

Christ Reformation Church

Tillamook, Oregon

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Wise as Serpents – A Practical Theology of Evil

(Part 2 – Evil Comes to Eden)

December 13, 2015

Sermon Text: Gen 1-3

Scripture Reading: 2 Cor 11

Introduction-

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men..."

(Matthew 10:16-17a)

"An appeaser is someone who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last."
(W. Churchill)

There is something in each of us, I suppose especially in people who consider themselves to be "good" people, that refuses to see evil for what it is. And it is quite probable that this

tendency, which is really a manifestation of self and our sinful flesh in action, is most widespread in Christian churches and organizations. This denial, which Margaret Heffernan calls *Willful Blindness*, permits evil to thrive among us, to deceive us, and to continue practicing oppression of its victims. In some cases, as Heffernan tells us, willful blindness reaches the level of a crime. Here she quotes from the jury instructions given by a judge in the Enron trial:

You may find that a defendant had knowledge of a fact if you find that the defendant deliberately closed his eyes to what would otherwise have been obvious to him. Knowledge can be inferred if the defendant deliberately blinded himself to the existence of a fact.

Judge Lake was applying the legal concept of willful blindness: You are responsible if you could have known, and should have known, something that instead you strove not to see. In this case, Skilling and Lay could have known, and had the opportunity to know, just how

rotten their company was. Their claim not to know was no excuse under the law. Since they could have known, they were responsible.¹

Willful blindness you see. It is not excusable. It is willfully committed. Heffernan continues:

We can't notice and know everything: the cognitive limits of our brain simply won't let us. That means we have to filter or edit what we take in. So what we choose to let through and to leave out is crucial. We mostly admit the information that makes us feel great about ourselves, while conveniently filtering whatever unsettles our fragile egos and most vital beliefs. It's a truism that love is blind; what's less obvious is just how much evidence it can ignore. Ideology powerfully masks what, to the uncaptivated mind, is obvious, dangerous, or absurd and there's much about how, and even where, we live that leaves us in the dark. Fear of conflict, fear of change keeps us that way. An unconscious (and much denied) impulse to obey and conform shields us from confrontation and crowds provide friendly alibis for our inertia. And

¹ Margaret Heffernan, *Willful Blindness* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022) page 1.

money has the power to blind us, even to our better selves.²

Therefore, when evil comes among us, especially when we are in a place such as the church where we have been taught that evil does not exist (it's only "out there" in the world), our fear kicks in, our selfishness demands that we hold on to our cherished prejudices, and we reject even plain facts and hard evidence because we want to keep feeling great about ourselves and about our little world.

This is willful blindness. It is willful sin. It is willfully failing to love one another and to obey our Lord's commandments. And evil loves it so. Listen once more to Heffernan:

There's a circle here: We like ourselves, not least because we are known and familiar to ourselves. So we like people similar to us—or that we just imagine might have some attributes in common with us. They feel familiar too, and safe. And those feelings of familiarity and security make us like ourselves more because we aren't anxious. We belong. Our self-esteem rises. We feel happy. Human beings want to feel good about themselves and to feel safe, and being surrounded by familiarity and similarity satisfies those needs very

² *Ibid*, page 3.

efficiently. The problem with this is that everything outside that warm, safe circle is our blind spot.³

In many ways, people who have been raised in Christian homes, have gone to church their whole life, whose very lives have been wrapped up in their church, are the most deceived about evil. It isn't on their radar. They have no experience with it – at least no experience that they have been aware of, though it has been all around them. And so, when evil is reported or exposed, well, widespread willful blindness and denial kick in. Or rather, the person reporting the evil gets kicked! “How dare you gossip! Don't ever tell me something like that again!”

I remember telling a man once some years ago that it was evident to me that the cause of so much widespread sin and rebellion in another man's family stemmed from the fact that the children in that family knew, down inside, that their father did not love them. And this fellow I was telling responded to me in anger: “Don't ever say anything like that to me again! It's not true! I don't want to hear it!” But it was true, and time has continued to prove that it was true.

