

“Not Today Satan”
The World, The Flesh, and The Devil
Downtown
April 18, 2021

Last week we did an introductory overview of what have been called the three enemies of the soul. The world, the flesh, and the devil. We looked at Ephesians chapter 2, which mentions all 3 of them.

Today...we're talking about the devil. My guess is that this topic is, for some of you, interesting. For others maybe off-putting. And no doubt for those of you who are new with us this morning you are currently wondering if you've made a horrible mistake. ...maybe. The answer to that is maybe.

To get our bearings we will look at John chapter 8, which is one of the longest sections of Jesus' teaching on the devil.

John 8:31-47

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Ok, so we are entering into a discussion about truth here

They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free?’” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

They are currently occupied by the Romans, Which is why they wanted the Messiah to pick up a sword. but Jesus says there is such a thing as a different kind of slavery. A much more foundational need for freedom than you think. And that true freedom only comes through Him.

I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you.

Remember he said that it is his word that is truth and truth that sets free.

I speak of what I have seen with my Father, and you do what you have heard from your father.”

What does that mean? Who is their father?

They answered him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.”

In other words, Abraham submitted himself to difficult truth that came from God in faith, you are doing the opposite.

“You are doing the works your father did.”

Again, who is Jesus saying is their father?

They said to him, “We were not born of sexual immorality.”

That’s a dig at Jesus here and his parents and how he was born out of wedlock.

“We have one Father—even God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.”

The message I have for you offends your sensibilities and doesn’t give you what you ultimately want most: freedom from the Roman empire. And here comes the dropkick:

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.”

I want to pull out some big concepts here. Notice a few things.

1) First. For Jesus, there is a devil.

I know that I need to start here because many of you do not believe in personal, supernatural evil. For whatever reason, our society makes it a little bit easier to believe in personal, supernatural good, God, than personal supernatural evil, the devil. I’m not even sure I know why that is, I just know that it is. So when I say that the sermon is about the devil, some of you think “cool. Maybe next week we could talk about leprechauns.” So I need to start with the fact that Jesus knows there is a devil. Personal, supernatural evil.

The devil is one of many names for a being we read about all throughout the Bible. Jesus also calls him the Satan, the evil one, the tempter, the destroyer, the deceiver, the serpent of old. Notice all of these are titles, not names. So a lot of us hear ‘Satan’, and we think of that as a proper name in English, it's not in Greek. In Greek, it's Ha Satan or ‘the satan’ or the adversary or the accuser. Some scholars think it is a settled dig from Jesus and the writers of the Bible, that this being does not even get a name. Three times Jesus calls this creature, ‘the ruler of this world.’ The word ruler was a political word for the highest-ranking position in a government. He is to Jesus an invisible but real intelligence, that is the evil behind so much of the evil in our soul and our society. Jesus here claims that he is behind the religious leaders in Jesus day. This is a reference to Genesis 3, where there is a prophecy about the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent and Jesus says these religious leaders are the seed of the serpent. Jesus elsewhere does the exact same thing with the Roman Empire, where he says, yeah there is human evil, political evil, institutional evil, but behind all of that is a whole other evil at play.

This is the longest single teaching on the devil in Scripture. We glean bits and pieces throughout the story of the bible. As far as his background goes, some of what passes for common thought comes from the Bible and some come from other works like Paradise Lost, which is of course not in the Bible. So it’s a mixed bag. We will save some of the background discussion for the Midweek Podcast...shameless plug.

2) His goal is to destroy

John 8:44

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning,

He is a murderer from the beginning. His goal is to wipe out life. Jesus says a few chapters later that the thief comes to steal, kill and destroy. Like a villain in a movie whose goal is to tear it all down.

The devil in the story of Scripture is at war with God himself and with God's vision of the good and the beautiful and true. God the Father, in creating all things, lays claim to what is real and what is not, what is good and what is evil, what is true and what is not, what makes life thrive and what tears it down. God was seeking to create an ordered reality for the good and flourishing of all things. That's what the Garden of Eden was. It was this high place where heaven and Earth met. But when the serpent deceived the first humans with the first and oldest lie, that God cannot be trusted--Earth was divorced from heaven and chained to the effects of its rebellion, with the devil being the dark sith overlord figure leading the quest to create and foster unreality and chaos and disorder.

CS Lewis

There is no neutral ground in the universe. Every square inch, every split second is claimed by God, and counterclaimed by Satan.

