

Welcome

One of the most successful comedians of the 1970s was Flip Wilson. His sketch comedy show spawned memes long before the internet, including the phrase What You See Is What You Get, or WISYIG to our coding friends, and “The devil made me do it.”

I couldn't help but think about that second phrase as I was getting ready for today because we're going to be talking about the devil today - sort of. We're going to be talking about the TV show Lucifer today - a sort of companion piece to last week's exploration of The Good Place.

Lucifer is a show about, well... the devil. It's based on a comic, and the premise is that Lucifer decides he doesn't want to be king of Hell anymore. So he moves to Los Angeles, opens a night club and starts helping the police solve crimes.

Needless to say, there's not much about the show that's, uh, biblically accurate. But it does offer some surprisingly insightful observations about human nature, evil and the possibility of transformation.

My favorite shtick in the show is that Lucifer doesn't hide who he is. He tells literally everyone he's the devil (and, of course, pretty much no one believes him).

So he gets really mad when people don't take responsibility for their own actions. He's heard “the devil made me do it” a few too many times. And he insists, over and over, that he - the devil - isn't responsible for evil in the world. He - the devil - isn't responsible for the sins people commit. Rather, we're responsible for our own actions.

It's surprising, but a show about the devil turns out to be a show about what it takes to change, to heal from old wounds and refuse to let them dictate how we live and how we treat each other. A show about the devil turns out to be about our longing for God, our need to be loved just as we are and to be made new.

Let's begin by worshipping God together. Let's ground our journey today in the good news that no matter who we are, we are loved by the one who created us and calls us!

Message

Welcome to CataVision! This summer, we're going to explore some of our most beloved television shows. Why? Because we're practicing listening well and creating spiritual conversations.

The shows we're engaging have been popular, which indicates they resonate with us. There's something about them that connects with us - not just as individuals, but at a cultural level. So

this summer, we're going to ask, "Why?" What message in these shows is resonating? And how do we engage that message in a faith-filled way?

So that's what we're doing this summer: first, listening to the show and second, responding in faith. We began with WandaVision, a show about learning to see past our self-deceptions and be honest with ourselves. Reality TV helped us understand our need for authenticity. And last week, the residents of The Good Place showed us that while Hell can be other people, Heaven is too.

Since last week was about The Good Place, this week is about the Bad Place - or rather, the guy in charge of the Bad Place. The Devil. More specifically, the tv show Lucifer, that started on Fox and has migrated to Netflix for its last season.

Now, it nearly goes without saying that a TV show about the devil isn't very faithful to what we find in the Bible, but it's worth noting that *Lucifer* takes quite a few, uh, creative liberties with its depiction of angels, demons, God and the devil. Even so, the show is a show about good and evil, about temptation.

One of those places you might think the show gets wrong is Lucifer's repeated insistence that he's not behind tempting humanity. The one thing that consistently makes Lucifer angry in the show is that humans try to blame our bad behavior on him. "The devil made me do it."

But would it surprise you to know that the Bible agrees with this take on sin and temptation?

Turn with us to [James 1](#).

This is a letter likely written by Jesus' half-brother James to the early church. If you tuned in to our WandaVision sermon, we spent some time at the end of the first chapter reflecting on James' instructions regarding truth-telling. I want to back up a little today - we're going to look at a lot of the earlier part of chapter 1. But first, let's zero in on James' take on temptation. James doesn't blame the devil. James doesn't blame God. James blames... us!

Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. -- James 1:14–15 (NLT)

In the show, the only real 'superpower' Lucifer has is the ability to make people reveal their deepest desires - it's often the key to solving whatever crime he's investigating.

That aligns really well with what James observes: that we're tempted because we want something that isn't good for us. We give into that desire, and that's what blooms into sin, which then poisons us.

You'll notice that nowhere in James' equation is the devil involved.

Temptations come from our own desires. We want what is bad for us.

So... is the solution to learn to want nothing? This is the solution our Buddhist friends advocate. According to the Buddha, desire is the cause of all suffering. If we can learn not to want, we can be free from suffering.

There's a particular Christian incarnation of this philosophy, one where Christians end up being against stuff. We boycott movies or music or various other things that promote things we find sinful or toxic. We end up with a version of a life of faith that's joyless, constantly worried about policing ourselves and others, always against and never for.

It's not a life that looks much like Jesus, and it's not what James wants for us, either. For James, the problem isn't that we *want*, it's that we want the wrong things. We need to learn, to train our desires. To learn to what what's truly good.

