

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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## ***Geraldine is Not Alone***

*Genesis 2.15-17; 3.1-7; Matthew 4.1-11*

Russ Dean, February 10, 2008



I watched her as a child, and she made me laugh. I had no idea she was making history in those brightly colored and appropriately padded dresses and blouses, as the favorite femme fatale of her creator's comedy show. Beginning in 1970 and running for four, hilarious years, "The Flip Wilson Show" was the first show to bear the name of an African-American comic. In one interview with "The Champ," Muhammed Ali, Geraldine Jones, complete with pink miniskirt and matching purse reminisces about one of her own boyfriends who was a fighter. "They called him 'Sweet Chariot,' she said. "Because he was always swingin' low!" In another sketch, football legend Jim Brown asks Geraldine her name and if she is "Miss" or "Mrs." The flirtatious delivery girl for the local fried chicken restaurant answers, "A little of both. You see, my boyfriend, Killer, and I have an understanding. Do you understand!?"

Though some blacks were critical of Wilson, saying his comedy played too much on bias and stereotypes against African-Americans, who were just gaining their rights to the stage and screen, most Americans who were watching in those days just enjoyed Flip's humor, including this grammar-schooler who didn't really understand what was funny about it!

But the irresistible Geraldine was undoubtedly best known for that one liner, which is as old as temptation itself. I wonder if Eve was as seductive and charming when she first uttered that excuse, which is even more proverbial than the proverbial "My dog ate my homework?" When Geraldine said it, she never failed to get a laugh. No matter how she got caught, no matter the indulgence, the justification was always the same: "The devil made me do it!"

A word about “the devil,” if I may...<sup>1</sup> He has, to state the obvious, a long, sordid history. The ancient Hebrews understood there to be a “heavenly court” in the highest of their three-tiered universe: God, and a whole host of divine beings, gathered around.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps they are remnants of the Hebrews’ poly-theistic religion (many gods), from which they were not far removed. Perhaps the precursors to the angels of later biblical writing – the beings gathered around the One God in his high heaven were many. Who is the “us” referred to in our creation narrative, “*Let us create humankind in our image*”? (Genesis 1.26) Not Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but this heavenly host, who held court with the Almighty.<sup>3</sup>

Among this heavenly council was an adversary. He was not a despicable character, wicked to the core, evil in intent, but a defense attorney of sorts. Ever wonder how defense attorneys can defend scoundrels? Unless they happen to be corrupt (and this is the exception not the rule), the defense attorney serves a necessary, even righteous purpose. The defense keeps the prosecution honest – it is the brilliance of our system. For if there were no defense attorneys, working diligently to make the system free and truly fair, the prosecutors would finally fail to serve justice. (Even good guys are corruptible.) Similarly, in the heavenly court “*ha satan*,” the Hebrew designation for “the adversary” challenged the lower beings on earth, as part of the divine duty. For it is in challenge and struggle that our mettle is tested. The adversary, “*ha satan*,” and God contend over old Job – not because “the satan” was related to the modern devil

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<sup>1</sup> In an aside to the parents in the room, I said that we didn’t often talk about the devil in worship (I think this is my first sermon, ever, on the topic), so if I needed to clarify my remarks or assist in any child-friendly conversation, I would be glad to do so. In my truck on the way home from lunch, I had a query from two boys that began, “We didn’t really understand what you were saying today about the devil...”

<sup>2</sup> The three tiers included earth, with the underworld beneath (and various understandings of what that was, hell, sheol, etc...), and the heavens above. In the creation narrative, the “dome” separates the upper tier from earth, and since the earth was conceived as flat, hell was, quite literally, below (see Genesis 1).

<sup>3</sup> In my understanding, these were not just angels, gathered around the throne (as depicted in the book of Revelation), but divine beings – not God, but not angels, either – truly in consort with God in the divine work in the world.

of the same name – but in order to prove the faith and commitment of the saint. (Something of that story may well ring uncomfortably in our ears, but do not confuse the adversary of Job’s struggle with the evil, demonic spirit, we commonly call “the devil.”)

In the evolution of our understanding the Hebrew title, “*ha satan*” (the adversary) gets transliterated (letter for letter) into a personal, given name in English, “Satan,” and, with a little Zoroastrian philosophy and Victorian imagery thrown in, presto... “the devil,” complete with pitchfork and horns, is born.<sup>4</sup>

Now the Devil has relinquished his hold on much of Christianity as the chief source of our dark nightmares of the soul, and progressive Christians have virtually dismissed this biblical character out of hand. Much of this is as it should be. Our ideas of faith must grow beyond a simple, literal application of the words and characters of scripture. But our problems with scripture, I will continue to insist, is not that the Bible is antiquated, but that even though some of our texts are now more than 3,000 years old, we still haven’t learned to read them. (Even as they were intended to be read 3,000 years ago!) Our problems with faith, and this is true on a world-wide scale, is that we are determined to make a concrete reality, a mathematical certainty