Jesus here says that his motivation from the beginning has been death and destruction. He was a murderer from the beginning. He is out to destroy and bring ruin. Bent on destruction. Working to see people and families and communities and civilizations torn apart by sin and breakdown and chaos.

3) His primary strategy is lying.

John 8:44

...He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Notice how Jesus says he intends to destroy...Jesus's warning is about lies and the captivity that they bring. Lies create a kingdom of darkness made of untruth and unreality. And he calls Satan the father of lies. There is no truth in him. When he lies, it's just his character and nature coming out.

This is not at all what most people think about when they think of the devil and if you find someone talking about fighting the devil, very rarely is this what they are thinking.

Like if you have a friend who blames all his marital fights on the devil, and you're like, "I don't know man, I think you're just a jerk. I don't think you need the devil's help to have problems in your marriage. You are pretty good at that yourself."

So you've got people who think they see a demon behind every bush, and we write that off as silly or superstitious and maybe even correctly so. Or, we only think of things we read about in the gospels like someone is demonized or sick and it's actually something spiritual in nature and not simply physical sickness and there is definitely truth in that.

But here is what I want us to catch. This is the longest, most in-depth teaching we have from Jesus on the devil. And it is an intellectual debate with religious thought leaders of the day and it's an argument over truth and lies.

His primary means for destruction is lies. That's the strategy. Now, there are times in the gospels where we read about demonic power. Demonization, diseases, sickness, natural disaster... which biblically there is a case for all of those.

We read about it in scripture and followers of Jesus throughout history can testify to this reality, especially those in other parts of the world. We might be skeptical somewhat but our brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world especially have a hard time understanding why we're skeptical.

But notice that is not what Jesus says here. Satans primary, go-to move to bring death and destruction isn't a power play but instead is getting someone to go where you want them to go through deceitful ideas.

Here's the way we framed this last week: **Deceitful ideas (the devil) that play to disordered desires (the flesh) that are normalized by a sinful society (the world).**

Jesus here says that the devil's most natural, instinctive plan to lead people into destruction is lies. Deceit. Lies. false information campaigns, coercion, manipulation. In subtle ways, makes you think you want what he's offering. Leading them with a carrot on a stick in a way where they don't know they are being led somewhere.

Speaking on Genesis 3 - Dallas Willard says "The most poisonous thing about the serpent is not his bite, but his lies."

If you think about Jesus' temptation in Matthew 4...Again, the attack isn't by force. It's with misleading statements, trying to create doubt. Seductive promises. He puts a question mark where God puts a period. Calls into question things where the case is already closed. And he tries to deconstruct not things that need to be torn down but instead good things that God has established.

Jesus calls the devil the "father of lies". He is the origin point for deceit itself. When he lies, he speaks his native language. Or his own character. The devil is a lie.

I'll just drop a pearl of wisdom here and tell you that when Rick Ross and Jesus agree, you're gonna want to listen up.

Because lies have the potential to destroy you.

Let me show you what I mean... Humans are the only beings that have imagination, which means we have the capability to hold both reality and unreality in our minds. This can be a good thing. The future is an unreality. We have the capacity to imagine a future, and work towards its existence. A dog doesn't have that. He just has drives to eat and wag his tail. He isn't worried about retirement. This is what enables all forms of creativity. Some of you are incredible at this. You can picture something in your mind that does not exist and then you can work to bring about its existence.

This is what enables leadership, as another example. The ability to imagine a possible preferred future for a group of people and then help those people arrive at that preferred future.

It can also be our greatest weakness. When a preferred possible future is the unreality we hold in our minds, that's fine. But if lies are the unreality we hold in our minds, we are set for ruin.

The clearest picture of our ability to hold unreality in our minds is mental illness. If you interact with a paranoid schizophrenic who thinks they are multiple people and that the Canadians are out to sabotage their life, you see on display, in a way that is easy for most of us to see culturally, what it looks like to hold unreality in your mind and base your life and actions off of it in a way that leads to breakdown and ruin and destruction.

But, what about the stuff that many of us in this room struggle with? Just as an example, consider this lie:

-You're on your own, you can't depend on God.

