



## Is There a Devil?

**TEXT**  
*Genesis 3:1–7*  
*Matthew 4:1–11*

January 29, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

**E**ve talks with a snake and breaks the one commandment God placed on life in the garden. The story never says the snake is the Devil, but it is the first story of testing.

Jesus is tested by the Devil. *Turn these stones into bread.* Jesus was faithful.

And later, Peter was called Satan. Do you remember? “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus said. It was a low point for the disciple.

How do we understand the Devil?

In 2013, Jennifer Senior, a speaker and writer, interviewed Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. In the course of the interview, Scalia said, “I believe in the Devil.” She asked how the Devil worked in modern society, and he responded: “You are looking at me as though I’m weird. Are you so out of touch with most of America, most of which believes in the Devil? I mean ... it’s in the Gospels!”<sup>1</sup>

Yes, the Devil is mentioned in the Gospels. But knowing that’s what it says doesn’t mean we know what it means. What does it mean to speak of the Devil or Satan?

I don’t believe that there is an evil spirit that lurks outside of

us as an opponent to God. I don’t believe that we are the “playing field” on which the power of God and the power of evil do battle. I don’t believe that there is an embodied spirit — that the Devil is a personality that causes God’s people to do that which we would not do otherwise.

But I do believe that the Devil describes a spiritual reality. I believe when the scriptures speak of Satan or the Devil or Beelzebul or the Prince of Darkness, the scriptures describe something that is true about us. That truth is this: When we know God’s will for us, we will question it. All of us will battle with God’s will. It is not our lack of understanding of what God wants from us — although that is an issue at times — but even more so, when we do understand God’s will for us, we will question it; we will battle it. If I understand it, the scriptures describe that spiritual struggle as dealing with the Devil.

God created us for a purpose. God intends us to live in particular fashion. The simplest way to say it is we are to love God and love our neighbor. That is what people are for. God creates humankind and says, “Here is how you live in God’s world.” But we question.

The serpent said, “Did God say, ‘You cannot eat of that tree or you will die? ... You will not die.’” Then — and this is the most important part — Eve realized the tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes, and it would make one wise. She then realized, God may have said it is bad, but it is actually good. She questions God’s will for her.

She worked out another way to live in God’s garden: *God says that, but I say this.*

There is something in us: When we know God’s will for us, we will question it; we will battle God’s desire for us. I can’t tell you why we do that. It’s almost like a power we can’t control — which is why scripture describes this struggle as dealing with the Devil.

When Nathan was small, he was into Legos. They are different than when I was a kid. When Nathan was a kid, they all came with architectural plans of castles and spaceships.

One time Nathan threw the plans out the window and built something on his own, mixing and matching pieces from various Lego kits. I interrupted, “Nathan, what is that?”

“It’s a train, Dad, but do you see these blocks?” He pointed to the underside of the train.

“These blocks push out air, and the train can fly.”

“Fly?” I said. “Really?”

“Yeah, can’t fly fast, but it can get up in the air.”

“Nathan, trains don’t fly.”

He looked at me with that expression that suggests, “You don’t have to be smart to be a dad, do you? They will let anybody be a dad.”

“Dad,” he said, “I put these blocks on here; I think I know what they are for.”

God made you. God knows what you are for. Human beings were created to love God with all that you are and to love your neighbor as yourself. That’s what we are for. But we question.

Why do I say this? Because I have a propensity to mess things up — even stuff I care about deeply. I want to be faithful. I want to do the will of God in my life. I want to do the will of God in my relationships. But I have a propensity to mess things up.

Francis Spufford says it this way: “Wherever the line is drawn between good and evil, between acceptable and unacceptable ... we’re always going to be [walking] on both sides of [that line.]”<sup>2</sup> And not just by accident. As Spufford says, “It’s our active inclination to break stuff, including moods, promises, relationships we care about and our own well-being.”<sup>3</sup>

We have a consistent inclination to mess things up — even things we care about very much. How do you explain that?

I do battle with God’s intention for me. I know that forgiveness is better than revenge. I

know this. I know that poverty is a spiritual problem, not just an economic one. I know this. I know that being generous is not at the end of the day about charity; that’s too small. It’s about justice. But I can reason my way around these things that I know. I can make a case that justifies the other decisions I have made in my life when I reject the things of God. I will see what I choose is a delight to the eyes, and good for food, and makes one wise. And bang ... I’m the Devil.

In the wilderness, the Devil tempts Jesus. *Look, you are the Son of God, but if you are the Son of God, jump off the temple. Do you know how impressive that would be? I bet people would flock to listen to you. It would be great PR. It would extend your influence. Just jump off the temple.*

The Devil is saying, *Look, I’m sure God has a plan for you, but let’s make an alternative plan.* What makes it so challenging is that the alternative plan makes so much sense. It’s reasonable.

But Jesus says, *I am God’s son, so I will live as God directs. Go away from me, Satan.*

Even when we know God’s desire for us, we choose to live differently. We choose to put ourselves above the call of God.

Let me tell you something that I am learning. I don’t get in many arguments ... with my kids, with my wife, with my parents. I don’t argue much — not as much as I once did. But when I do, I usually win. Not all the time, but often — even when I

am not right. Sometimes in an argument, I realize, “I’m wrong here; I’m completely wrong. Oh yeah, she’s right about this one.”

Then I think, “But I’m winning. It’s going my way.” And all of a sudden, what’s right is less important than being victorious. And before I know it, Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan.”

I don’t believe that there is some evil spirit that causes me to do evil I wouldn’t choose on my own. But I do believe that knowing what God wants from me does not mean I will do what God wants. I will build my case as to why what God says is bad is really good. I will figure out a way to call the light darkness and the darkness light. It happens all the time, among all of us.

Tom Long tells the story of his senior play in high school.<sup>4</sup>

The new English teacher helped them. She poured herself into this play. She met students before school, learning lines and blocking. After school, they were painting sets and assembling costumes. Tom said, “Opening night came. The house was packed. As the play started, everything was going perfectly.” It was a comedy, and the audience laughed frequently and loudly.

Halfway into the second act, one of the actors forgot his lines. There was a painful pause. Just as that English teacher was about to whisper the line from backstage, the actor spoke. It wasn’t a line in the script, but it was a funny line, and the crowd laughed. With that laughter still

ringing in his ears, he made up another line. It wasn't as funny, but a few people laughed. So he made up another. The others on stage could not keep up. The play disintegrated before them. Tom said he doesn't remember how they got out of it. He just remembers the tears crawling down the face of that English teacher.

We all have the ability to make up our own lines; we just don't have the power to make them the play.

We are Christians, so there are some things we know. Jesus has given us our lines, so we know forgiveness is more faithful than revenge. But when it comes to actually forgiving, I'm going to have a conversation with myself.

We know that scripture is a lamp unto our feet and a light to our path, but when it comes to actually studying the book, well, we have better things to do.

We know that bridges are better than walls ... but when the person on the other side is different from me, I'm going to have a conversation.

We know that welcome of neighbor is a holy practice ... but it's a struggle.

So it's important that we recognize this spiritual reality. And we need to pay particular attention to his voice — because he has given us our lines.

And we need to remember that we are not in it alone. We have each other. And there is grace — because the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, which is where we are. In the wilderness, the will of God is

questioned. But he came to find us and to be with us and to love us, with a love that is stronger than the Devil.

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Allen Murphy, *Scalia*

<sup>2</sup>Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic* (2012), p. 33

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27

<sup>4</sup>Tom told this story at Masanetta Bible Conference 1995.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.