

Do Not Make Room for the Devil

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Hi. I'm Ryan. I thought I should introduce myself given that it's been a while since I stood behind this pulpit! ☺

A combination of some holidays, a shortened study leave in Vancouver, and a persistent bacterial infection that wove its way through a good chunk of July, meant that I haven't been in a Sunday service for a while.

The one service that I was supposed to preach at in July I was sick for (thanks, Kevin, for handling the sermon that day!) and one that I was supposed to be away for, I kind of slunk in and sat at the back.

(I really enjoyed this, by the way! I have very few opportunities to simply be a worshiper in church, and it was amazing to just observe the life of this community that keeps on humming along without me! I found that Sunday very moving.)

So, it's been an interesting month or so. I'd like to thank Jen, Abe Janzen, Marie, and Henry Janzen for preaching in my absence. I am grateful for the wisdom of our broader church community.

At any rate, I'm back now. And for the rest of the month of August, we're going to be looking at the lectionary readings from the book of Ephesians which touch on the nature of Christian identity and ethics among many other things.

But before we get to today's text, I want to start with a story from the jail.

It was a Monday afternoon some time last year and there were around fifteen of us sitting in a circle on our plastic chairs.

Before we got get into the business of the day, young man wanted to know if he could ask a question.

“Yeah, of course,” I replied. He furrowed his brow, took a breath, and said, “What’s the point of being good?”

That’s the kind of question that can uncork an opinion or two.

The responses came thick and fast. One guy said the obvious: “Well, to avoid being in places like this!” Grins and chuckles all around.

“Because there’s like, karma, you know?” another opined. “You put good out into the world and good comes back.” A few nods, but also a few, “Well, not always’s.”

One guy seemed impatient with the question: “It’s not about doing good things, it’s about faith! All our good works will never be enough.” *Someone’s been reading the book of Romans*, I thought.

Another young man offered a remarkably mature theological anthropology: “I think it’s because each one of us is made in God’s image and because God is good, so we should be good, too.” Impressive (he basically preached this morning’s sermon in a lot fewer words than I’m going to use!).

One guy directed the question right back at the questioner: “Well, let me ask you a question, ‘Do you want someone doing bad things to you? If you don’t want it, don’t do it.’ Ah yes, the Golden Rule, if expressed a bit more bluntly than usual.

At one point near the end, a new guy chimed in. Slick black hair, covered with tattoos (almost literally head to toe), a physique that looked like it had been chiselled out of stone. But also, a wide, self-deprecating grin.

“You know, I don’t think we talk enough about the devil. Not like as an excuse for the things we’ve done, but, you know, there’s a war out there. There’s God... and God’s stronger, but the devil’s real, man. I just think we’re in a battle.”

He pointed to a few quite elaborate tattoos covering his neck, encroaching on his jawline. “You see this? God on one side, the devil on the other. I got these to remind me every time I look in the mirror. It’s God and the devil. And I’m at war.”

I’ve said this before, but I am regularly struck by how differently we theologize and read the Bible in jail than we do in more “respectable” Christian circles.

I thought about what might happen if I got up in front of you nice people on Sunday and said, “You know, we’re at war... the devil’s gonna try to make you do all kinds of things you shouldn’t... but you gotta fight, man.”

I could imagine a few horrified stares.

What’s the point of being good? What are the obstacles to being good?

Well, ourselves, certainly. We can be our own worst enemies. Sometimes we do things we know we shouldn’t simply because it’s easier or more convenient or whatever. Sometimes doing good is hard and we can’t really be bothered.

But, like my friend in the jail, I wonder if we talk enough about the the devil. Scripture does have a bit to say about the devil as well, even if we studiously avoid those parts.

Jesus certainly took the devil and the realm of the demonic seriously (we could think of his temptation in the wilderness, for example, or the role that exorcisms played along with his healing and teaching about the inbreaking kingdom of God).

