we'll close by looking at evil in the world and talking about what it means when we pray that God will deliver us from evil.

The scripture that I chose as the basis for this sermon is one in which Jesus talked directly about evil. It comes from the book of Matthew – the 10th chapter. After the feeding of the 5,000 and after Jesus walked towards the disciples on the Sea of Galilee and then after healing persons when he arrived in Gennesaret, people began to question Jesus about why his disciples weren't following all of the ritual washing procedures. Can you imagine Jesus' frustration with this?! It's been a long and busy couple of days. I imagine that he's exhausted and then as Matthew tells us, these Pharisees and Scribes come to Jesus and begin questioning him about why his followers aren't following the traditions of the elders. Jesus' response is recorded in the following words from Matthew...

"Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, 'Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.' ¹²*Then the disciples approached and said to him, 'Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?'* ¹³*He answered, 'Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.'* ¹⁵*But Peter said to him, 'Explain this parable to us.'* ¹⁶*Then he said, 'Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds*

from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.’”

The concern of these Scribes and Pharisees is that people were remaining clean and pure by following this ritual washing rules. They were concerned that the lack of proper washing would cause people to ingest things that would leave them ritually impure. Jesus points out though that he is not worried about the things coming into our bodies making us impure as he states the obvious – “Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” Jesus is not concerned about the things that people put into their systems, rather he is worried about the evil things in our hearts that we put out into the world because as he observes, “out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” These are the things that make a person impure, not eating with unwashed hands.

At its core then, Jesus’ concern with evil was not that we would allow the evil things of the world to get into and corrupt our systems. His concern with evil was that we would put the evil things from our hearts out into the world and further corrupt the goodness of God’s creation. The message of this parable then is that we have a responsibility as human beings for the decisions that we make. And, it is this idea of responsibility that leads into our second point for the morning, that question of several weeks ago, “What’s the deal with the devil?”

What’s the deal with the devil? I imagine many of you have an image in your mind of what the devil looks like, right? What is that exactly, what does the devil look like...? (Allow people a chance to answer question) He’s the guy with bright red, or at

least really tan skin, who wear's a red outfit, has pointy horns, a nice reptilian-like tail, and carries a red pitchfork right? And I imagine many of you have seen this devil represented in cartoons and on TV, sitting on one shoulder trying to convince people to do bad while a little angel sits on the other shoulder trying to convince people to do good? These images of the devil have become a popular representation in comics, television, movies, and even for Halloween costumes over the years. We have personified the idea of a devil so much that he has come to be accepted as a real physical being in the world acting to bring about evil.

Now, if you'll allow me to be a bit bold this morning, hear what I have to say – there is no physical devil that is all evil battling an all good God in some kind of cosmic war. Evil definitely exists, don't get me wrong, but evil is something within each and every one of us rather than something being pushed upon us from the outside by this devil character. When we personify evil and perpetuate the idea of a physical devil's existence there are several issues that arise – the greatest of these is that we don't take responsibility as human's for the evil that we do in the world.

Let me share briefly three other reasons why this “the devil is a physical being who made me do it” way of thinking is problematic. The first problem that exists in this quest to understand “what's the deal with the devil” is Linguistic. The historical and cultural development of the devil or of Satan comes from a Hebrew word – satan. And it is not a proper noun as we use it today, in fact, in the few places that it appears in the text it is “ha satan.” Just as the earth creature created in Genesis 2 is “ha adam,” and we call him Adam, the word ha satan in Hebrew is often translated as Satan and given the status of a proper noun. The most faithful translation of “ha satan” into English though is “the

adversary.” So, when Jesus cries out to Peter, get behind me Satan – he is not implying that Peter is somehow possessed by Satan or influenced by Satan, he is instead calling Peter what he is – his adversary.

The second reason that this “there is a physical devil who made me do it” way of thinking is problematic is cultural or social. It has to do with responsibility as I said earlier and it’s two pronged. On the one hand we use the idea of the devil to strike fear into others or to guilt them into behaving certain ways. The idea of the devil and hell are held up as reasons for why we should be good – if people don’t resist the devil’s attempts to make them do bad things they will be punished. And on the other hand we then can use the devil as a scapegoat for our own bad behavior. When we do bad things, it’s not our fault, the devil made us do it. Both of these ways of thinking run contrary to the idea that God created all of creation, saw that it was good, and gave us as human beings dominion to care for and oversee this creation. We use the devil as a way of threatening others and as a scapegoat for ourselves. Neither of these are healthy or responsible ways of living in relationship with God and with one another.