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<sup>4</sup> This is, obviously, a broad-brush painting. My intent here is to give some idea of how the human understanding of “the devil” has changed dramatically over our history, so we can be careful not to confuse a modern conceptualization of “the devil” with the Hebrew understanding of *ha satan*. I did not go back to a study I did a few years ago, but if memory serves, it was through Zoroastrian thought that the idea of a personalized, evil spirit emerged (and merged into Hebraic thought), and through Victorian era artwork that the modern portrait of the devil, with pitch fork and horns, was born. Transliteration is the process of creating new words in one language from the original. For example: the Greek word “*agape*” is translated as the English “love.” But since there are the three Greek words for love, each with a specific meaning, English commentators began to use those words as English transliterations. Now it is fairly common to see *eros* (erotic love), *philos* (brotherly love), and *agape* (God’s love) written as English words, themselves. Similarly, *adam* which is translated “humankind,” and *ha satan*, “the adversary,” have also been transliterated into English – in the process losing their translated meanings. As a result, the creation narrative becomes a literal story of the creation of one man, with a given name of Adam, not a metaphor/allegory of the creation of all “humankind” (*adam*), as it was intended. And, *ha satan* becomes the given name of the personification evil, Satan, instead of conveying the Hebraic idea that God (not the devil) is responsible for life’s tests and struggles. In the process we’ve virtually created two co-equal Gods, good and evil, who fight over human beings. This is far from the ancient Hebraic understanding. (The history of translation is fascinating, decisions often being made for political or pre-disposed doctrinal reasons, and not purely out of grammatical or philological exactness. What difference would it make to the current creation/evolution debate if the translators had uniformly agreed to translate and not transliterate the word *adam*?)

of mythological, metaphorical, spiritual truth. For as scripture itself says, *the letter kills, but the spirit gives life* (2 Corinthians 3.6). A legalistic literalism may yet be the death of us all.

Of the devil, then, the words of Frederick Buechner, are apropos:

To take the Devil seriously is to take seriously the fact that the total evil in the world is greater than the sum of all its parts. Likewise the total evil in yourself. The murderer who says, “I couldn’t help it” isn’t necessarily just kidding.

To take the Devil seriously is also to take seriously our total and spine-tingling freedom. Lucifer was an angel who even in Paradise itself was free to (excuse his language) get the Hell out.<sup>5</sup>

In that regard, let us take the Devil quite seriously. Let us reckon with the disturbing fact that is the reality of daily news and nightly television programming that there seems among us, even within us, an evil that is rampant, out of control, an evil that cannot be fully accounted for by biological causation<sup>6</sup>, nor by environmental influence. How can the likes of Hitler and Houssein rise from our own families? How can systems of government, even governments, like ours, claiming to be based on religious principles, principles of equality and fairness, of liberty and justice for all people – how can we support such unimaginable wickedness as slavery and Jim Crow, apartheid and preemptive war? And, even closer to home, how can I look in the very face of the ones I love the most and be willfully deceiving, conniving, mean-spirited, jealous? Someone has said, “The chains of tyranny are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken.” This is true in systems of government and in the human heart. For something seems

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, “The Devil.”

<sup>6</sup> Richard Dawkins and other atheistic Darwinists would laugh at my argument. In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins says: “We are survival machines – robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes. This is a truth which still fills me with astonishment. Though I have known it for years, I never seem to get fully used to it.” This seems to me the biological equivalent of Paul’s argument in Romans 7: *For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!* For Dawkins the “selfish gene” is responsible for all that is called “evil.” For Paul it is Sin. I take issue with Dawkins’ basic assertion, and stand with Buechner – evil is more than the sum of its parts. (Can selfish genes really account for genocide and slavery?)

alert and alive, lurking among us as a tyrant of our conscience and will, looking to bind all that is good within us to more potential wickedness than we can even imagine.

In this regard, then, maybe she was right. Maybe of the wicked around us. Maybe of our leaders and structures, the systems that define our lives. Maybe even of our own actions, there is truth to Geraldine's cute little flirtatious justification: The devil made me do it!

But today's sermon is not about the devil, per se, for to concentrate on him (Amy insists there is no inclusive language when it comes to Satan – the devil is a He!) is to totally miss the biblical point. There is no slimy reddish creature “out there,” flying around with his minions purporting war on all that is good. That Satan is a creation of our own dark imaginations – and of our fondest wishes. (Oh, if only I could blame my selfishness on something or someone beyond myself.) Calvin, the funny paper legend, of “Calvin and Hobbes” fame once asked: “Do you believe in the devil? You know, a supreme evil being dedicated to the temptation, corruption, and destruction of man?” To which Hobbes insightfully answered: “I'm not sure [we need] the help!”

And he is right, for Jesus reminded his disciples, “...*it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come...*” (Mark 7.21). The devil did not make us do it. We are fully capable. Fully culpable. Fully responsible – all on our own, thank you Geraldine.

Yet even Jesus was tempted to say otherwise.

