

THE MYSTERY OF EVIL

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to a passage of very great difficulty to many, but one of extreme value to us, especially in this day in which we live. The business of preaching is largely to reveal how the conditions which we face daily are being created by profound and fundamental causes that can only be seen through the window of the Word of God. We cannot understand life as it is being lived today with the problems you and I are facing unless we view it through the insight and revelation of the Scripture. The business of preaching is to make this revelation so clear that all can see how to apply them to life, and then to declare the great remedy, the only one which can ever permanently change the conditions in which we live.

This week the papers have been full of an appalling condition in one of our local high schools, where scores of high school young people have become involved in the practice of using such drugs as marijuana and LSD. Many in our community have been shocked by the revelation of what is going on. Yet those who work with high school young people know that this is nothing new. It is present in every high school in this area and is spreading widely, not only in California but across the nation. It is part of the greater picture of an increasing moral collapse in our day.

The most appalling thing to the authorities who are attempting to deal with this problem is that nothing they do seems to be able to stem the tide of this spreading evil. They once thought these things were only a manifestation of youthful folly -- just the normal exuberance of youth, the desire to step over the traces and try out new experiences. Therefore, the authorities felt that all that was needed was simply to explain the dangers to our young people, help them to see that there were problems involved, and as soon as they were educated enough about the evils and dangers of these things, this would all stop. Thus, a few years ago, teams of men were organized to go around to high schools and explain to our young people the possible deteriorating effect of these drugs upon their health and upon their moral lives. But I was interested to note this last month or so that many of these teams were disbanded because they found the young people were greeting their educational efforts with contempt and disdain, and were laughing at them. Instead of decreasing the traffic in drugs, these efforts were actually increasing it by making youngsters more desirous of experimenting along these lines.

The authorities began to see that there was something deeper, something more troublesome behind this, and that it could not be explained on such simple terms as mere youthful exuberance. Then they felt that what was required was more stringent legislation, more severe penalties for this kind of problem. This is what is being tried now, but, as in previous cases of this kind, it will not serve to solve the problem. The traffic is still increasing and the authorities are becoming greatly alarmed. They do not know what to do to stop this. They are appalled at the rapidly accelerating speed of moral revolt, and the apparent imperviousness of youth to all attempts to slow it and to reveal it for what it is, and thus to stop this moral decay.

Well, what is behind all this? It is becoming apparent, even to those attempting to deal with this problem from an authoritative line, that we are facing a flood of immorality which is being fed by an unseen fountain that is gushing out moral filth faster than it can ever be cleaned up. It is most frustrating to those attempting to deal with these problems to discover that the power behind all this is apparently an unseen power, disembodied, invisible. You cannot legislate against it, for it is above and beyond law, beyond human control. You cannot get hold of it by any of the ordinary avenues that are open to human

power. This modern enigma brings us exactly to what John is declaring in Chapter 3, Verse 8. He says to us very plainly:

He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. {1 Jn 3:8 RSV}

The apostle declares that the problem behind all that we are facing today is the existence of a malevolent, evil being who continually is subverting every human effort to counteract his activities, and is pouring out a flood of evil continuously into the human stream of life. This is why we can never permanently solve the problem. We are forever running into manifestations of the working of this superhuman force in life. Notice that this verse is part of a larger passage in which the apostle is dealing with the whole problem of evil. It might be helpful to point out that these are really two parallel passages, running side by side in Verses 4-7 and 8-10. Their parallelism is evident in three ways:

First, each has a word to say about sin. In Verse 4, the apostle says, "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." Then in Verse 8, the first verse of the second parallel passage, he says, "He who commits sin is of the devil..." One describes the nature of sin, lawlessness; the other declares the origin of sin, the devil. Then, in each passage, there is a word about Christ and his appearing. In Verse 5, "You know that he appeared to take away lawlessness, and in him there is no lawlessness." In Verse 8, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." Finally, there is a logical conclusion resulting from these statements. In Verse 6, "No one who abides in him sins;" i.e., as a result of the fact that Christ has come to take away sins. And in Verse 9, "No one born of God commits sin;" as a result of the fact that God's nature abides in him, and the Son of God has come to destroy the works of the devil.