Peter spoke of the devil as “prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

Are we too sophisticated to admit that there might be a force in the world that seeks to thwart God and God’s purposes for the world and for our lives? Or that life is a moral struggle of any kind at all?

For many in our culture—outside the church, certainly, but sometimes even inside the church—the answer seems to be, “yeah kind of.”

We don't tend to think of life as a moral struggle to become what we were made to be. That would imply that there is some standard outside of ourselves to which we have obligations.

Increasingly, the only standard that many in our world can even conceive of is the self. We don't talk about moral improvement as much as things like "self-actualization."

If we have a moral duty of any kind, increasingly, it is to ourselves. To be true to ourselves. To express our true identity. To be "authentic." To look inside our hearts, to discover who we truly are, and then express this self to the world around us.

Psychologists and sociologists call this view of the world "expressive individualism." Even those of us who have suspicions of this view of human nature—and I would enthusiastically number myself among them!—make our way in a world where this approach is assumed by a great many people around us.

This is increasingly our cultural default. And it exerts pressure upon us. It affects us.

This is the world in which we are called to bear witness to another better, more honest, more dignified, and more hopeful way.

And this brings us (finally) to Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In our text this morning, Paul provides a fairly comprehensive list of moral exhortations.

- put away falsehood—speak the truth with your neighbor
- do not let the sun go down on your anger (note: he doesn't say, "don't be angry, just, in your anger, don't sin")
- don't steal; do good and honest work with your own hands
- share with the needy.
- Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up (our words are to be a source of grace, not judgment and blame and shame)
- Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice (but how will the internet survive?!).
- Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

It's all summed up at the end of our reading.

Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph. 5:1-2).

Paul packs an awful lot into a few short verses! This is a sweeping portrayal of what a life lived in imitation of God looks like.

Truth-telling, forgiveness, gracious speech, other-focused kindness. Hearts that are tender, not bitter and choked full of anger.

I think most of us look at that list and think, “Yeah, that’s the kind of person I *want* to be!” At the very least, “that’s the kind of person that I want to be married to or to be friends with or in business with!”

Even if our culture increasingly lacks the moral vocabulary to notice that this is a very different kind of life than that of a life spent pursuing self-actualization, we still have the capacity to admire it, however partially or inconsistently.

Paul is describing a deeply admirable human being here! One who is living in harmony with others and with the God who created them to reflect his image!

This is, to return to the question my friend in the jail asked in the beginning, why we should be good? Because it’s what we were made for. Because a good God designed us to be so!

And in the middle of it all is this peculiar phrase: “do not make room for the devil.”

The immediate context is anger. *Don’t let the sun go down on your anger and do not make room for the devil.* But I wonder if this whole passage could be read as what a life that doesn’t make room for the devil looks like.

The devil tends to prey upon our weak spots. He accuses, twisting the knife into past failures. He says things like, “Did God really say?” and “Who do you think you are?” and “look at this impressive list of failures in your life! You’ll never be able to change the script!”

The devil says things like, “You can be your own gods, determining right from wrong for yourselves.”

But if our lives are occupied by the things Paul speaks of here—again, honesty, kindness, compassion, tender-heartedness, *forgiveness*—if these were the directions our lives were consistently and persistently, however imperfectly leaning...

If we decided that our primary task as human beings was to imitate God as dearly loved children?

Well, where would the devil find room?

Perhaps you're now thinking, ok, I'm looking at that checklist and, yeah, I'm with you on the "that's the kind of person I admire" bit. I'm with you on the idea that there is a moral struggle at the heart of what it means to be human, that there are evil forces to be resisted and divine virtues to be pursued, that imitating God is at the heart of what it means to be human...

But I'm also noticing how consistently I fall short of all that!

Paul Kingsnorth is an author I've quoted before. He is a writer who has a really remarkable conversion story from godless environmentalism through Buddhism and Wicca to Eastern Orthodoxy.

