

“Please, Can We Have Some Sympathy for the Devil?”

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Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted[a] by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. 3 The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” 4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’” 5 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. 7 If you worship me, it will all be yours.” 8 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’” 9 The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. 10 For it is written: “‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; 11 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” 12 Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Sermon

*“Please allow me to introduce myself
I’m a man of wealth and taste
I’ve been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man’s soul and faith
I was ‘round when Jesus Christ
Had his moment of doubt and pain
Made damn sure that Pilate
Washed his hands and sealed his fate*

*Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my
name
But what’s puzzling you is the nature of my
game*

*I stuck around St. Petersburg
When I saw it was a time for a change
Killed the Czar and his ministers
Anastasia screamed in vain
I rode a tank, held a general’s rank
When the Blitzkrieg raged and the bodies
stank*

*Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my
name
But what’s puzzling you is the nature of my
game
I watched with glee while your kings and
queens*

*Fought for ten decades for the gods they
made
I shouted out, “Who killed the Kennedys?”
When, after all, it was you and me*

*Let me please introduce myself
I’m a man of wealth and taste
And I laid traps for troubadours
Who get killed before they reach Bombay*

*Just as every cop is a criminal
And all the sinners saints
As heads is tails
Just call me Lucifer
Cause I’m in need of some restraint*

*So, if you meet me
Have some courtesy
Have some sympathy, and some taste
Use all your well-learned politesse
Or I’ll lay your soul to waste*

*Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my
name,
But what’s confusin’ you is just the nature of
my game...*

No doubt some of you are familiar with those lyrics from the song, "Sympathy for the Devil" by the Rolling Stones.

It was written by Keith Richards and Mick Jagger, back in 1968, and it was the first track on their album, "Beggars Banquet." With Jagger's iconic voice they highlight a few of some of the more tragic events in human history. Starting off with the arrest and execution of Jesus, they then jump all the way to the 1917 and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, before moving on to Hitler's genocide and blitzkrieg in WWII. And then finally to the present (well their present of 1968, that is) and the recent assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy. And then too, a slightly more obscure reference to the deaths of numerous "hippies" who were traveling overland to India in search of enlightenment.

In all but one scenario, the devil, or Lucifer, as he finally identifies himself toward the end, takes all the credit. For some reason he seems to want to exonerate his human co-conspirators of any complicity.

I call this the "Geraldine excuse." Now, some of us older folks may recall the comedian Flip Wilson and his cross-dressing character, Geraldine, whose frequent excuse for bad behavior was, "The Devil made me do it!"

So, if that is true, then, I have to ask Keith and Mick a lot of questions. If the devil was truly responsible for all that carnage and mayhem why should we have any sympathy for him? If the devil indeed "makes" us do bad things like start wars, commit genocide, and kill innocent children and maybe even naive hippies, should we not despise or even hate the devil? Are we not justified to demonize Lucifer, rather than feel sorry for him?!

But as modern troubadours themselves, Mick and the boys, do, in the end, reveal to us the uncomfortable truth.

Now the devil, as we know from scripture, is a liar! Yes, he's certainly along for the ride and seemingly always around, energetically trying to stir the pot of all kinds of trouble . . . but is he really the only one to blame? Was it the devil who pulled the trigger or pushed the button to drop the bomb?

By shouting out, "Who killed the Kennedys?," the singer's answer echoes discomfort us: "Well, after all, it was you and me!" Thus, lifting the veil on the devil's false sense of self-importance!

So, yes, perhaps we should feel just a little bit sorry for the devil since, in the end, he's not really all that powerful, at least not nearly as powerful as he thinks he is. Because in the end, he really can't do much without a little help from his friends (oops that's a different English band) to help accomplish his dastardly deeds. And actually, according to the song, he suffers from incredible delusions of grandeur, seemingly thinking that he is supremely in control.

Now I do actually hate the devil, or perhaps more clearly defined as all those demonic systems of oppression and exploitation that unleash human thirst for power – a thirst that animates our desires of gluttony, our fears, our lust for wealth, as well as all those chauvinistic forms of racism (or any other "ism" you care to add), and of course our belief in necessity for military solutions.

