

Title: The World, the Flesh, and the Devil

Introduction

We are in the midst of a verse-by-verse study of 1 Peter 1 & 2. We took a little detour last week to hear Peter's first sermon, which he gave at Pentecost. Next week we are going to read the part of his letter in which he says:

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1 Peter 2:13-14

13 For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, 14 or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right.

Before we get there, I want to take another detour. It's pretty hard for us to read these words and NOT say to ourselves, "Wait a minute, but the Christians were being persecuted by the emperor! He's evil! Why would Peter even think of saying this?"

Before we get there, it feels important to me that we should spend a few minutes reflecting on where evil comes from. Thankfully, Paul has wisdom for us.

Eph 2:1-6 NRSV

2:1 You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. 3 All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

Slide: Memorial in Uvalde; Destruction in Ukraine

We know evil is real, and sometimes it is super obvious – like in Ukraine and Uvalde. And we want to localize the evil on one group or even one person. In the case of Vladimir Putin, Time Magazine had this headline a few weeks ago: "'Everybody's Waiting for Putin to Die.' A Russian Businessman on the Hopes for His Homeland." It feels good to us to imagine that if this one evil person would die, then everything could be made right.

But we know that isn't true. And we know that isn't how evil works. Often – in fact usually – evil's source is really hard to see and pin down.

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Where does evil come from?

According to Paul (Ephesians 2:1-3)

The world = “The system” or our “-isms”

The flesh = the ego, justified by the system to accept “necessary evils”

The devil = the power that glorifies what is totally Bad as if it is the highest good

The **world** isn't creation, which God created good. It's the interplay of social, political, and economic forces that create an entire system. Any -ism – socialism, capitalism, consumerism, nationalism, totalitarianism – that creates an alternate set of rules and rewards from loving God and loving neighbor is “the world.”

The **flesh** isn't our bodies, which – again – God created good. If Paul were writing today, he would have certainly used our psychological term “ego.” Ego are good and necessary to a point, but when our egos buy into the system, we justify “necessary evils” to get along and get ahead.

The **devil** is called lucifer, the bearer of light. When evil is not just justified but glorified, the devil is at work. When our institutions and structures are treated as sacred, when our ends are seen as so good and right that we aren't even allowed to question or critique the ends we go to in order to achieve them... that's the devil. Paul calls the devil “the ruler of the power of the air” because its influence is absolutely everywhere – it's like the air we breathe.

Notice how this is showing up for us right now. We hear things like...

How dare you question my right to have a gun?

How dare you question my right to have an abortion?

When we take such positions, it becomes easy to scapegoat “those” people “over there” and then attack them and dehumanize them. Paul knows this to be our tendency, which is why wants to remember:

Eph 6:12 NRSV

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

The devil can keep you hating people... hating Russians or gun manufacturers or abortion clinicians or members of the other political party... As long as our attention and our hatred is directed at other people, the devil giggles.

Describing evil like this might leave us with no hope. If you are feeling that way, now is good time for some gospel, which Paul provides.

4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have

been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...

How did God accomplish this? How did God make us alive together with Christ? What does this grace look like?

Slide: ECCE HOMO

To find out, we need to think about how Jesus responded to evil in his passion and his death. We go back to the events of Holy Week and see what Jesus did when he was in the eye of the storm as far as the world, the flesh and the devil were concerned.

Slide: How does Jesus respond to evil?

He reveals it. Exposes by not returning evil for evil. This is the essence of non-violent change.

He suffers it. Absorbs, receives, suffers, endures, includes, holds. RR: Suffering happens Whenever you are not in control.

He forgives it. - names the evil, but doesn't try to find its source or apportion blame to anyone. Doesn't scapegoat. Doesn't throw it off but takes it in. On the cross: *Father forgive them because they have no idea what they are doing!* Having revealed it, and absorbed it, he then releases it as an act of total trust and surrender to God.

Jesus' victory over evil doesn't eradicate it. He transforms its effects, bringing ultimate good – union with God – out of it.

As we prepare to continue our study of 1 Peter, I want to see if you notice how Peter teaches and models what our response to evil should be.

Slide: What are we to do? (Image of globe surrounded by candles)

Companion the suffering. Walk with Jesus in his suffering with the world, open our hearts to suffering of others

Withhold our participation. Resist participating in in the sin system, and call it out when we see it.

“But that’s impossible!” We say. It sure can feel this way. Nevertheless our call as Jesus’ disciples, to be people who seek the Kingdom first, is to refuse to buy into the world’s game.

Instead we are called to:

tikkun olam - the repair of the world.

The goal isn't moral perfection. It's union. We cannot eliminate evil. But we can love people when they experience evil. We can even love them when they do evil. We can do our part to repair the world.

At the cross, the worst thing that could happen in the history of the universe happened. The cross is our proof that God can take the worst things and use them for our transformation, for our good.

Let us pray.