

EMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Official Preaching Guide

Thanks for downloading this preaching guide. It accompanies my book, *Empathy for the Devil*. If you haven't read it, you can [get it here](#). I'll give you a lot more information than is in this brief guide.

I preached through this series at my church, Catalyst. You can find my [sermons, including the full manuscripts, here](#).

If you have any questions about this preaching guide, please don't hesitate to reach out. And you can find graphics for social media, slides and more on [the downloads page](#).

This guide is intentionally simple. I know every preacher has their own style, so I tried to include just enough to incorporate the key info from the book into your process.

I hope this guide is useful to you and to the people you pastor. I pray the Spirit surprises you as you work through this material.

-- jr. forasteros

WEEK 1 – CAIN

BIG IDEA: Anger is an opportunity for us to investigate how we are grounded our identities in something other than God's love for us.

KEY TEXTS: Genesis 4:1-7; Matthew 5:21-26

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: Genesis 4 is all about names. Adam means 'dust'. Eve means 'life'. Cain means 'strength' or 'spear' and Abel means 'vapor' (it's the word Hebrews used to refer to the dew on grass that's burned away by the morning sun). In Genesis 3, after the Fall, Adam renames his wife. Before she was 'woman' ('because she was taken from man'), but now she is 'Life' because she is the mother of all people. The emphasis in their relationship goes from equality and mutuality (you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh) to something more instrumental (fulfilling God's warning that there will be strife between them). Adam is now concerned with what his wife can do for him: give him descendants.

In the ancient world, children were legacy, the way people attained a measure of immortality. Now that Adam and his wife will surely die, the woman's ability to bear children becomes the central focus of their relationship, as her renaming suggests.

She, too, when she bears a child, is ecstatic. "With the Lord's help, I have born a man!" She names her child Strength (or Spear). He is everything for them, a life, a future, a promise that they will not merely end. Abel is born as an afterthought, and his name reflects as much.

Why does God reject Cain's offering? The text doesn't tell us. We are told that Abel brings his best while Cain doesn't – which has satisfied many commentators throughout the centuries, but it's noteworthy that Cain doesn't seem to understand why he's been rejected and God doesn't offer an explanation either. These observations open up the possibility that God's question to Cain is the real point of the whole thing: "Why are you angry?" It's possible God isn't punishing Cain, but trying to rescue him.

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND: Psychologists call anger a secondary emotion, which means it's always triggered by something else. Anger tells us something is wrong, that something isn't the way it should be. Unfortunately, because we are fallen, we can get angry for the wrong reasons. We rage against human trafficking, genocide and corruption, but we also rage when someone cuts us off in traffic, threatens our position in the workplace or among a friend group or disagrees with us. In these latter instances, anger is inappropriate, and actually covers up a real problem we need to address.

We can think of anger like a warning light on our car's dashboard. When we get angry, we need to pull over and pop the hood, figure out what's going on inside, what's not like it should be. We may find we've grounded our identity in the wrong things – like Cain. In this case, we can hear God's invitation: "If you do right, you will be accepted. But be careful! Sin is crouching at your door. It seeks to devour you, but you can master it."

WEEK 2 – DELILAH

BIG IDEA: Holiness is a function of character, not behavior.

KEYTEXTS: Judges 16:4-31; Matthew 5:13-16; Galatians 5:16-23

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: Judges 16 is not about how bad Delilah is; it's about how bad Samson is. The author of Judges contrasts Delilah with Jael in Judges 4. Both are Gentile women who seduce then immobilize a man by means of doing something to his head. Jael is regarded as a hero, while Delilah is a villain. Judges invites us to ask why.

The book of Judges is a downward spiral: Israel was to settle in the Promised Land and serve as a 'kingdom of priests', a light showing the world around them God's way. Instead, as Judges says again and again, everyone did 'what was right in their own eyes'. As a result, a cycle emerges in Judges: God's people are faithless, so God allows them to be conquered and oppressed. They cry out for rescue, and God raises up a champion (a Judge), who liberates them. Then the cycle repeats. As the story of Judges progresses, the Judges get less and less faithful to God until we get to Samson, who embodies Israel's sin. Rather than fight for God, defend God's honor or liberate God's people, Samson takes whatever his eyes find pleasurable (he does 'what is right in his own eyes').