Now these two passages are dealing with the mystery of evil which has been confronting the human race from the very beginning and is so evident in our society today. I wonder if there has even been a time when we were more obviously faced by superhuman forces which we simply cannot explain or deal with by the normal methods of human control. The difficulties are beyond this. As we saw from the Apostle Paul, there is no adequate explanation for the hideous tangle of human problems, such as exists today, if we fail to see the malevolent genius of the devil behind these things. As Paul put it, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in high places," {Eph 6:12 KJV}. All the apostles agree that we can never adequately explain what life is about, and especially explain the problem of human evil, if we do not come to grips with these unseen forces and recognize their existence.

Now, in this passage in John there are two phrases that we must particularly note. One is, "the devil has sinned from the beginning," or, literally, "the devil is sinning from the beginning." The second phrase occurs in the latter part of the verse, "the works of the devil." The devil's sin, and the devil's works. These are not the same thing and it is very important that we distinguish between the sin of the devil and the works of the devil. They are quite different.

The sin of the devil is, as John says, "from the beginning." It dates from the time when he first became the devil. God never created a devil. He never created a fallen man, although man is now fallen. He never created a fallen angel, although there are fallen angels. And, chiefly, he never created the fallen angel, the devil. He created a being of beauty, glory, intelligence and responsibility, but as in the case of man, he gave him a free will. It was the activity of that free will, opposed to his Creator, that changed the angel God created into the devil. The Lord Jesus is himself the authority who tells us that the devil "abode not in the truth" {John 8:44 KJV}, i.e., literally, he did not continue to stand in the truth. There was a time when the devil was "in the truth," but he was not the devil then. Most scholars feel that we have a description of the fall of this angel in Isaiah 14, where a being whom Isaiah called the Day Star,

or, literally, from the Hebrew, *Lucifer*, is described. Isaiah 14, Verse 12:

**"How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
'I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High.'" {Isa 14:12-14 RSV}**

Five times the devil said, "I will," "I will," "I will," "I will," "I will." Here was a glorious being who was not content with the glory he had. In his own view he was not glorious enough and he determined to be more glorious. Free will became, in the devil, "I will," and that "I will," five times repeated, regarded God as an obstacle to the devil's plans and no longer a necessity in the devil's life. He set himself to become higher than God, to become "like the Most High." Thus, he set himself above all the law and will of God, and became a law unto himself. That is what lawlessness is, acting as though you are a law unto yourself without regard for any other law, any other person, or any other authority. But whenever we adopt the attitude, "I will do what I want, I am a law unto myself," we have repeated the sin of the devil. That is lawlessness; that is the devil's sin.

That is why John says every one who commits sin is "of the devil," because what he is doing is repeating, in his own limited area of experience, the sin of the devil. He is living like the devil, for the devil continues to live just as he began to live at the moment of his fall -- independent of God and therefore opposed to God. This is the sin of the devil and is the nature of sin wherever it appears in human life, whether in a Christian or non-Christian. He who commits sin is of the devil because he is permitting the devil to reproduce in him the devil's character, for the devil continues to live in the lawless attitude into which he fell when he sinned from the beginning.

Now the works of the devil are the natural result of the sin of the devil. They are what inevitably follows. Sin is an attitude within the heart. It is an attitude of lawless disregard of the authority of God. But the works of the devil are the activities that result from that attitude. In Romans 8 the Apostle Paul uses a similar description, "the mind of the flesh" {cf, Rom 8:7}, which, he says, "is hostile to God," enmity against God. That is an attitude within. That is the feeling, "I'll run my own life. I don't need any God to tell me what to do. I don't need any God to support me or help me or tide me over difficulties, I can take care of my own affairs. I'll run my own life." That is the mind of the flesh, and it is hostile to God. But, in Galatians 5, Paul speaks of "the works of the flesh" {Gal 5:19}, immorality, impurity, enmity, strife, jealousy, selfishness, envy, carousing, drunkenness, and other things. These are the things that result from having the mind of the flesh.

