

Jesus and Satan in the wilderness.

Now I realize it's 2008, and the idea of the devil or "Satan" probably seems quaint, out-dated, even medieval or archaic. Don't get hung up on the name. The name isn't special. You know where they came up with the name? When they were translating the Bible they simply copied the letters of the name from the original language into English and made up a new word: "Satan."

The name is nothing.

But what does it *mean*?

The meaning of the word "Satan" is simply "adversary." What is an adversary? Someone who works against you. Not constructive criticism, not someone who challenges you to make you better: someone who tries to cut you off at the knees.

Does Satan exist in 2008? Well that's a hard question to answer, if you mean "Is there some external force that can make me do something I don't want to do?" then I would say no. "The devil made me do it" isn't a valid excuse. But does that mean we don't face an *adversary*?

Again, realize that I'm not talking about someone who is going for your job, or your parking spot, or someone else competing against you for something that you want. I'm not suggesting that we start pointing at people and calling them *Satan*.

No, I think Satan is something much more subtle than *The Exorcist*. Satan doesn't pop out in a little red suit and whisper in our ear. Our adversary is, I suspect, much more cunning. Subtle is the way to go to get smart people to do the wrong thing. Ever know that you were about to do the wrong thing but had something in the back of your mind that told you maybe it wasn't all that bad? Ever know that you were going to say something that was going to hurt someone's feelings, and said it anyway? I don't mean an accidental slip of the tongue. Maybe you didn't even say it ***to*** someone, you just said it ***about*** them to someone else?

That's the adversary at work. Now at no point am I going to claim that we aren't responsible for those things that we do or say. The adversary doesn't get to force us to do things. But planting idea to force us to do things. But influencing ideas and thoughts?

Isn't that what we see him doing to Jesus in our first reading?

Let me quickly remind you of the sequence of events thus far.

First, John the Baptist, or John the Baptizer, showed up on the scene. He spoke to people about their need for repentance. Jesus went to him and was baptized. When he came up out of the water, Jesus heard a voice saying:

"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

That's how the 3rd chapter of Matthew ended. How much of a "spiritual high" would that moment have been? I can't think of anything much more powerful and positive.

What's next? Temptation in the wilderness.

The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

First he challenged Jesus' identity:

"If you are the Son of God..."

Remember what had just happened, just one page ago in the text? God had said "You are my beloved Son."

Now the tempter is questioning that. "Are you really? Why should we believe you? Prove it." He doesn't let up either. He goes on to say "In fact, here's a Biblical verse to show you why you should do as I say."

Tell me, does that still happen in 2008? Oh you better believe it does.

If you hear nothing else I say this morning, hear this: Just because someone can quote a Bible verse doesn't mean they're right, doesn't mean you ought to believe them, doesn't mean you ought to do what they want you to do.

Satan was quoting a Bible verse out of context, using it for his own purposes to manipulate someone into doing what he wanted.

Where's the harm? Really, who would it hurt? A few stones into bread, who would miss them? Not only wouldn't it hurt anyone, it would actually have helped Jesus. He needed bread. He had just completed a fast of 40 days and nights.

Let me suggest to you that the greatest temptation that we face is when we think that it really won't hurt anyone else and it will accomplish something that we need. Not just **want** but **need**.

But Jesus knew there was more than just bread and stones involved. It was a matter of trust. So he refused.

The tempter did not give up. Satan pulled out two verses that seemed to support his argument. Jesus responds with one verse which isn't nearly as specific as the verses he's responding to, but it does get at the core of what God expects from us.

If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

The tempter did not give up. He turned to a different temptation: money and power.

“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

When I read this, I noticed something I hadn't realized before.

Jesus said “no” easily.

When Satan said to him, “Come on, do it, where's the harm?” Jesus simply said no.

How did He do it? How did Jesus turn away the suggestions of the adversary?

Simple. Jesus knew who He was.

Now stay with me, this is not some new age, pop psychology self-help happy talk. This is a core, foundational issue.

Jesus knew who He was, and knowing who He was guided His decisions in what He was willing to do or unwilling to do.