Samson's name means 'the Sun'. He is meant to embody God's way in the world, to show the Gentile Philistines God's way. Instead, he is no different from the Philistines – just as cruel, just as oppressive and unjust. So Delilah, when presented with a choice between God's people and hers, chooses hers. She sees no difference between them. She seduces and betrays Samson, and the one who takes whatever he sees is blinded. The light of the world goes dark.

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND: Too often, we treat holiness as a set of behaviors, a list of do's and don'ts. We imagine that looking different from the world begins with our outward orientation toward the world. This essentially reduces holiness to one more optional brand for the world to choose from. While we look superficially different, we don't offer a substantial alternative to the rest of the world.

When Christians don't live out God's way in the world around us, we fail to fulfill our vocation – to be God's light in the world. In Galatians, Paul describes the 'fruit of the Spirit' – the results of a life in which the Spirit is working. These qualities are internal – harder to measure, but true marks of holiness.

WEEK 3 – JEZEBEL

BIG IDEA: We live as God's people in the world when we give away power rather than use it for ourselves.

KEYTEXTS: 1 Kings 16:29-31; 1 Kings 18:16-40; Philippians 2:1-11

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: Jezebel was a Phoenician princess from the city of Tyre. An ancient city, Tyre was waning in Jezebel's day. Her father, a former priest who seized power in a coup, married her to Ahab, whose father Omri also seized the throne of Israel in a coup. Ahab and Jezebel were remarkably successful in stabilizing Israel. Their trade and foreign policies made Israel a power in the region. This was achieved through alliances condemned by God's prophets; the alliances involved worshiping the gods of the other nations.

It didn't matter how much success Ahab & Jezebel found on the political, financial or military stage. That they built their rule on worship of pagan gods meant that they were evil in God's eyes. Ahab and Jezebel sought power and prestige that mimicked the world around them, rather than following the way of God given to them in the Torah.

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND: The old adage claims "Power corrupts". But in the creation stories, God creates humans to receive power from God and rule in God's image in the world. We were made for power, but power the way God uses power. Jesus reveals what that power looks like. He tells his disciples that it's the opposite of what the Gentiles do – rather than compete to see who can be on top, God's people seek to serve, to give away power to others.

On a practical level, this impacts how we engage in relationships. Psychologist M. Scott Peck outlines the route to True Community. Community begins as Pseudo-community, where each person suppresses their true thoughts and beliefs for the sake of getting along. Eventually, this erupts into Chaos, where those thoughts and beliefs break to the surface. Often, instead of engaging those differing beliefs, groups will suppress them, returning to Pseudo-community and eventually resulting in Burnout.

The alternative to Burnout is Emptiness, where the group members intentionally set aside judgment and pre-conceptions to receive each other's true thoughts, beliefs and feelings. This path of Emptiness imitates Jesus' journey of incarnation as outlined by Paul in Philippians 2. If we can practice Emptiness, we reach True Community, where we are welcomed and loved for who we are, not for who we pretend to be. We learn to share power with each other and contribute to each others' flourishing.

WEEK 4 – HEROD

BIG IDEA: When we seek a life of balance, we overlook and oppress the most vulnerable. Rather than balance, God calls us to seek out a life of faithful presence.

KEY TEXTS: Matthew 2:1-18; Matthew 6:19-24

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: Herod was a man trying to achieve security by keeping the opposing forces in his life balanced. Herod was ten years old when the Hasmonean kings fell. His father, Antipater, was advisor to Hyrcanus I, the last Hasmonean king. Antipater arranged for Rome to liberate Israel from the usurper (who was backed by Rome's enemy to the East, the Parthian Empire). Rome's famous general Pompey the Great took Jerusalem and entered the Temple's Holy of Holies, emerging unharmed despite being a Gentile.

