

"WHO SAID IT WOULD BE EASY"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

Scott Peck is a psychiatrist and the author of a best-selling book entitled, The Road Less Traveled. You may have read it. There are those who say it's one of the better self-help books.

Scott Peck has now written another book entitled, The People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil. It's a book that's got a lot of people upset for the reason that the author - a psychiatrist, a scientist trained in the humanities, an enlightened human being - says that he's seen the devil. He's convinced of it...so much so that he's written a book with the provocative theme that evil is a force in this world. Oh, he's not going around arguing that the devil is a man with horns, running around in a red union suit. He's not arguing that, but what he does insist on is that there is such a thing as evil in this world, and it has a kind of cumulative force in history. It can take hold of the life of individuals, and even of nations...and possess them.

This is disturbing to me for I don't believe in the devil. Once I had someone visit me to challenge my faith. They asked, "Do you believe in the devil?" I said, "No, I believe in Jesus Christ." They doubted that I was a true Christian, suggesting, "Well...if you don't believe in the devil then you're not a Christian". My patience tends to get stretched by such statements. By definition, a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus Christ is Lord. And there's nothing in the Bible or in the creeds of the Church that says that to be a Christian you have to believe in the devil. / I recall pointing out to my visiting friend that the Bible says that Christ defeated the devil on the cross. Now, some of you may wish to continue to believe in him; that's your prerogative, but in fact - he's a fiction. Luther said, "One little word will fell him."

### DEVELOPMENT

So I don't believe in the devil. And what's more, it's a dangerous thesis to believe in the devil. People who believe that the devil is everywhere will one day rise up and try to burn somebody at the stake, or bomb some nation into oblivion. It's dangerous. It's not only dangerous, it's a cop-out. To say, "The devil made me do it" is a cop-out of your own personal responsibility for your own actions. I believe we are responsible by and large for what we do in this life. As somebody put it, if you kicked the person who causes you most of your trouble, you couldn't sit down for a week. I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe He is Lord and nobody else.

So Scott Peck is wrong, but he's also right...because there is something out there that works against the Kingdom of God that Christ came to establish. There is something "out there" that can only be described as evil. I've seen people at one point in control of their lives - rational, intelligent human beings. They make a series of decisions that I know are not good for them. I wish they wouldn't make them. They say, "It's all right...I know what I'm doing." They get away with it for awhile, until one day they go too far, and then they are no longer, after that point, in charge of their lives. You've seen them, too. They're possessed. And what possesses them is bent on destroying them.

I don't believe in the devil, but I do believe there is a kind of cumulative evil in individual lives - the result of the effect of the decisions that become, at a certain point in that person's life, stronger than that person. It's as if up to a certain point you're free to make decisions. But after that point the cumulative effect of the decisions that you have made controls your life.

That's true of what you put in your body, we all know that. We know all about addictions. It's also true of what you put in your mind. Most of us don't know that. But certain thoughts are like poison - self hate, or hatred toward other people - and after awhile your mind can't tolerate that. Your mind can tolerate destructive notions just as the body can tolerate poison up to a certain threshold. But after a while those poisonous thoughts begin to take over, as Jesus' parable of the evil spirits points out and possess the house. And they change the way you look at yourself, and they change the way you look at the world about you.

ILLUSTRATION

I read about a woman living in the state of Washington. She was washing dishes one sunny day in her kitchen, a beautiful day, when all of a sudden she was overwhelmed with an awesome feeling of bliss and peace. And she was given the conviction we are all one. It was like a revelation to her. We are all one.

She ran to tell her family this wonderful news that she had just received, and they were upset. They didn't know how to handle this. They sent her to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist, deeply concerned about her, had her admitted to a private hospital. After that he had her admitted to the State Mental hospital. Up to this point she was convinced that what she had received was a gift. She continued to insist, "we are all one"...but after a couple of days in the hospital she said, "This is crazy....I'm not going to put up with this". She had had enough and she stopped saying, "We are all one". They said, "Ah, she's cured." And they released her. And ever since she's been very careful not to disclose to anybody what happened to her.

Who is sane? Who is crazy? Who is free? Who is possessed? I don't believe in the devil, but I'm concerned that there is something in this world that resists the plan that God has for your life and for the whole world. When somebody has a vision or a revelation of what life should be, or has a revelation of the way God wants this world to be, is locked up, or imprisoned, or stoned, or nailed to a cross, there is something terribly wrong with this world.

TODAY'S TEXT

Our text is taken from the 10th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus calls His disciples together. They've been with Him now for a period of time...long enough to know what He's about, long enough to understand what He is saying. They know what His message is now. They know that He is here to reconcile the world to God and to reconcile people to each other.

They have watched Him preach forgiveness to people that are not supposed to be talked to, much less forgiven. They've seen Him heal people who were considered to be cursed, so that you couldn't go near them. He embraced them. They heard Him proclaim "Blessed are the peacemakers" and "Blessed are those who are merciful". They heard Him tell stories about people stopping along the road and helping other people who were considered to be enemies. He calls the disciples together now and commissions them to go out on their own and to preach what they have seen and what they have heard. That's in this tenth chapter, the "Commissioning of the Disciples". And He sends them out with this warning:

"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and as innocent as doves. Beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings and you will be hated by all, for my sake."

