



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE SUBTLETY OF THE SATANIC”

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 6:10-17

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, November 2, 2008.*

This morning I would invite you to think with me for a while about a subject which most people, including most Christians, are prone to either completely ignore or else inappropriately exaggerate. I am speaking of the reality of Satan and the Satanic. For many people Satan is an ancient relic of the dark ages, an embarrassing carry over from the Church's pre-enlightenment and pre-scientific days. They are convinced to believe in a literal Satan serves no practical value. To the contrary, it allows certain individuals or institutions to ignore their own responsibility for evil choices or to evade completely their complicity with the forces that are so clearly opposed to the purposes and plans of God. After all, they contend, if we can get by with saying “The devil made me do it,” then we can deny any culpability and not expect to be held morally accountable or ethically responsible.

By contrast, there are still others who are convinced that Satan is no less real than God and that the forces of evil in us and about us are more pervasive, more powerful, and more personal than many people in their assumed sophistication are prepared to admit. Denying his existence, they say, will not make Satan go away nor render him any less effective. In fact, it may even cause people to minimize the reality of evil in God's world.

You understand, of course, the timeliness of this topic. Each year as All Saints Day and thus Halloween come round a wave of hysteria arises with respect to things diabolical and satanic. Much of it is frivolous and sensational, or biblically distorted and theologically naïve. Some of it plays right into the hands of those who to take some kind of perverse delight in the things Satanic. Some even believe that Satanism starts with little children dressing up as goblins and going through the neighborhood threatening “trick or treat.” In my personal opinion this trivializes both evil and Satan. I take the Satanic far too seriously to worry about Halloween and hobgoblins.

Not surprisingly, this is the time of year when some who are fixated on Satan become very critical of schools and colleges that have demons and devils as their mascots. They find it especially objectionable that many Christian colleges are among these schools. This year, of course, we have been spared most of their protests. They have become temporarily upstaged by those who find offense at having mascots named Indians, Redskins, Warriors, Rebels, and the like.

Will Willimon, who formerly taught at Duke Divinity School, has a tie he loved to wear to church functions which has little blue devils all over it. He wore it not only to display his school loyalty but even as a way of ridiculing such a trivial understanding of the devil. He reports that once a woman came up to him at a church and told him she found his tie obscene. And then he notes: “To me it would have been obscene to have little pictures of Jesus all over my tie. That would trivialize Jesus.”

So personally I don't worry about mascots and I don't worry about children with pitchforks and pointed tails. I don't personally believe Halloween is a satanic plot to capture the souls of the unenlightened. I don't believe the reason this year's Tampa Bay Rays made it to the World Series this year is because they removed the word Devil from the mascot's name. I don't believe church colleges or school are in league with Satan by using demons and devils as farcical mascots. There is probably a good reason why these symbols were chosen. For example, the "Demon Deacons" at Wake Forest. I would like to imagine that some old Baptist preacher who has been educated at Wake Forest came of a meeting where church business was being conducted one evening and immediately thought up the notion "Demon Deacons"!

Now lest you think I am making light of Satan and the Satanic, let me assure you that I am not. I am aware that it is as wrong to take the devil too casually as it is to take him too seriously. I believe C.S. Lewis, the brilliant Oxford scholar and converted atheist who wrote the delightful little classic The Screwtape letters, epistles from a senior devil to this young protégé, was right on target when he wrote these words of warning in the book's preface. "There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about devils. One thing is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight."

I know that some of our members take great exception to my view and surely would like to get me aside and straighten me out. They would like to inform me that Satanism is a growing phenomenon in this country and around the world. They would like me to know that the Church of Satan, founded in 1965 by Anton LeVey in San Francisco, is an officially recognized church by the Internal Revenue Service. They want me to understand that many young people today, some of whom thirst for power and knowledge, some of whom are hungry for acceptance by any peer group, some of whom are products of dysfunctional families and angry with the world and almost all of whom are experimenting with alcohol, drugs, and sexual perversions, are in growing numbers dabbling in the occult and in Satanic phenomena. They want to remind me that a great deal of contemporary music, has lyrics which intentionally glorify the depraved and the gory.

But, you see, they don't really need to remind me of any of these facts, I am well aware of them and I am concerned about them too, though to be quite blunt about it, none of the young people I know have been involved in this type of activity to the best of my knowledge. But more importantly it is not this sensational aspect of the Satanic that primarily concerns me.

