

Welcome

When I was in high school, a friend of mine invited me to play Dungeons and Dragons. This was exciting to me for a couple of reasons: first, I am and was a huge nerd, so D&D had always been something I wanted to check out. And second, I didn't have a lot of friends in high school, so this invite was exciting to me!

There was only one problem: I was a child of the 80s, which means I grew up during the so-called "Satanic panic" when America was convinced there were covens of Satanists behind every rock and tree. D&D was alleged to be one of their primary recruiting tools. So my mom was *not* thrilled that I would be summoning demons with my friends so that we could sell our souls to the Dark Lord.

I'll spoil the ending: she eventually relented, and my friends and I played D&D for several months straight and no one ever even *saw* Satan. We certainly weren't interested in selling our souls.

But even today, in many churches, bring up D&D and people who wouldn't know a d20 from a d10 are convinced that D&D is a tool of Satan, along with rock n roll music, high school dances, and a host of other activities.

Which begs the question: really? And, in light of our last series about asking better questions, "Are those the right places to be looking for the devil?"

Today, we're going to see the answer to that last question is, "No. Actually, if you want to find Satan, you might want to start by looking at religion. Because according to Jesus, one of Satan's favorite tools is not D&D, but the kind of religion that shields us from looking closely at ourselves. There's a way to be religious that keeps us from being honest about our sin, so it actually keeps us from God.

The good news, though, is that Jesus offers to shine the light of truth on our satanic deception, freeing us to follow him into God's life!

Message

We're in the season of Lent, which is a time the Church sets aside for doing some deep introspection, looking into our lives for sins known and hidden. We spend six weeks in fasting, prayer and giving so that God can reveal sin to us and we can repent, turn to God for healing and new life.

This year, our Lent series is called The Devil in the Details. We're in the Gospel of Mark, following Jesus to the Cross. And all along the way, Satan keeps appearing, trying to derail Jesus' mission. We began last week in the wilderness after Jesus' baptism. We saw that Satan tempted Jesus, but that ultimately, this time of testing prepared Jesus for his mission. So too, we look at the season of Lent as a season in which we allow God to prepare us for our calling.

[Scripture Slide] Today, we're skipping ahead a little bit, to the time Jesus called Simon Peter, one of his closest disciples, Satan! Peter was one of Jesus' inner circle. He was the one who got to walk on water

with Jesus. And he later became one of the most important leaders in the early church. Mark 8 marks the halfway point for Mark's story of Jesus. This is right after the disciples have figured out Jesus is God's promised Messiah. Jesus asked them who he was, and Peter - sort of the self-appointed leader of the disciples, blurted it out: "You're the Messiah!"

So now that the disciples know who Jesus is, Jesus sets about telling them what it *means* that he's the Messiah. Because it's not what they've been expecting. They think he's going to raise up an army and lead military battles. But Jesus has come to die. Let's read what happens when Jesus tells them as much:

Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead. As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things.

Jesus turned around and looked at his disciples, then reprimanded Peter. "Get away from me, Satan!" he said. "You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's."

You can imagine the scene, can't you? The disciples have spent weeks nervously whispering about whether this Jesus they've been following has been the Messiah in disguise. They see him do *impossible* things and begin to hope. After all, if he can calm storms and command demons, what hope do the Roman oppressors have against him?

Then, he straight up *admits he's the Messiah*. Can you feel the rush of excitement, the flush of hope, that feeling that they're going to be part of history?

And then he immediately starts telling them that when he gets to Jerusalem, the seat of Roman power, they're going to kill him.

Way to kill the mood, Jesus! If you want people to follow you, this is *not* the way to do it!

Now imagine you're Peter, the sort of unofficial leader of the disciples, self-appointed side-kick to Christ. You see how Jesus' negative self-talk is really bumming out your friends so you pull him aside. Mark tells us Peter was "rebuking" Jesus.

"Jesus, if you're the Messiah, then that's enough talk about being betrayed and getting killed. The Messiah is God's *chosen champion*. You're going to go to Jerusalem and defeat God's enemies. You're going to take back the throne of David and rule for 1,000 years! You've got to quick talking about betrayal and crucifixion. I'm telling you this as a friend, in godly love."

And it's to *this* statement Jesus responds, "Get behind me, Satan! You're using human words, not God's."

When Jesus calls Peter "Satan", he's saying that Peter is tempting him to abandon the way of God. In other words, Peter's rebuke is exactly the kind of thing Satan would say.

And what is Peter saying? He's saying that *Jesus doesn't have to go to the cross to be the Messiah*. He's not trying to get him to get a tattoo or play an half-orc wizard or play some sick power chords on a lute. He's trying to get him to be exactly who all Jesus' contemporaries expected the Messiah to be.

You can hear Peter's words now. "God hates the Romans. They're an affront to his holiness. The Bible says this is what was going to happen!"

