

## **Ephesians 6:10-20 “The Evil Spirit Sermon”**

I was born in 1966. That was fifty-two years ago during an era where there was a big shift in folk music. Prior to the mid-1960s you had Woody Guthrie, the Carter Family, Doc Watson, and the Kingston Trio. But then all of a sudden you had folks like Peter, Paul, and Mary and Pete Seeger coming up through the ranks. And then, God bless him, Bob Dylan hit the scene. So you went from, “This Land is Your Land,” “Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down,” and “Tom Dooley” to “Everybody Must Get Stoned.” That’s a heckuva song really. You see the title and hear the chorus, and you automatically assume that it’s promoting cannabis use. But when you pause, listen, and read the lyrics, you realize that the song is really about how alone people can feel when they’re having stones thrown at them. And remember, this was the 1960s. A lot of protesters used this song as their anthem when they placed themselves in vulnerable positions while standing up to some serious injustices. When Dylan said, “everybody must get stoned,” he was really saying that everyone should experience what it’s like to stick your neck out for a good cause. Everyone should know what it’s like to put themselves in a position of vulnerability in standing up for what’s right. And I agree. Because if we’re going to be co-conspirators with the Holy Spirit to bring blessings to our world, sooner or later it’s going to cost us something. It’s going to get us in trouble. We might get stoned.

Jesus told his disciples that following him wasn’t going to be easy. His followers could face pushback or persecution from those who opposed God’s reign on earth. Jesus even described that push-back as demonic in nature. Demonic!? Is the preacher finally going to talk about Satan? Sort of. I don’t do it much because quite honestly “Satan” doesn’t come up in scripture much compared to other subjects, but a bad or evil spirit? That comes up a lot. And since we’re in the middle of a series about what it means to be spiritual, we need to spend some time talking about what an *evil* spirit is or isn’t.

When it comes to what people believe about Satan or demons or anything like that, you've got two ends of the spectrum. On one side, you've got folks who believe Satan and demons are literal, objective realities or entities. On the other side, you've got folks who believe they're just outmoded superstition and a scapegoat for the evil that we humans do. Like the old Flip Wilson routine, "The devil made me do it!" Others are somewhere closer to the middle and interpret Satan and demons as powerful and insightful images that our ancestors used to describe shadowy realities that are still at work today. In today's terminology, we might call them social, political, structural, ideological and even psychological forces. These forces take control of individuals, groups, and even whole civilizations and drive them toward destruction.

Think of it like this: You've got an average crowd of happy people gathering at a dance or some kind of social event. Someone shouts, "Fire!" and people panic. Everyone stampedes toward the exits. Some people get trampled and killed in the chaos, which means there are others *doing* the trampling and killing. None of the happy dancers at that social would have been seen as heartless killers before that scare. But we might say that in the moment, there was a "spirit of panic," and that spirit possessed them and drove them to violence. That spirit seemed to have a will of its own turning a group of peaceful, decent people into a ruthless, dangerous mob.

Now imagine a similar spirit of racism, revenge, religious supremacy, ideological supremacy, greed or fear getting a foothold in a community. All of a sudden, previously decent people can become possessed and controlled and driven by these forces, mid-sets, or ideologies. Soon, individuals aren't thinking or feeling for themselves anymore. They gradually let the spirit of the group to possess them. If nobody can break out of this craziness, it's easy to imagine the potential tragic outcomes: Vandalism, riots, beatings, lynchings, setting things on fire, plundering land, looting, terrorism, human trafficking, dictatorships or even genocide. Bullets fly, bombs explode and the death toll soars among people who seemed so decent. So peace loving. So ... normal.

So you don't really need to believe in literal demons and devils to get your head wrapped around what Jesus and the apostles were dealing with. There are real and mysterious forces in our world that have to be confronted. But how do we do this? If we respond with violence, anger, fear, and hate, we're no better than the ones who started the ball rolling with anger, violence, fear, and hate. Pretty soon, we'll be driven to the same unhealthy and unholy forces that we detest and are trying to resist. To make matters worse, we'll be the last to know what's driving us, because we'll feel so pure and justified in our opposition. "We must be good and holy ... so we need to *utterly destroy* that which *isn't* good and holy!" See how absurd that sounds? Biblical writers describe Satan as a deceiver, an accuser and a liar. It's not hard to imagine why.