And the final reason that this “there is a physical devil who made me do it” way of thinking is problematic is theological. When we talk about God we talk about God as a unique, all powerful being and force in the world. If we truly believe this about God then there is no room for a second figure who is co-equal with God. If God is good and is all powerful, then there is no room for someone else to be bad and all powerful...

Now, if we begin to let go of the idea that there is a physical devil controlling the evil forces in the world, we are admittedly left with a puzzling situation. The harsh reality that evil exists. We know this to be true and we see it and experience it in the

world around us all the time – evil exists and bad things happen. It is much easier to understand this evil when we can blame it on something, when we can blame it on the devil. But, when we really engage our brains and think about the linguistic development from “ha satan” to Satan, when we think about the cultural and social implications of using the devil as a scapegoat, when we think about the theological problem of assigning another entity in the world a co-equal status with God, we then have to wrestle with the question of where the evil in the world comes from.

As we begin to answer this question let’s go back for just a minute to what Jesus was saying in Matthew 10 – “out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.” Evil comes out of the hearts of human beings. But, how is this possible you ask? How is it that human beings, who were created in the image of God, can have evil in their hearts?

The answer to this question lies in the concept of free will. Does anyone know what I’m talking about when I say free will...? It is our God given ability to make choices, to truly have freedom of our will, to be able to decide at a million little different intersections through life which path we’re going to take, the path to do good, or the path not to do good. God loves us so much that God did not program us to be robots, God has given us the gift to choose, to make decisions about our own lives and about the way those decisions are going to impact others. Sure, God could have programmed us to always do good, but if there was no freedom, if there was no alternative to choosing good, it wouldn’t be good, it would just be... the way things are. In order for us to truly experience the goodness and the gifts of life there have to be other options...

And so we get to choose – are we going to do good or not? And what happens when we turn away from our opportunities to do good? Evil comes from our hearts.... And we are all faced each day with opportunities to make choices.

So, if we begin to let go of evil personified as the devil – a being trying to manipulate the world for evil – what does it mean for us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer that God will deliver us from evil? Again, this becomes about responsibility. It is a prayer that we might live our lives so that God’s kingdom might come on earth, it is a prayer that we will consume food in ways that allow all people to have their daily bread, it is a prayer that we will forgive others in the same way that through God’s unconditional love, we have been forgiven. When we pray that God will deliver us from evil, we are praying that we will be open to God’s guiding and inspiration in our lives so that we might avoid evil, so that we might make good and Godly choices.

Think about our human nature for just a minute, our basic instincts if you will. Are we as human beings more wired to look out for others or to look out for ourselves? Yes, God created us in God’s image and said that it was good, but we live in a broken world and for some reason it seems that human nature has shifted away from God’s will for us. We are much more likely today to be concerned about ourselves than others – and over the years the world has become more and more wired to support this way of living.

Charles Wesley, the brother of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley wrote about this human condition more than 250 years ago. In his hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” he asks that God’s loving spirit might breathe into every human heart and take away our bent to sinning. Our bent to sinning.... This is our human tendency to ignore the needs of others in the pursuit of our own comfort; this is our human tendency

to get tired and cranky and snap at our loved ones; this is our human tendency not to care for ourselves as we should; this is our human tendency to make decisions that harm our environment and damage creation; this is our human tendency to take for granted the gift of free will; this is our human tendency not to choose to work for good in God's world.

We have a bent to sinning and as we pray the Lord's Prayer and pray that God might deliver us from evil we are not praying that God will protect us from evil that is out there being caused by someone else – we are praying that God will protect us from our own human tendency to make bad decisions that bring evil into the world harming ourselves and others. And as we pray this prayer the good news is that Christ, who taught us to pray, modeled this way of living for us, and that the Holy Spirit continues to guide us and empower us today as we seek to live in the ways that God would have us live, as we seek to be delivered from evil.