If you were to truly internalize this lie, it could lead to crippling anxiety over time. You may never find a house safe enough, a security system smart enough, a car with enough safety features, or a mask that's thick enough. Your mind could rot from the inside with worry as you imagine every possible worst scenario that could happen. You lose sleep at night, and lack of sleep will compound your irrationality. You will lay curled up at night and your only companion will be your pillow and the shuddering thought that you are on your own. You can live that way if you want, but it is hell on earth. It's unreality that destroys you. Fear of what "could" happens begins to steal away your joy and ability to be grateful for what is happening.

And the tricky part about this is that the more you feed unreality, the more real it feels to you. The more you believe God is impotent or incapable of watching over you, the more that starts to feel real as you scamper to protect yourself. Some lies are self-reinforcing. How about another one:

-I am unlovable.

Consider what may happen if you internalize this lie, which is a baseline rejection of the gospel that God loves the world so much He sent His only Son to die for it. But you? You're dirty. You're not worthy of love and respect. People don't like me, I am a bother. If people do like me it's only because they don't really know me. However that lie comes to you--most likely through your life experience, a parent wound, a family of origin, a body or personality that does not fit the cultural definition or ideal. However, that lie comes to you. Before you believe it, in that moment, it's a lie. It's not true of you, you're not unlovable, you're not unworthy of love and respect, you're a human being in the image of God.

But if you believe that lie, and then you begin to live as if that lie were true, and let it color or discolor all of your relationships, your interaction with others, how you live in community or don't live in community. Tragically a year goes by, or two, or ten. And what can happen not always, but what can happen is it can become true with you. You can become the kind of person with ruin in your soul. Who the way that you interact with other people, the defensiveness, the anger, the insularity, the insecurity, the standoffishness--you can become the kind of person who is in fact very difficult to love. Breakdown and destruction and ruin and chaos have been unleashed in your life, all because you believed a lie.

You understand I could go on and on here.

As one of your pastors, I am not concerned about many of you holding a seance or running out in the woods for a bonfire to worship Satan. What I am concerned about, however, is your news feed. The podcasts you listen to. The shows and movies that preach to you for countless hours each week, and let's not kid ourselves that they aren't preaching.

These stories you hear constantly and the ideas embedded in them about what is right and wrong, what is freedom and what's oppression, who is good and who is evil. Because there are spiritual kingdoms at war amongst those stories. And I want for you to realize that Facebook or Fox News or CNN are a battleground of spiritual warfare in your mind and soul. You are inviting voices to speak into your worldview and these voices are very interested in making you see things a certain way. The Left and right ideologies in our country have profound power to shape people. We have people losing their minds both to the right and to the left. Mixing truth with lies but unable to see the differences. Whichever direction you lean, that's fine. And you can keep thinking the other side is a greater danger to our country. Also fine. But you need to know that your side is a greater danger to you and to your discipleship to Jesus. And there's a sinful path of lies on either side wooing you down it as you increasingly dislike what you see on the other side

For Lent, Courtney unplugged from all social media. Neither of us are super engaged with it as is but she wanted to completely disconnect. And after a few weeks, she said something I thought was so interesting. She said, “It’s like I now have fewer voices in my head.” Your news feed, your social media, they are spiritual formation practices. Netflix is a spiritual discipline. You are opening your mind and self to messages and inputs and other voices. And of course, they are not all bad, of course not, not even close. Many are good, in fact. I just need you to see that this is what you’re doing. And to realize the power that these things have in your life, to shape what and how you think.

Have you seen the image, usually it's a cartoon but, it's where a person has an important decision to make and all of a sudden a little angel-type person pops up on one shoulder? And then a little devil-type person pops up on the other and they start arguing trying to persuade. It was basically this idea that in really key moments of your life, the devil or one of his minions all of a sudden showed up and tried to get you to succumb to temptation and do something awful.

As though breakdowns in our lives and in our society happen all at once, at a particular instant. That’s not exactly true. First of all, the devil isn’t omnipresent like God is. He’s nowhere near as powerful as God. He can’t be everywhere at once. So his strategy is not, all at once, at that moment, show up to get you to do something awful. Instead, his strategy is more so to get you to believe something awful that leads you to do something awful without any evil spirit needing to be present whatsoever.

So it’s the strategy of “If I can get a spouse to believe that his or her happiness is found in sexual fulfillment, and get them to chase that fulfillment in a hundred discreet ways outside of their spouse, then when an opportunity to cheat comes around, the decision has already been made. No devils on shoulders necessary.