In the passage that was read earlier from the 8th chapter of John, the Lord Jesus partially described the works of the devil for us. He said they are murder and lying. "He was a murderer from the beginning, and when he lies, he is only speaking out of his own character because he is a liar and the father of lies," {John 8:44b RSV}. In John 10 he gives us yet another. Concerning the false shepherd whom he calls the thief he says, "The thief comes only to kill and to steal and to destroy," {John 10:10a RSV}. Now these are the works of the devil -- murder, lying and stealing -- those three. They manifest themselves in various ways but they all sum up to these -- murder, lying, stealing. These inevitably follow the sin of the devil, i.e., rebellion. Whenever there is a rebellious attitude in a human heart toward the authority and will of God, or that will reflected in the government of man, then the works of the

devil will follow.

This is the way the devil attacks and misleads mankind: Morally, he steals away the blessings God intended for man. The devil never offers anything positive. All the things the devil apparently offers to mankind are but illusions, glimmering mists that disappear when you grab them. You are left with nothing but cobwebs and ashes in your hand, for there is no substance to them. The devil steals from us the blessings God would have man have: peace, quietness, courage, love and joy. In this way the devil violates God's love by stealing and robbing us.

Physically, the devil attacks mankind by destroying through disease -- and all disease ultimately stems from the activity of the devil -- and death. That does not deny the existence of bacteria or the reality of germs, but these are the activities of the devil in attacking the body of man. Also, by means of disaster, by war, by crime, by violence, the devil is active in human society -- destroying. He delights to ravage, to twist and hate and break and smash and mangle. He loves this. That is why our newspapers are full of it all the time. That is what is behind the war in Viet Nam, the crime in our streets, and in our private homes as well.

Intellectually, the devil attacks man by lying to him. He deceives him, tells him falsehoods, makes him act on principles that are wrong, directly contrary to fact. He teaches us to believe certain widespread proverbs that everybody accepts as true. "Watch out for yourself." "You'll never get ahead unless you think of yourself." "Number One first, and the Devil take the hindmost." We all act on them at times, because we believe the devil. Thus, he brings confusion and darkness and extinguishes the light that is in man.

All this is why intelligent, happy young people, moving into adulthood, are caught up in vicious, savage patterns of delusion and destruction. They believe the lies of the devil about sex and LSD and other things, and they allow him, through these, to steal their strength and their joy and their youth, and thus to destroy and to murder and to ravage among them. These are the works of the devil. Our newspapers are full of them all the time, and you can trace this throughout all of human history.

It was evident in the very beginning of the race, when Cain murdered his brother in order to steal his place of acceptance before God, and lied to God about what he had done. "Where is your brother?" Cain said, "I don't know." But he did know. Remember how King David, after he had walked with God for years, and was a man after God's own heart, chose to give way to the sin of the devil and to act lawlessly? He became a law unto himself and decided to get what he wanted apart from what God wanted. When he did, he stole from Uriah the Hittite his most precious possession, his wife. Then, in order to cover it up, he murdered him with nothing more lethal than a pen dipped in ink. Then he lied about it, in hypocrisy, covering it all over, until God sent Nathan the prophet to unveil the whole hideous story and bring it out into the open.

Remember that in the early Church Ananias and Sapphira sought to rob God of what they said belonged to God. They said they had given to him, but they had not. Because they wanted to gain a prestige among the Christians which they did not really possess, they lied to the Holy Spirit, as Peter accused them. And they destroyed the fellowship of the early Church, wrecking it for their own ends.

This is the business of the devil. His business is to tempt you in any way he can to adopt a sinful attitude of rebellion and willful independence; to say, in one way or another, "I want what I want, and I don't care what anyone else wants." That is the sin of the devil. When you do that, the inevitable result which you cannot escape is that the works of the devil follow. You discover that you will lie, you will steal, and you will destroy to whatever extent and degree you feel you can get away with. If not outwardly,

openly, and brazenly, then it will be inwardly, subtly, respectably. But there is no way to escape.

We think we can. We are continually deluding ourselves by thinking we can control these reactions. "I'll only go so far, I'll give way to this willful desire, but then I'll limit the reactions -- I won't let it go too far." But as Jesus said in the Gospel of John, Chapter 8, "Truly, truly I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin," {John 8:34 RSV}. You no longer have the power to determine how far it is going to go. It will go beyond your own desire, it will carry you farther than you want to go, and you will end up doing things that you never dreamed of doing once. We are always carried on beyond ourselves. We do not master sin; it masters us. It is only a matter of time before the results of it become evident and the works of the devil are there.