Most Christians have been taught falsehoods about evil and particularly about evil in the local church. This has

enabled evil to flourish in the pews, disguised in wool, and for widespread oppression of Christ's flock to continue and even be assisted by people who are charged with shepherding that flock. The traditions of men have been embraced as God's Word, while God's Word has been largely rejected. It is one of the main purposes of this present sermon series to correct this perversion of truth by looking closely at the Holy Scriptures where we are going to find warning after warning about evil creeping in among us in the church.

This morning we begin at the beginning – the opening chapters of Genesis.

Gen 1:25-31 And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. (26) Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (27) So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (28) And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be

³ Ibid, page 11.

fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (29) And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. (30) And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. (31) And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Here we have the account of creation. Genesis 2 will continue the story, including that of the creation of the woman from Adam's rib.

Gen 2:15-25 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (16) And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, (17) but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." (18) Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." (19) Now out of the ground the LORD God

had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. (20) The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. (21) So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. (22) And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. (23) Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (24) Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (25) And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

Everything was pronounced "good" even, "very good." Every tree there was pleasant to the sight, including the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Gen 2:8-9 And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. (9) And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and

good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

This was perfection. It was Eden – paradise. It was creation as the Lord intended it to be. This was the perfect church. God’s temple where the Lord Himself met man.

And yet, consider carefully God’s commandment given to Adam, and note the very name of the tree he was forbidden to eat from. We see that:

- The name of the tree includes something called “evil”
- There was some possibility that an evil thing could be done: Adam could eat from that tree
- Furthermore, there was a possibility that something evil, called death, could enter into the world.

And, as we know, so it was-

Rom 5:12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—

We also know that this evil showed up in Eden in the person of the devil, the serpent:

Gen 3:1-5 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" (2) And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, (3) but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" (4) But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. (5) For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Where did this evil one come from? We don’t know. We do know that he is a creature, a created being, and that God is not the author of evil and had created everything very good. At some point, unknown to us, Satan turned from that goodness into the evil being he is. It is quite probable that the arrogant, high-minded personality described in Ezekiel 28 is Satan, perhaps even a description of the essence of his sin:

Eze 28:1-15 The word of the LORD came to me: (2) "Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the Lord GOD: "Because your heart is proud, and you have said, 'I am a god, I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,' yet you are but a man, and no

god, though you make your heart like the heart of a god— (3) you are indeed wiser than Daniel; no secret is hidden from you; (4) by your wisdom and your understanding you have made wealth for yourself, and have gathered gold and silver into your treasuries; (5) by your great wisdom in your trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in your wealth— (6) therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because you make your heart like the heart of a god, (7) therefore, behold, I will bring foreigners upon you, the most ruthless of the nations; and they shall draw their swords against the beauty of your wisdom and defile your splendor. (8) They shall thrust you down into the pit, and you shall die the death of the slain in the heart of the seas. (9) Will you still say, 'I am a god,' in the presence of those who kill you, though you are but a man, and no god, in the hands of those who slay you? (10) You shall die the death of the uncircumcised by the hand of foreigners; for I have spoken, declares the Lord GOD." (11) Moreover, the word of the LORD came to me: (12) "Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre, and say to him, Thus says the Lord GOD: "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. (13) You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl,

onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. (14) You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. (15) You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you.

Notice the heart of his sin – pride and arrogance claiming to be a god, if not God. And you have it back in Isaiah 14 as well-

Isa 14:11-15 Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, the sound of your harps; maggots are laid as a bed beneath you, and worms are your covers. (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! (13) 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 reaches of the north; (14) I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' (15) But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit.

All of this certainly coincides well with the serpent's words in Eden-

Gen 3:5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

There it is. The essence of evil and sin. *I will be God. I will be like the Most High. I will have total power and control and I am entitled to it.* Wherever you see these things, be sure that you are looking at evil. And this is the very thing that evil promises to us when temptation comes. It is at the root of all false religion which is idolatry. The creature will be Creator. The man will be God. Evil says we are entitled to it. The quest for deity. The lust for power and control. These are the inevitable, certain characteristics of evil which we must learn well and be on guard against at all times. *You owe me worship!*

Rom 1:18-23 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (19) For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. (20) For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (21) For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to

him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (22) Claiming to be wise, they became fools, (23) and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Now, let's consider two things in light of all of this.