When we allow ourselves to come under the spell of an ideology or a similar force, we feel utterly convinced that evil is over *there* among *them*, and only the righteous are *here* among *us*! We become the accusers when we are deceived by the lie that has convinced us that we have the moral high ground. We become blind to our deteriorating innocence and disintegrating morality. We are no longer able to entertain the idea that our actions might be harmful as we seek to harm others. We lie to ourselves and live in denial about what we've become. This is why Paul had so much to say about "spiritual warfare." We don't wrestle against flesh and blood. Well, no, sometimes we do, but that's not the true enemy. The enemy is the principalities and powers that we wrestle against. They're the invisible systems and structures of evil that possess and control flesh and blood people. The real enemies throughout history, back in Paul's time and in ours, are greed, fear, racism, selfish ambition, misuse of power, nationalism, twisted and toxic religion, and anything that shows a general disregard for human life. Those are the forces that capture decent people and pull their strings like puppets to cause them to do terrible things.

So in that light, being filled with the Holy Spirit -- seeking to be spiritual people -- takes on a profound and practical meaning. Where there are

unholy, unhealthy spirits or movements driving people towards harming others, the Holy Spirit leads us to boldly and compassionately stand up for the ones being harmed. Where unholy, unhealthy spirits or ideologies spread propaganda and misinformation, the Holy Spirit boldly speaks the simple truth.

So how do we resist being possessed by these powers and principalities? Sometimes it's just as simple as responding to harsh words with a calm, non-anxious, and disarming presence. And I know that's a whole lot easier to say than do. When powerful forces collaborate to do harm to others, you may need to join or even form a collective group that resists or stands up to these forces. It also helps to be equipped with a knowledge of scripture too. In the passage that Joe read, Paul talks about the armor we wear to resist the evil forces. He mentions the "sword of the spirit" which is ...? The word of God. One of my youth ministers in high school said that Bible study was practicing our spiritual "swordsmanship." I had this little pocket-sized Phillips New Testament and he jokingly called it my "pocket knife." But whether it's in small, quiet ways or big, dramatic ways, if we join the Spirit in the ongoing mission of Jesus, we won't be overcome by evil. We'll overcome evil with good.

Let's take a minute to give Paul some more credit this week. I feel we pick on him a bit, but fail to remember that, he ... just wasn't Jesus. Jesus was the one whose life and actions reflected those of God, who he called Father. Paul did the best he could with what he had, but he spoke his truth from personal experience. He had once been an over-confident, accusatory, violent persecutor of Christians who he considered evil. He was utterly sure of himself. He thought he had the moral high ground. That is, until he encountered Jesus on the Road to Damascus. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and soon became part of the group that he used to persecute! The Spirit gave him boldness to face repeated arrests, beatings, imprisonments, and ultimately, according to church tradition, was killed by beheading in Rome. He walked the path of Jesus. When he was insulted, he did not reply with insults. When he suffered, he did

not threaten revenge. Instead, he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. Just ... like ... Jesus. To do these things takes courage and power. It takes love. It takes the Holy Spirit.

We all walk a path that we in this church call a “Journey of Faith.” We walk it together. And as we walk it together, we’re being prepared and strengthened for the struggle. We’re learning to cut the strings of all the “unholy spirits” that have been our puppet masters in the past. We’re learning to be filled, led, and guided not by a spirit of fear, but by the Holy Spirit. A Spirit of power, love, and a sound mind to face with courage whatever crises may come.

When a crisis hits, unprepared people may be paralyzed with fear. But we’ll set an example of confidence and peace. Unprepared people may not know where to turn, but we’ll have this circle of peace in which to welcome them. Unprepared people may turn on one another and pull apart, but we’ll turn toward one another and pull it together. Unprepared people may withdraw into survival mode, but we’ll have strength enough to survive and share. Through the Spirit, we will have unintimidated power, unfailing love, and a sound, nonreactive mind. When necessary, we will suffer graciously, because we’ll know that for us, whatever happens, even the end of the world ... isn’t *really* the end of the world.