Satan tried to attack him on that, saying “You're not really God's Son.” But Jesus realized that having someone else tell him who he was didn't change who he was. Still with me?

Imagine someone comes up to you and says, “What are you, Presbyterian? Are you saved? Do you even know Jesus?”

What would you say?

Would you say, “I go to church”? What if they said “Going to church doesn't make you a Christian”?

Would you say, “I give money to the church, make my weekly offering every Sunday”? And what if they said “But you don't tithe? Doesn't it say in the Bible you should tithe? How can you call yourself a Christian if you don't tithe?”

Let me warn you, that's not a fight you're going to win. Anyone of us, if faced with someone who wanted to push us and challenge us and poke around in us and our lives will eventually find some weakness, some failing, some crack in the armor. Most likely they'll attack us for what we do, or what we don't do enough.

Do you give to the poor? Volunteer your time? Money? Every one of us knows that there's always more we could do.

But Jesus didn't get caught up in trying to prove something by doing something. He rested in who He was. He rested in his being.

We often get our being and doing mixed up. That's where the sermon title came from, by the way, mixing up BE and DO. How often do we define ourselves by what we do, by the jobs that we have, or had? When we define ourselves that way, we are at a large risk of finding our identity gone if or when our job is. I know my Dad struggled with that after taking “early retirement” which was a thin euphemism for being pushed out before he wanted to in order to avoid being downsized. For 33

years he had been an accountant, suddenly he wasn't. Parents often go through this when the last child leaves home. I'm sure many in this place can think of other examples.

We are vulnerable when our identities are tied up in what we do. What's what Satan was trying to do right from the beginning.

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

Prove it.

Prove who you are, prove your power, prove your faith, prove your commitment.

But you know where the devil made his fatal mistake? Right there fatal mistake? Right there in the first part of the sentence:

"If you are the Son of God..."

I wonder if Jesus heard those words and thought to himself, "Not if, but 'because'."

Because I am the Son of God, I know I have nothing to fear.

Because I am the Son of God, I know I have nothing to prove.

Because I am the Son of God, I can withstand these tests.

Now I have another question for you: could you do the same? When temptation comes and knocks on your door, how will you answer? When the tempter comes and pushes your buttons, what will you do?

Here's what I suggest. When you find yourself starting to feel those hairs on the back of your neck go up, because someone has done something or said something that has you ready to fight back, think these words:

"Because I am a child of God..."

Again this isn't some new age, pop psychology self-help happy talk. Go back and read Romans. Time and time again, Paul talks about us being sons and daughters of God.

"Because I am a child of God..."

Next time someone does something unkind or unfair, and you feel that anger start to well up inside you, start your response with:

"Because I am a child of God..."

Next time you feel that urge to do the wrong thing because some voice inside you has come up with a good rationalization, say

"Because I am a child of God..."

Next time someone is trying to pin you down, push you around, push your buttons, think to yourself

“Because I am a child of God...”

I’m not saying you have to back down. Go back and re-read the passage. Jesus didn’t back down one step. But there’s a world of difference between not backing down and not fighting the battle someone else is trying to pick.

“Because I am a child of God...”

Now don’t feel alone here. Remember a few weeks back the youth handed out the bracelets with the beads on them. For every positive thing you did you were supposed to move them one way, and for every negative thing you did you were supposed to move them the other.

Well word made it around to me that several folks confessed they didn’t make it out of church without moving some beads in the wrong direction.

Here’s some truth: the better you try to be, the more temptation you face. No, I don’t know why. No, it isn’t fair. If life was fair, vegetables would taste like chocolate and chocolate would taste like the insole of your shoe after you finished running a 26 mile marathon.

That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try. But when our efforts fail, we need to be able to rely on a strong knowledge of who we are:

“Because I am a child of God...”

I will try again. I’ll try to avoid making the same mistakes. I’ll try holding my tongue when I should, and I’ll try to do better at speaking up when I should. Will you succeed? Yes, but not 100% of the time. Will you fail? Yes, but not 100% of the time. In the end you should realize that what we do and say matters, but we should also realize that we are more than our successes or our failures.

“Because I am a child of God...”