First, let me go on record as saying that I do believe in a personal, powerful, and pervasive force of evil in this world which has through the centuries been called many things, the devil and Satan being among them. I believe in a personal Satan not because I have had any personal encounter with such a character, but because there are two millennia of Christian tradition backing this interpretation and because every single writer in the New Testament makes reference to the devil, or Satan, or the evil one or the deceiver of this age, or the ruler of this world. If Satan only appeared in an isolated reference to two it would be one thing, but scripture speaks consistently of the existence of such a being. Without a doubt, Jesus took Satan seriously. So, too, did the Apostles Peter, James, John, and Paul. And if you were to argue that they were simply deluded and that they were wrong about the reality of an evil force called Satan, then why not conclude that they may also been wrong about the reality of a good and loving force called God?

So yes, I believe in a Satanic force present in this world and I make no apologies for that. What is more, people much wiser and more experienced than I, have come to the same conclusion. Not long ago "The Expository Times" carried an excellent, reasonable, and scholarly essay by the Venerable Michael Perry of Durham, England, entitled "Taking Satan Seriously". He traced the

evolution of the biblical notion of Satan and reflects philosophically and theologically on the origin of evil. His essay ends with a conclusion that adequately reflects my own convictions with respect to Satan. He writes:

“For me, the hypothesis of an entity opposed to God and working out its evil will in cosmic and human situations, is a hypothesis which scripture, tradition, and reason combine to validate. In the end I do not know where Satan came from, whether the devil’s name is one or legion, or where he will go to; but I do know that if I act as though he is constantly, insistently, and unremittingly at work in this world and in my experience, I can do my part by prayer and action to work towards his downfall. So I look towards that great, eschatological, day when God will triumph and Christ will at last be all, and in all.”

You see, it is precisely because I do take Satan seriously that I refuse to trivialize the demonic by orchestrating against Halloween or demon/devil mascots. Children inevitably learn to distinguish the imaginary from the real in literature and in life. When I read my grandson at bedtime one of his favorite books, The Very Silly Shark by Jack Tickle, I don’t worry that he will minimize the danger of real sharks. The same could be said for witches, warlocks, wizards and devils. Frankly, the real force of evil in this world could not be less concerned about how the Demon Deacons of Wake Forest fared against the Duke Blue Devils yesterday. If you know anything at all about the tempter called Satan in scripture, then you must know that the caricature of him in Western culture that portrays him as a frightening, loathsome creature, with horns and cloven feet, with a pitch fork, a pointed tail, and the wings of a bat hardly does him justice. In scripture we see just the opposite. Satan is friendly, engaging, personable. He is described as being subtle, crafty, and wise. His appearance is anything but objectionable. Rather, he is pleasant, articulate, provocative. His voice is not the scary, grotesque voice like the one that comes out of Linda Blair in “The Exorcist.” No, Satan’s voice is pleasing, assuring and seemingly rational.

It is the very subtlety of the Satanic that we most need to fear for it is here that most of us are vulnerable. You see, what concerns me about the Satanic is not some crazed and mixed up teenagers who sometimes engage in cruel and depraved acts in the name of Satan. Every so often the authorities will come across some ritualistic sacrifice of an animal in the woods and the whole community goes into hysterics thinking that there are Satanists among us.

And to be sure, there are Satanists among us, but the ones I worry about are not the ones who are out in the woods killing cats and getting high and practicing various perversions. The Satanists who concern me are the closet Satanists sitting in the pews of our churches and teaching in our schools and working in our hospitals, and laboring beside us day by day and living with us in our homes. I don’t worry so much about the Church of Satan because there are probably more genuine Satanists within the Christian churches than there are within the church of Satan. They just don’t know that they are Satanists and we seldom recognize them as such. But the Satanists who are more of a threat to people like you and me are the ones who are our friends, our family, our colleagues, and ourselves. They are us. What makes them so dangerous is their subtlety, their attractiveness, their seeming wisdom. They appeal to all the worst that is within us and invite us to disbelieve & disobey God.

Do you remember the tempter in the Garden of Eden? He was subtle and cunning and wise. Do you remember him in the book of Job? He was articulate and insightful and convincing. Do you remember Satan’s temptations of Jesus in the wilderness? Satan was quite adept at quoting scripture

and arguing persuasively. The Apostle Paul is right when he tells the Corinthians that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (II Cor. 11:14).

Now why have I come to this rather disturbing conclusion that the Satanists to fear are the ones who may be near and dear to us and who haven't a clue as to the fact that they may be in league with the devil? Several years ago I attended a seminar led by Dr. Robert Werstlein, a Presbyterian layman who is also the clinical director of Woodridge Psychiatric Hospital in Tennessee. He briefed us on the history and origins of Satanism in this country, the different levels of involvement, the signs and the practices of Satanism, and the treatment available. At one point in his presentation he reviewed the beliefs of Satanism as they are articulated in the Satanic Bible, written by Anton LeVey.