It seems we must hate and we must name such demons in our world but we must also stand up to, and actively resist, these systems. Maybe you are familiar with the statement, "The

only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men (people) to do nothing." Often falsely attributed to William Burke, this is actually a summation of a much larger quote by the philosopher John Stuart Mill. And if he is correct, then, the best way, probably the only way to stand up to evil, is to do what is good, right, and just. Of course, we know all too well that that ain't always easy, especially when demons and their sympathizers are hollering into our ears all the time.

Maybe that devil's whispers were a bit more seductive than portrayed. "You're hungry, so very hungry Jesus" - perhaps to the point that you are hearing voices and seeing things that are not really there? "Your fast is over, prove you're God's Son and simply and quickly satisfy your needs by turning this stone into bread?" Now a bit of personal honesty here, I certainly wouldn't begrudge Jesus one bit if he had made himself a little snack - after all he had fasted 40 days! But if any of us want to stand up against the devil, to evil structures, well it will take more than just a few crusts of bread.

The devil then continues, "The message that you have been given, by God no less, will certainly save the world. Would it not be quicker and more efficient to end all this suffering by just taking over all the current world empires, institute God's way by force and put yourself in charge?" Again, let me be honest, I sometimes wish he'd taken the devil up on this offer, since I'd really be okay to let King Jesus be in charge.

In the third and final "temptation," I hear the devil's voice, "You know Jesus, with all your magical talents you could become a star, probably the most famous celebrity of all time! Now if we channel it right you will be adored, revered, loved and all your self-doubts and insecurities will fade away! Even that childhood trauma from being raised by an austere, emotionally distant, and far too stern father can finally be healed." And once again, I would be willing to trust Jesus with maintaining a healthy ego in light of such adoration and praise, as well as, not buckling to those unrelenting pressures to perform.

But in each case Jesus says, nope - not interested! Well, in fact, if you look at his responses closely, you'll see that he really does not give the devil any answer. There is no hedging, no negations; in fact, in each scenario he doesn't even engage the devil in any form of dialogue. Jesus actually comes across sarcastic, even a bit cheeky, if not downright snarky as he simply quotes what would have been very familiar scripture verses that any child could have cited.

In Deuteronomy 8:3, the full verse says: "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

By clipping it to simply "One does not live by bread alone," Luke likely knew that, at least his Jewish readers, would be able to recite the rest of the passage from memory. Luke's admonition to "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" is also found in Deuteronomy (6:13). And the final verse comes from a warning to not get too testy with God, only three verses later. That final quotation is from a specific reference to those who so tried Yahweh's patience during the Exodus that they were left for dead in the wilderness.

But Jesus' replies must remind us of two very crucial truths. One, the devil isn't really in charge of anything and therefore, cannot truly deliver on any promise he might make. And two, the demonic structures that do seek to control our world have always, and will only, create chaos and destruction.

Jesus' replies were curt and impolite and basically telling the devil get the (bleep) outta of his face "cause I ain't got anytime for you!" As I said already, the Devil's got nothing, only lies. God on the other hand has it all and God is enough! God's love, God's presence, and the way that God wants us to live is not only the truly best way to live, but it is far more powerful than anything that you think the devil may offer! God, is actually more than enough. Multi-grain bread, organic produce, justly and humanly raised food that is more sustaining than anything else. And what God freely gives us, we must share with all God's children.

God will change the world so that we will one day live in peace. But God's way cannot include violence and domination. My fears, insecurities and brokenness can be healed, but not through fame, chemicals, the accumulation of things, or by being selfish, or in my uncritical indifference towards others.

True community, building equitable relationships, sharing sincere affection, and considering the situations of others that are just as important as my own - those are the things that will eventually truly heal.

Yes "the way" that we have been called to, that path along which we are supposed to dance, can seem at times to be too slow for our liking and far more difficult than what we may have initially thought, but it is still the very best way to travel.

Now, the devil's path is far easier because it is the laziest way. And the devil's job is also actually quite easy, but we are the one who usually make it even easier for him. "Confusin' us" after all "is the nature" of his game. " So, no, don't have any real sympathy at all for the devil, but do "resist the devil and he shall flee from you!"

And don't worry, he'll be back for you as he waits for another opportunity to get a "better shot." But on the way Jesus is calling us to, God is there – before us, behind us, and under our feet. In the end, it is God who will never fail to keep us satisfied, because God is enough - always more than enough.

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