Please note that the context of Jesus' temptation is within the power and purpose of God – *Jesus was led up by the Spirit... to be tempted...* – it was not under the control of “the Devil.”<sup>7</sup> Which is not to say that God literally tempts us to evil (James 1.13) – but that a life lived in the Spirit, in the purpose of God, will always, of necessity, put us in places of temptation – out there, out there where the truth we bear in the name of Jesus can shine light to brighten the darkness of despair and need. And as we begin a season of Lent, let us not miss the fact that it is in the context of a disciplined spiritual practice that Jesus finds himself hungry and weak, vulnerable to the very temptations he seeks to avoid. Contrary to the best intention of those preachers who sell prayer as a panacea, a cure-all for every trouble and temptation, prayer that makes us safe and comfortable is no prayer of Jesus. Any so-called spiritual discipline which takes us only to our closet for quiet, fails Jesus' test. Spiritual practice, however you find it in your own life, must take us beyond the calm of private practice and into the chaos of people's lives.

From such calm, Jesus was tempted with the temptations that are ever before us.

Jesus was tempted with power. And power can be such a good thing, can't it? “Feed all the world...” Just think what I could do with a little more power. In my house. In my office. In the context of a global community. But Lord Acton knew rightly when he said, “Power tends to corrupt. And absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Jesus knew this to be so, and he knew that even ultimate power can not feed the world's deepest hunger.

Jesus was also tempted with popularity. Which can also be used for good. Jesus' own cause has no doubt benefitted from the “popularity” of the message. But we need look no farther than that circus (which one commentator calls “Hollyweird”) to know the dark side of fame. We ought also to ask how the popularity of Jesus has weakened the justice of God. When we think

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<sup>7</sup> Again, note the difference in a modern conceptualization (the devil and God as nearly-equal gods battling over human beings), and the Hebrew mind, which allowed the vicissitudes of life, and the challenges which such a life brings to our character – all under the sovereignty of God (and God's heavenly council).

too highly of ourselves, let us not put God to the test. We may find out just how much God thinks of us!<sup>8</sup> (Which is just to say – just as much as all good parents, who must be willing to let their own beloved kids “crash” a time or two, in the name of growing up.)

And Jesus was tempted to prosperity. What a triumvirate of temptations... for our day. It has always been so, but our culture of great success and wild affluence has elevated the place of power and popularity and prosperity to the status of divine (they are still our gods). Such misplaced priority, ironically, gives these potentially good values a demonic authority over our own lives.

Jesus’ temptation begins in self doubt. One of the tempter’s favorite tools, no doubt: “*If you are the Son of God...*” *If* you have the energy... *If* you have the strength... *If* you have the skill... *If* you are willing... The more we ask it, the weaker we become. “So, what if I’m not... what if I can’t... what if I don’t...”

Temptation begins in self doubt. The number of Americans on prescription medication for depression and anxiety is a clue into the condition of our collective soul. We must “give the Devil his due” and admit that he is winning this one, in the hearts and minds of so many.<sup>9</sup> You

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<sup>8</sup> I’m playing here, a little tongue-in-cheek, with the idea that God might have, in fact, allowed Jesus to “crash” had he actually jumped. Some would not take too kindly to the assertion, but I have learned from a seminary theologian who asked, “Could Jesus have turned the stones to bread?” Most of us answered something like, “Of course... he was the Son of God.” Dr. Tupper replied that he could not have, because in the moment that Jesus succumbed to temptation, at that moment he would have ceased – from all time – to be who we claim that he is. Thank God, Jesus had better sense.

<sup>9</sup> Two people asked me about my reference to taking medication, in the context of a sermon about the devil and temptation. I responded to one email, in part, by explaining: “By no means was I suggesting that anyone who is on medication is “spiritually ill.” (This may or may not be the case.) Maybe it sounded that way – but my point was (and I do think this is true) that there are a surprising number of Americans on medication... Which does seem an indicator of something about our lifestyle, our choices (collectively), and the effect that these have on our health. Amy and I speak with lots of people who would fall into the category of ‘self-doubters’ -- the pressure in our society to succeed and be powerful and popular and wealthy is enormous, and it is taking its toll on us. I never worry about preaching a too-cheery evaluation of human beings (whereas so many preachers are telling you how sinful you are) - it’s clear to me that people know that TOO WELL. If I err in not emphasizing sin enough, so be it. I think people “get that”! They need to be told NOT to doubt themselves. To “be at peace.” To relax in the Grace of God, etc... (I’m

are a child of God. You are the light of the world. You are. Do not let “if” tempt you to be any less than Jesus gives you the power to become.

Temptation begins in self doubt, and temptation ends in self awareness. Not egocentrism. We don't have to be particularly powerful or popular or prosperous to avoid temptation (nor totally lacking in these qualities). But we must be aware of the weaknesses that can claim us – and of the strengths that can save us. As my friend, Tom O'Neal says, “Being self-aware means having the capacity to take stock of our motivations, desires, and values with limited self-deceptions.”

We need a healthy dose of honesty.

The devil made me do it, Geraldine?

I don't think so.

May our confessions make us so aware, and awaken in us enough faith to be tempted – that in the Grace of God, we may find ourselves worthy of the challenge.

May it be so!

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not an idealist... I know illnesses are real, and I am grateful for the advances of medical science. It's not as if we went back to "the good ole days" no one would be taking anything. But... is the pressure of our society not having its ill effects on us? This is the basic question I was asking.)