Peter is using religion to try to talk some sense into Jesus. But it turns out the sense is satanic, and Jesus knows it. So he says, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Can we sit here for a moment? It's troubling, isn't it, that religion can get in the way of God? Troubling that we can go to church and read our Bibles and memorize scripture and *still* be tricked into seeing things from Satan's way rather than God's?

How can we know if our religion is good and true, if it's connecting us to God rather than getting in the way of God? The key is to look at the difference between what Jesus said and what Peter said (when he sounded like Satan).

Jesus said, "I'm going to go to Jerusalem, be handed over and killed." And Peter rebuked that. He denied that any Messiah could *lose*.

There is a way to be religious that keeps us from the Cross. It's a theology that says Jesus died for us (so that we don't have to die). Because Jesus bore our punishment, we can remain safe, secure and comfortable. We don't have to do anything - our faith has no external existence. We can act how we want, treat people however we want, as long as we believe Jesus died *for* us.

But that's not the way of Jesus. He goes on, just after he rebukes Peter, to address all of us who would be his disciples:

Then, calling the crowd to join his disciples, he said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." -- Mark 8:31-38

Jesus warns that the way of the world, the way Satan would have us follow, is a way of gaining, acquisition, power and comfort. They're the things we surround ourselves with to make a life for ourselves. They're the very things Peter was trying to get Jesus to think about.

But Jesus says that if we make these things our goal, we'll gain them - but at the expense of our true life. Much like we talked about on Ash Wednesday - these become their own reward. We get them but lose eternity.

If we would follow Jesus, if we would have God transform us and give us life, we have to pick up *our* crosses and follow Jesus to Jerusalem, to his cross. Jesus died for us, but he also calls us to die *with him*. Jesus calls us to crucify our sinful selves, those Shadow Selves that want to be comfortable rather than welcoming. Jesus says that self that wants to win has to lose. Jesus warns us that the person who wants to be known and acclaimed has to deny themselves.

We have to give up our own ways and follow him.

How many of us have found ourselves in a religion that's comfortable? How many of us have been seduced by a faith that is mainly about being safe? A religion that buffers us from undesirable people, that says God wants us to work hard and will reward us with material blessings?

We become convinced that Satan is in the poor and the refugee, those who aren't as well-off as we are, the outsiders and the weirdos. We stay where it's safe, because where else would God be?

How many of us have been seduced by a religion of performance? One that says that what God cares about most is piety - do all the right religious things and stay away from the people who don't?

We're sure Satan is in the bad folks, reveling in sex drugs and rock n roll. We work hard to be holy so we remain in God's favor. Satan won't gain a foothold in our hearts!

Others among us are seduced by a Christianity that wins. We think God is on our side, backing our political party or our view on social issues and, like the disciples, we've been called to wage holy war on all those who disagree.

We're sure Satan is in our enemies, and we're not surprised to find enemies everywhere in the world, in our country, at work and in our homes. The only place we don't see an enemy to fight is in ourselves. How could we? God is on our side!

But Jesus warns us these are the ways of the world. And Satan is happy for us to follow this religion because ultimately it shields us from the way of the Cross. We gain the world and lose ourselves in the process.

The antidote is to pick up our crosses and follow Jesus. This is the exact command Jesus gives Peter. The Greek word "Get behind me" is another form of the same verb Jesus used to call Peter in the first place. It's the verb "follow me". So Jesus isn't saying, "Bye, Felicia!"

He's saying, "Peter: you've got this all wrong. You can't see God's way clearly. So get behind me. Walk behind me. Follow me, and you'll see what true religion looks like. You'll see the path to God, the path that goes through the cross to the resurrection life on the other side.

"Get behind me. Follow me."

Friends, when we follow Jesus, our satanic religiosity can't survive. Instead of a safe, prosperous religion focused on ourselves, we find a risky, vulnerable faith, one that welcomes without fear those who aren't like us.

Instead of a pietistic, performance-based religion, we find a faith that invites us to be honest about who we are, a faith that flows out of an authentic relationship with God and embraces as friends those who don't share our beliefs and practices. We're not afraid or judgmental, we're loving and hospitable.

And we're not interested in winning because the Cross is a lot of things, but it's not a victory. So we look in ourselves first for the seeds of sin, and we approach our enemies with love because we recognize they're no more Satan than we are. They're humans, created and loved by God and bearing his image.

When we follow Jesus, we begin to discern the way of the Cross. We begin to see what it looks like to put others ahead of ourselves, to trust God to bring life even in the face of pain and suffering. We begin to live out the religion of Jesus, which is life to all who encounter it.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to the table to invite us to the Cross.

1. When in the last week did your faith lead you to acts of love and sacrifice?
2. When in the last week did you lean toward selfishness, power-seeking or playing it safe?
3. When in the next week will you be tempted toward selfishness, power-seeking or playing it safe?
4. What opportunities will you have to act in love and self-sacrifice this week?

Blessing/Assignment

An act of secret sacrifice → do something that costs you, for the good of someone else. And don't get caught!