WHO TOLD YOU

I tell you, there is something in this world....I don't know what you call it, but there is something in this world that resists the good. It's almost as if it were entrenched. It's almost as if it were viral, so that when the conditions are right in the world, it spreads. It's like the body....it can lie dormant for years, as long as there is good health and peace. But when hate and fear are given respectability, it spreads. That's why after two thousand years we understand what Jesus is saying when He says to His disciples, "I send you out into this world as if you were sheep among wolves." We understand that. If you live the way He taught us to live, it won't be easy. You'll have to be "as wise as serpents". That is to say, you have to be realistic about what you're up against. It's not going to be easy. Who ever told you it was going to be easy?

To be "wise as a serpent" means to be worldly in your wisdom. That is, don't be naive. Don't have any illusions about what this world is like. If you have no illusions, then you won't be disillusioned. Know how this world operates. Be realistic. But at the same time, be innocent, and loving, and kind and forgiving. Be a peacemaker. Hold on to what you believe. Be innocent as a dove. It's hard...difficult.

There have been those times when I've debated or argued with someone the application of Christian ethics in this world with other people, but inevitably, somebody will say, "But it's not realistic...what Jesus taught is all right, true....but not realistic....you can't run a business that way and politics are not structured that way....and societies can't deal with each other that way. It's just not realistic to think that Christian teachings can ever be applied in a practical way in this world". I've argued that way myself. We all settle for something less than we know that we should be doing, and justify it by saying, "It's more realistic". But the instruction that Jesus gives to His disciples says, "Be realistic". Go ahead. "Be wise as serpents" - but don't use it as rationalization for avoiding what you're supposed to do. "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves".

It's kind of like this. I remember being at a service at Annual Conference some time back where the words, "Do it anyway" were used as a kind of litany. The leader outlined a course of action that seemed risky or crazy and then we all said, "Do it anyway". And I suggest we've all lived our lives that way. In fact, the great moments in our lives have been lived that way.

And those who achieve greatness in this life know that if you insist on moving cautiously from one rational decision in your life to another rational decision, you would be where you started - still thinking over and reflecting on the first decision. At some point they had to say to blazes with all of the negative instances and they did it anyway.

We'll be celebrating the end of World War II within a few days. Forty-one years ago the Normandy invasion of France turned the world around. Eisenhower confessed later that the advice was that they not make the invasion on that day, June 6th, 1944. The seas were rough, the fog was too thick. He thought about it for a minute and said, "Let's go anyway". That's the way all great victories are won in this world, being realistic, counting all of the consequences, and then going ahead and taking the risk that is necessary in order to accomplish the task. Know what you are getting in to and then go ahead and do it. Be realistic, but don't use realism as a rationalization. Use it as a way of avoiding disillusion. "Be as wise as serpents and innocent as doves".

MORE TO THIS TEXT

There's more to this text. There is a promise. Jesus says,

"When you are called up and there are charges made against you and you have to make a defense, don't worry. I'll be there with you. You will do all right."

It's like this. Vietnam. A peasant and his family are trudging along the road just hours ahead of the armies, a man carrying his family on his back. The man happened to be a Christian. It was near Christmas. The American reporters were there in Vietnam, getting a story on Christmas in Vietnam. The reporter calls the man aside from the column of refugees, asks him what Christmas means to him in the midst of all of this conflict. The man said:

"Christmas means that Christ came to the earth to help the poor." The reporter asks, "How has He helped you?" The man answered, "He gave me strength to carry my children".

What we have in this text is instruction to the Disciples, to anyone who wants to be a disciple. I read it. Nowhere does it say it's going to be easy. In fact, it says it's going to be rough. There is something in this world that resists the kind of life that Christ is calling us to live. You try to live it. You will feel the resistance. "But I will be with you" He says. "I'll be with you."

And Matthew make a lot of that. The last words of Matthew are the words of Jesus, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." And this scene in the tenth chapter is an application of that universal promise. When you have to defend yourself, I'll tell you what to say. If you have to keep on going when you want to give up, I'll keep you going. If you have to go through a period of sorrow or a time of isolation in your life, I'll be there to strengthen you. I'll be there. That's a promise. You can count on it.

I have a good friend from Seminary days who pastors a church in Carmel, California. He wrote of one of his daughters who was learning how to high jump in the backyard. She got two boxes and put a stick across them. He watched her as she tried to learn how to high jump, watched her without her seeing him. She started out timidly, and then finally got the bar up to 20 inches. She was just a little girl. And then the father went over and asked his daughter, "How high can you jump?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, how come you don't know how high you can jump?" She said, "Because I haven't missed yet." "Oh?" When you finally miss will you then know how high you can jump?" "No" she replied. "When I miss then I know it's going to be harder from there on."

I've read the text carefully. No where does it say it's going to be easy. What it says is this. When it starts to get rough, harder, more difficult, "I'll be there...with you. You can count on it."