As Dr. Werstlein read the various beliefs of Satanists, it occurred to me that there may be more Satanism among people like you and me than there is among wild libertarians who gather occasionally in the woods. True, some of the beliefs of the satanic church we would find immediately offensive and immediately reject such ideas outright as the intentional glorification of evil or the intentional defamation of God. But as Dr. Werstlein spelled out the doctrines of a legitimate Satanist, I realized that many of these ideas and beliefs, though not professed, are certainly practiced by ordinary people like you and me, inside the church and outside the church. Just listen to some of them.

To begin with: Satan represents indulgence instead of abstinence. Does that sound or look familiar? What about this one? Satan represents all actions, even the so-called sins, as they lead to physical or mental gratification. Now both of these doctrines would never be professed by Christian people but in truth they are being practiced day in and day out. By contrast, Jesus calls us to live sacrificially, to deny ourselves in loving service to others, to abstain from things that might injure us or others, to live not for the moment but for the eternity, to resist immediate gratification in the service of the greater good. Yet, in point of fact, many church members live only for ourselves and only for the present. If it feels good, do it! After all, you deserve it. If it makes you happy, if it meets your needs, then full steam ahead without a thought for the needs of others or the will of God.

If you consider the way people spend their money, use their time, and gratify their personal desires, then you have to conclude sometimes our values are actually more satanic than Godly. Christian. Statistics annually reveal that the more people make, the less they actually give to God and others. As the level of income increases, the percentage of church and charitable contributions decreases. The fact that nearly 60% of our church members gave no financial support to the church in 2007 is more than embarrassing. It is scandalous! It even borders on Satanic. Called to live simply that others may simply live, too many of us who profess to be Christians live extravagant, wasteful, and luxurious lives while people all about us go without the basic necessities of life. Satanists among us could not care less, that after all is a part of their creed. But as Christians we ought to be outraged.

Here are some other satanic beliefs that certainly are not a part of our official creed as Christians but may be reflective of the way many of us feel and live. Satan represents kindness to those who deserve it instead of love wasted on ingrates. Or this: Satan represents vengeance instead of turning the other cheek. The whole idea of loving your enemy, of praying for those who persecute you, of forgiving those who have harmed you, of helping the undeserving is pure poppycock to all Satanists, and if the truth be known, to many who call themselves Christians as well. Just consider the way we approach political, social, judicial, medical, and economic problems within our society.

So the point I am attempting to make today is that the Satanic is far more subtle than most of us are willing to admit. The great enemy of God and God's people, the devil, is not some caricatured

creature with horns and a tail who wants us to curse God and sing Satan's praises. Satan is far too subtle, too serious, and too wise to work in such a manner. Paul is right when he tells the Ephesians, "Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day and having done everything to stand firm."

It takes nothing less than the whole armor of God to resist the subtle voices of Satan countinuing calling us to defy the ways of God and to adopt the ways of the world. In an interview some years ago ("The Door" Jan. /Feb. 1990) Dr. Walter Wink, writer, educator, professor of biblical interpretation was asked about the demonic and he alluded to our passage from Ephesians. The question he is asked is this: "Is prayer the primary power that defeats the demonic?" And he answers:

"Prayer is the most underrated weapon of all the weapons in our arsenal. It certainly is fundamental. But Ephesians mentions a whole arsenal of weapons. For example, the "shield of faith" which "quenches the flaming darts of the Evil One." Every moment flaming darts are being thrown at us from the culture. These darts try to con us into accepting the values that are dominate in this culture. So when an ad comes on television telling us that "you've got to have a BMW or else you are a nobody," we can quench that flaming dart with the shield of faith before it hits our hearts and before we begin to think of ourselves as nobodies. And then there is the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God". It is not a defensive weapon, it is a weapon of offense. The sword can cut through the lies and it can name reality cold. The word enables us to see through the cloud, the smoke screen, and the fog of a disillusional culture and its value system."

In closing, I would encourage all of us to take Satan more seriously than perhaps we have, but also to recognize that Satan often speaks to us in a voice that is subtle, persuasive, and seemingly wise, and pragmatic. May God grant us to distinguish between the truly demonic and satanic as opposed the superficial & childish. May God give us the grace to distinguish the Lord's voice from all those other voices competing for our allegiance and our lives.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.