Now what is the answer to all this? Well, there is only one answer. It is the answer that John gives us here, "The Son of God appeared to destroy the works of the devil." That is what Christ came for. He came to set us free from this bondage, to deliver us from this inevitable chain reaction. He literally came to unloose, to untie the works of the devil, as though these were actual chains about us. I was interested in reading Dr. Paul Tournier recently, to see the way he put a certain truth. He said that when we come into the experience of the grace of God we find that the problems we were facing in life are not always solved; what happens to them is that they are dissolved. They simply disappear, they fade away like the morning mist. You do not find specific solutions to them so much as to simply find them disappearing, as God's grace enfolds and surrounds us. This is exactly what John is saying. The Son of God has come to untie, to loosen the bonds of the devil, the works of the devil in human life, to dissolve them and thus to set us free.

Now how does he do this? He does it by substituting the method God intended for living. The devil always imitates. He never comes up with anything original, for he cannot. He is forever imitating God with phony, cheap, and shabby imitations of the real thing. He imitates the Trinity -- the Father, Son and Holy Spirit -- by substituting a false trinity -- the world, the flesh and the devil. These are the great powers in human affairs today -- the world, the flesh and the devil -- and they are an imitation of God's true character as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The devil also imitates the method of God, as well. W. Stuart Briscoe, who is a young associate of Major Ian Thomas, put it very clearly this way. He says the way God intends man to live is as follows:

The death of Christ is the prelude to all Christian experience. When the Son of God died, he laid the groundwork for everything that happens in the Christian life.

The resurrection of Christ is the pattern of all Christian experience. Just as the Son of God arose from the dead, so we are to be constantly rising from the death around us into a new vitality, a new adventure of living, day by day.

To be in Christ, i.e., to be a Christian, is the province of all Christian experience. You never can experience real living unless you are in Christ.

But for Christ to be in us, that is the power of all Christian experience. That is how God intended man to live, a moment-by-moment dependence upon the power of Christ within. That is what makes life a continual thorough-going adventure story.

But the devil imitates this, too. He substitutes his own formula. The fall of Satan becomes the prelude to all sinful experience. The life of Satan, his present existence, is the pattern for sin, as we have seen. The devil is sinning as he did from the beginning, John says. That forms the pattern for all sin. The world of human society is the province of all sinful experience. It is society-governed and mastered by sinful, devilish principles, following the devil and unwittingly and unknowingly doing what the devil wants. That is the world. But within us is this strange thing called the flesh, which is the power of all sinful

experience. There is the devil's imitation of the work of the Son of God. The Son of God came to set the false aside and to restore us to the true. He came and died upon a bloody cross and rose again in power in order that in your life he might undo the works of the devil; he might break these cords and set you free, and teach you that when you live as God intended you to live, following the pattern that is in Jesus Christ, our victorious Lord, all the power of the devil and the antagonism of the world and the clever subtlety of the flesh is defeated. You can be free from these things, be delivered from them and mastered, not by the devil, but by the Son of God. That is when life begins to make sense.

Now John has much more to say about this, as to how it works in actual experience. But our question now is: "Has the Son of God been allowed to begin this work in your life?" Have you discovered him, and received him? Are you already repudiating the mind of the flesh with its rebellion against God, and setting it aside? Has the Son of God, in the might and power of his being, begun to dissolve in grace these problems in your life and to set you free to be what God intended you to be? That is what church is all about, and what this whole service is all about. It is to open our minds and help us to see that what is happening around us, reported in our newspapers, finds its solution only in the Son of God and what he does in the individual life. Has he begun that with you? God grant that you can say, "Yes, at least he has begun, and day by day as I believe him and move out in the experience of this pattern I discover that 'if the Son shall set you free, you will be free indeed.'"

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for the revelation of this truth anew to us. What a glory is in this One who came and died that we might be free. As we gather now at this Table to which he has invited us, by which we remember that death, the pain and the agony of it, the cost of it, the blood, the sweat, the tears, and the patience that he manifested as he endured these things, God, grant to us that we may realize and appreciate anew what it cost to bring us this freedom, this deliverance, and enter into it with joy and gladness and with gratitude. We pray in His name, Amen.

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