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# What Comes from the Heart

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 1 September 2024

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9 • James 1:17-27 • Mark 7:14-23

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

We don't often talk about the devil, or Satan; or evil; or the fight between good and evil. There are places in the Bible where that fight is explicit: think of the temptation of Jesus, when he went into the wilderness and was tempted three times by Satan. Mark simply says Jesus was tempted by Satan for forty days; Matthew and Luke expand the story quite a bit, and identify the three temptations (Mark 1:13, Luke 4:1ff, Matthew 4:1ff). After this, Satan doesn't appear personally in the Gospels. Jesus uses him as a reference to evil, as when he speaks to Peter, saying, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" (Matt 16:23)

Outside the Gospels, the best-known appearance of Satan is in the Book of Job, when God allows Satan to torment, but not kill, God's servant Job. Satan does

so, and then disappears from the story, which becomes a chronicle of faith tested. Then there is a mention in 1 Chronicles, and another in Zechariah.

Jesus does talk about demons quite a bit, and he drives them out of various people, like the violent men in the tombs, when the demons ended up in the herd of swine; and some men who were blind or dumb. The ancients believed that many conditions, which we know today are caused by various pathogens, were due to demon-possession. Demons sickened or disabled many people in those long-ago days. Jesus was of course able to heal sicknesses or disabilities of any kind, whether caused by demons or not.

The judgment of demon-possession was not entirely free from moral judgment on the person involved. There was also a prevailing belief that sickness or misfortune in general was caused by sinful behaviour. In John we read:

As he went along, [Jesus] saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.” (John 9:1-3)

And at times it was also believed that misfortune may not be due to anything one has done, but to one’s parents’ sin. But in Deuteronomy we read, “Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin” (Deut 24:16). This is not to say that God may not declare in some cases that the children will suffer, as in Numbers we read:

The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation. (Numbers 14:18)

But in a telling passage from our Gospel reading today, Jesus identifies another source of evil and misfortune: ourselves! He is disputing the teaching of the Pharisees, which centred on the outside aspects of a person and the habits and rituals a person practiced. They were careful to observe everything which could be observed — that is, all that was visible, ignoring the more important things which cannot be seen. As Jesus said, “Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness” (Luke 11:39). Jesus wanted them to see that they were misleading their own people, turning their focus from the things of God to the things of humans: rituals, ceremonies, and ceremonial objects. In so doing, the people were distancing themselves from a true relationship with God — and the Pharisees were encouraging this!

The true source of evil has nothing to do with what we eat, or what we wear, or how well we master religious ritual. The true source of evil is our own hearts. What goes into our bodies is not important:

It is what comes out of you that makes you unclean. For from the inside, from your heart, come the evil ideas which lead you to do immoral things, to rob, kill, commit adultery, be greedy, and do all sorts of evil things; deceit, indecency, jealousy, slander, pride, and folly — all these evil things come from inside you and make you unclean. (Mark 7:20-23)

These are the things to guard against, for if we have not self-control, then we may fall into sin. Notice that Jesus does not attribute these evil things to the devil. They are sins committed by people. A little earlier, Jesus accused the Pharisees of “rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!” (Mark 7:9). And the Pharisees were all about tradition. That is why they had such trouble accepting Jesus’ teachings. They had been developing and reinforcing their own practices and rituals for so long they no longer had much to do with God.

To what can we compare this in our own day? Perhaps (without getting too political) we may see that our lawmakers must be careful that any proposed legislation addresses people’s true needs, and does not just build up the administrative state. For the Pharisees certainly liked to make themselves important, according to Jesus — praying loudly and openly on street corners so that other people could see and hear, when they should have been most concerned with the true object of prayer: communication with God. Are there people in our modern society who seem to do things primarily for show, and not to help others?

Jesus did not come to abolish the law — by which he meant the Ten Commandments. Those are rules which directly address the evil things which may come from our hearts. But he did do away with all the human additions to the law, so strongly championed by the Pharisees, and which they eventually put above the Commandments themselves. Jesus’ teaching, by focussing on what truly matters, brings us closer to God, for which we give thanks.