1. Evil came into a perfect paradise,
2. There is a right way and a wrong way to have knowledge of evil.

If pure evil, Satan himself, came into a perfect paradise where there was no evil thing, do you not think that evil will most surely come among us in our churches in this fallen world?

Evil came, as it always does, in a deceptive, "subtle" form. In "craftiness." I don't think that the serpent in Eden was ugly or fearful in appearance, as we perceive serpents to be today. No, he was incredibly believable. He was smart when it came to evil and temptation and he knew right where to strike and what doubts about God to plant in their minds.

Now, does the Bible not warn us repeatedly that Satan will surely and definitely continue to come among us in the very same way today in the

church? Yet somehow Christians simply choose to live in denial of this.

2Co 11:3-4 But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. (4) For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

2Co 11:12-15 And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. (13) For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. (14) And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. (15) So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

Expect it. Look for it dressed in wool, shining as bright as a most eminent, holy person. Where do such people operate? *In the church.* What is the spirit that empowers them? *The spirit of antichrist.* Where is the antichrist obviously going to operate? *In the church.*

Second, there is a right way and a wrong way to obtain this knowledge of evil yet remain innocent. Everything in Eden was “very good.” Under the umbrella of that “good” was included the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the commandment that if Adam disobeyed the command, he would die. That kind of knowledge about evil was good. Perhaps this was even the very reason that tree was in the garden at all? BUT, the knowledge of evil, being wise about evil, *needed to come by obeying the Lord, not by DOING evil.* The devil spoke a “truth” when he said that Adam and Eve would know good and evil, but he made even that truth into a lie because they ended up “knowing” evil in a very different way than God knows evil – they knew it and they were *guilty of it.* Wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove in regard to evil I believe means that we are to have the knowledge of evil, as the devil knew of its existence, but unlike the serpent to have no sin in respect to that evil.

The Lord Jesus Christ *knew* evil in the sense that He was wise as a serpent about it, yet innocent as a dove. Yet you will never, ever find him practicing *willful blindness* in regard to evil:

Joh 8:42-46 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am

here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. (43) Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. (44) You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (45) But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. (46) Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?

Jesus said these things and knew these things, *yet without sin*. He was never deceived by evil. *Being like Christ includes being wise about evil and not being deceived by it, by not enabling it in any way, by speaking for those who are oppressed by it, and even doing hands on battle with it to protect the innocent.*

A Christian is never more UNLIKE Christ than when he or she lays heavy loads on victims of evil, telling them things like:

- You must forgive and reconcile
- You must love them no matter what
- You must say nothing negative about them

- Well then, have you considered what YOU did to make them do that to you?

That is the antichrist. That is the spirit of evil.

What should Adam and Eve have done? When evil came, started talking to them, making those lying claims about God's motivation? What should they have done? Listened to him? Told themselves, "well, he is one of God's creatures just like us"?

No, I can tell you what they should have done. They should have *killed this serpent, put him out of the garden forever, and thereby obeyed the Lord*. They should have immediately recognized that here was a creature craving God's glory for himself and thereby they should have known he was evil.

Let me ask each of us a question as we end:

Are you wise as a serpent and innocent as a dove in regard to evil? Do you WANT to be wise when it comes to evil? Do you want to see it when it shows up? Do you want to know its wicked tactics? Do you want to rescue its victims? Or, do you prefer willful blindness? The former are marks of Christ and fruits of His Spirit in us. The last, willful blindness, is the self-

serving flesh that we are no longer characterized by.

I opened with a quote by Winston Churchill and I close with one as well, only this time it is to disagree with him. The quote actually does show the far too common reality of a lack of serpent wisdom in the church however:

“The high belief in the perfection of man is appropriate in a man of the cloth but not in a prime minister.”

No, this naivete about the nature of man is not appropriate in a pastor, a Christian, or a prime minister. All must be wise as serpents in these things.