It works the same way with relationships. If you are in a friendship with someone else, or in a community, and you begin to practice what is referred to as “negative filtering” where you don’t value all the ways in which that person or community expresses love and goodness towards you. But you only retain in your mind the ways in which you felt hurt by that person or community, then it’s only a matter of time before you begin to think these people are out to get you or are dangerous. You believe that what has been done is past the ability to forgive and if you have a bad counselor he or she is glad to let you pay them while you wallow in it week after week.

If you start to base your life on the lie that you know what other people are thinking without sufficient evidence, or just decide to assume the worst about every interaction you have, then you don’t need the devil following you around. You’ll tear everything down just fine yourself. You’ll torpedo relationships just fine, cause drama and relational chaos like an expert. You’ll spread your unreality like kudzu, and you’ll be building the devil’s kingdom of lies without even knowing it.

This is why, According to **1 John 3:8**, Jesus actually came to destroy the works of the devil and the kingdom of lies he created in the world:

1 John 3:8

Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

For Jesus, the devil is not a metaphor. All of Scripture frames up this battle, from the first pages to the last pages, where the works of the devil are literally destroyed. The serpent ruins things with a lie in the beginning, and God promises to defeat the serpent through a descendant of Eve. Jesus defeats him through His perfect life. He defeats him in the wilderness when He’s tempted by the devil, and each time Jesus responds with Scripture to combat his lies. He beats him on the cross and He defeats him in the

resurrection. The end of the story is told in Revelation 19, where Jesus is riding a white horse, has eyes that are on fire, with a voice that sounds like a waterfall, and a tattoo on his leg.

In other words, Jesus will come after the devil-like Liam Neeson when a family member has been abducted.

But in the meantime, we have some fighting to do ourselves.

Jesus in this teaching gives us direction on how we follow Him out of deceit:

John 8:31-32

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

If you abide or stay, or trust in, my word--my reality...you'll be my disciples. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Jesus' weapon wasn't a sword or a chariot or machine gun or a drone, it was truth. Radiant, solid, grounding truth. All of which means, as we begin to land for the day, that our fight against the devil, before it's ever about demonization, how to do an exorcism--all of that real stuff. Before it's ever about that it is first and foremost the fight to recognize truth over lies, and to internalize the truth of Jesus over the deceitful ideas of the devil. To abide in God's word. Then we know the truth and the truth brings freedom.

Do you know how counterfeit money checkers are trained? they don't spend a lot of time with fakes. They spend a lot of time with real money, learning exactly how it feels and smells. That's what we need with Scripture.

This is what we are trying to do with so many of the things we do. This is when we preach from the Bible, even when what the Bible says is really hard and makes people mad at us.

This is why we sing what we sing together. And why many of our songs are taken directly from scripture. This is why every sermon series is accompanied by reading plans and practices. This is why we open the bible as LifeGroups and we discuss the application of the sermon into our lives. It's why we speak truth to one another. We're trying to abide in the truth while stuck in a world with a ruler seeking to destroy it all through lies.

Our vulnerability to taking in deceitful ideas is why the New Testament makes such a big deal out of being cautious about false teaching and lies.

The warnings are everywhere. But here's a sobering thought to take away this morning: Because of the smartphone in your pocket and the advertisements we see, you and I are probably exposed to more false teaching in one day than a member of the early church was in their whole lifetime.

For them, to hear false teaching, someone had to be physically present and deliver it. We are assaulted with it every single day. Messages that tell us to indulge our flesh, reject God's authority (if He even exists in the first place), to get in line with culture, or risk being ostracized and shamed. With all of the lies we hear through all of our different mediums...1 hour on a Sunday morning has no shot of counteracting it. What we do here is important and necessary, but I'll be honest--it's just not enough. Your intake of God's word will have to go beyond this Gathering for you to stand a chance against what is set against you. We are going to have to abide in Jesus constantly to see the lies everywhere around us.

So our members all agree to a handful of practices. Habits we agree to take on, together, because they will help us become the kinds of individuals and therefore the kind of community God calls us to be. And one of those practices is abiding with Jesus through meditation on scripture and prayer. I need you to see why

that's not a cliché. It's abiding with Jesus so that his truth can set you free. So that you're not captive to lies that bring ruin and death.

Next time someone sees you reading your Bible and asks what you're doing, feel free to say "Oh I'm just fighting the devil." When you open your Bible and meet with God in his word, it is the ultimate "not today Satan." It's the primary way we fight the deceitful ideas of the devil.