Back up to the beginning of the chapter. For James, difficult times are good - he calls them a 'great joy'. And he's not too specific - these could be troubles that are the result of our own mistakes and choices or they could be because of external factors - choices someone else has made or even natural troubles like illness or disasters. Look at what he says:

Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. -- James 1:2-4 NLT

James says that troubles are an opportunity for our faith to be tested, with an end result that our "endurance" has a chance to grow. That word is interesting. New Testament scholar Gay L Byron translates it as "militant patience" or "non-violent resistance".

She reaches back to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, to the example set by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and others. Her choice of this moment in history is instructive.

It's easy to read James' words from a place of comfort and privilege, to roll our eyes and think, "Easy for him to say."

But the Christians of the first century to whom James wrote lived in a world of hardship. The vast majority of the first Christians lived below the poverty line. A number were slaves. Quite a lot lived as minorities in a culture where they had no political influence. And they faced various degrees of persecution for following Jesus - James himself was lynched by being thrown off the top of the temple in Jerusalem.

So for James to write that troubles are a source of opportunity for great joy is a statement he earned the right to say. As Dr. Byron said, "James is calling for spiritual discipline that will provide strength, support and a connection to God in the face of various hardship." -- Dr. Gay L Byron

In the same way, those leaders of the Civil Rights movement grounded their militant patience in a deep faithfulness. Their public engagement with the unjust powers required them to be patient and non-violent. They marched, they sat at counters, they protested. These were more than

weekend warriors. The movement was a years-long push for substantive changes to our national laws and culture.

No human has the energy to maintain that level of patience and love in the face of hatred and injustice for that long. What sustained them was that deep, personal faithfulness.

It's worth noting here that there's a debate in some Christian circles about whether God cares about social justice (which is redundant - all justice is social, in that justice is how we talk about good, fair relationships among humans).

This question would be incredibly strange to James (not to mention Dr. King and friends). You may remember from WandaVision that James ends this first chapter by observing that true religion God loves is remaining undefiled by the world and caring for widows and orphans. Or, as Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself."

We've created a distinction between 'righteousness', which we imagine to be about our relationship with God and 'justice', which we imagine to be our relationships in the world. But in both Hebrew and Greek, those two ideas are the same word. Because they're the same concept.

What God desires is righteous vertical and horizontal relationships. Social justice flows out of a holy connection with God. And we learn to love God by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

James challenges us to take our own spiritual formation seriously, and he promises we're not alone:

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do. -- [James 1:5-8](#) (NLT)

Did you catch that paradox in the heart of this instruction? God will give us what we ask for, but we have to ask without being divided. It *sounds* like a vicious circle. If we want the right things, God will give us wisdom. But it takes wisdom to learn to want the right things!

What I love about this little paradox is James' acknowledgement that we aren't wise enough on our own to want the right things. We have to have God's help.

This is where those spiritual practices come in - spiritual practices make space in our lives for God to shape us, to teach us and give us wisdom.

One of my favorite aspects of the show *Lucifer* is that from the first episode, Lucifer is in therapy. The show recognizes that Lucifer is a deeply flawed individual (uh, duh?) and much of the show is really about his own path to healing. It doesn't happen through spiritual practices, but through his relationship with his counselor.

We can - and should! - take advantage of both counseling and spiritual direction.

[Catalyst Spiritual practices]

Both *Lucifer* and James recognize that our desires can pull us away from God. They can keep us from seeing who God truly made us to be.

James shows us that, if we will make space for God, God will teach us to be whole in spirit and body.

So the question before us today is whether we are truly seeking God.

We live in an unjust world, and we cannot hope to be a people of justice without seeking God.

We live in complicated families, with all sorts of dynamics both helpful and hurtful. We cannot hope to be agents of healing without seeking God.

We live in a world of complex, complicated choices in our homes, our neighborhoods, our offices and more. And God doesn't expect us to navigate all that alone. God has given us a church family and God has given us a promise - to teach us - if we will listen. So are we listening?

Communion + Examen

When in the last week have I engaged in a spiritual practice?

What has kept me from spiritual practices in the last week?

What might keep me from spiritual practices in the week ahead?

How can I make space for spiritual practices this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Spiritual Practices

God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Whatever is good and perfect is a gift coming down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. He never changes or

casts a shifting shadow. He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession. -- James 1:12–18 (NLT)