In a recent essay, he wrote these words:

It's been about three and a half years now since I was baptised in the River Shannon. This is a long time, and also no time at all. It's certainly not long enough to learn how to be a Christian—but then that's probably not something we ever have enough time for. Towards the end of his life, Saint Sophrony of Essex was approached by an excitable convert who had just been baptised. 'Father!' he said, 'I've just become an Orthodox Christian! 'How nice for you,' the Saint is said to have replied, 'I have not yet learned to become one myself.'¹

We must always remember that the task of being fully human, fully alive to God and God's purposes in our lives and in our world will always remain an unfinished one.

¹ <https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/orthodoxy-for-beginners>

We must always end on grace.

Yes, there is moral struggle involved in life. Yes, there are actual virtues to which we should aspire and that we do not get to make up for ourselves. No, I do not think being “true to ourselves” represents anything close to what we were made for (or is even consistent! I think there are many parts of ourselves that we should absolutely *not* be true to!).

But the gospel is and remains good news for sinners. Good news for those who miss the mark. Mercy for the undeserving, the underperforming. Forgiveness for transgressors.

We must never forget this.

A final story that I hope illustrates the point. Yesterday, Naomi and I were making our way home from a week out in BC and we stopped at a fruit stand in Creston.

We were browsing around amongst the cherries and the berries when the manager approached us with a very grim look on her face. “Are you the owners of a black SUV?”

“Yeah,” I said, “Did I park somewhere I shouldn’t have? I can move it right away.” “No,” she said, “it’s not that. I’m really sorry, but someone just hit your vehicle.”

We went outside and saw a car with its entire front panel ripped off at an angle beside our Honda. The back end of our vehicle had some damage, but nothing like the car.

The driver of the car was a sixteen-year-old girl who had just gotten her license. Her mother told me that they were on the way home from getting it insured. It seems she had panicked and hit the gas pedal instead of the brake.

The mother and her daughter were both distraught. There were tears and salty language and rage and stalking around the parking lot and more tears.

Well, the police came, we dealt with the collision report, exchanged insurance information. The whole deal.

Naomi and I were just standing beside our vehicle waiting for permission from the RCMP officer to be able to go home.

I noticed the girl sitting by alone by a fence, tears in her eyes. I smiled kind of half-heartedly at her. I felt genuinely terrible for her.

She looked up, walked over with a very determined look on her face and said, “I am just SO sorry. This is completely my fault. There is no excuse. I am SUCH an idiot!” On and on the self-flagellation went.

I looked at her and I saw my sixteen-year-old self after one of my idiotic careless mishaps, whether driving or with farm machinery or whatever. I cringed a little.

I said, “It’s ok, mistakes happen. You didn’t mean to do this! I’ve done some dumb things myself.” I told her the story of putting a VW Rabbit on its roof in a frozen canal and of my dad having to drag it out with a tractor.

Naomi put her arm around the girl and said the same kind of thing, “Don’t beat yourself up, it’s just an accident. It’s going to be ok.”

I don’t know what the girl took away from this experience. But I do know that if either one of us had said, “Yes, you completely failed today. You were too heavy on the gas, you didn’t check your mirrors properly, you were probably looking at your phone! You were careless and reckless and stupid. I sincerely hope you’ll do better next time!” that she would *certainly* have left that fruit stand a defeated and resigned (and probably even angrier and sadder) girl than she already was.

I hope she looks back on yesterday and remembers grace. I hope that grace can be a motivation to drive better, certainly, but also—and far more importantly—to extend a bit more of that grace into the world around her.

What is true for that sixteen-year-old girl is true for each one of us.

I hope you leave worship today not just with a checklist of Christian virtues, important as these are, and as desperate as I think our culture is for more human beings seeking to imitate God as dearly loved children who forgive just as in Christ God has forgiven us.

I hope you also leave knowing that the gospel is grace for moral screw-ups. And that all our moral striving proceeds best not from a place of guilt at all that we can’t do but from our secure status as dearly loved children.

May God help us to not leave room for the devil, to imitate him, as dearly loved children.

Amen.