Herod spent the first two decades of his adult life trying to win Israel's throne, backed by Rome and aided by Julius Caesar's right-hand man, Mark Antony. Antony had Herod declared King of Israel, and helped Herod secure the kingdom from yet another Parthian-backed opponent (all this happened about 35 years before Jesus was born).

In the civil war that followed Julius Caesar's assassination, Herod's ally Mark Antony and Caesar's adopted nephew and heir Octavian defeated Caesar's assassins Brutus and Cassius. Antony went to Egypt (where he fell in with Cleopatra), while Octavian stayed in Rome. The two went to war, and Octavian won. Since Herod was Antony's ally, things looked bad for him. Herod sailed to Rhodes to appeal directly to Octavian. He highlighted his loyalty not as a deficiency, but as a strength and offered it to Octavian (who would soon become Caesar Augustus). Octavian, who was not known for offering second chances, gave Herod mercy and reaffirmed him as king of the Jews.

Thirty-some years later, after surviving multiple assassination attempts, Herod faced, according to Matthew, "magicians from the East" came to pay their respects to a newborn King of the Jews. Matthew uses the term for Zoroastrian priests – the official religion of Parthia, Rome's old rival to the East. Knowing when Augustus got wind of the apparent betrayal, he would descend on Israel with the fearsome Roman legions, Herod acted swiftly. Approximately 6-7 boys under two years old lived in Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born – a small price to pay for national security.

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND: 'Balance' is the buzz-word of the day. But in striving to meet every requirement, keep everyone happy, someone always gets overlooked. That 'someone' is always the most vulnerable among us. God doesn't call us to balance, but to a holy imbalance – one focused on faithfulness to God's call on our lives.

WEEK 5 – HERODIAS

BIG IDEA: We inherit both life and death from our families. The legacy we pass on is up to us.

KEY TEXTS: Mark 6:21-29; Exodus 20:5-6; Ezekiel 18:19-22; Mark 3:31-35

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: Herodias' family tree is a tangle of incest and betrayal. She is Herod the Great's granddaughter, and was originally married to her uncle, Herod II. After Herod disinherited his son, Herodias divorced Herod II and married another uncle, Herod Antipas (who also divorced his wife). They ruled as tetrarchs in Galilee, where John the Baptizer condemned their marriage as an abomination to God. Herodias schemed to have him arrested and then executed.

Herodias grew up in a family where she was a pawn to be shuffled like a piece on a chessboard. She was born into a family of political schemers, and learned to manipulate to get what she wanted from them. This pattern of learned sin is what theologians call "generational sin". In Exodus 20, God promises to visit the sins of the parents onto the children to the third and fourth generations. The children of the Exile protested this was unjust. In the famous 'sour grapes' passage of Ezekiel 18, the prophet explains that God only holds us responsible for our own sins. So which is it?

It's both. We inherit patterns of sinfulness from our families, but we are responsible for our own choices. Our families predispose us toward certain sins, but we choose death or life.

Jesus imagines the Church as a new spiritual family in Mark 3. As jarring as his words sound to us today, they would've been vastly more radical to his ancient listeners. Their world was significantly more family-centric even than ours is. But by treating the Church as a spiritual extended family, we learn to identify the legacies of sin we've inherited from our biological families and see what healthier, more holy patterns of relationships look like.

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND: No matter how dysfunctional our families are, they seem normal to us. We learn how to live in the world from our families. Family Systems therapy invites us to explore the patterns of dysfunctional behavior that have embedded themselves in our family trees so that we can begin to overcome them and live healthier lives.

Christians can rightly call these patterns of dysfunctional behavior 'generational sin'. The Church can provide – through small group ministries and vulnerable preaching – opportunities for all of us to see other families functioning at other levels of functionality. By seeing other families who function differently, we see our own dysfunction. In this way, the Church can become a people who all heal together.

Consider sharing both legacies of sin and holiness that you have inherited from your own family, to illustrate God's charge in Exodus 20:5-6. Holiness can be a legacy that extends to the thousandth generation.

WEEK 6 – JUDAS

BIG IDEA: Faithfulness to the wrong god is as good as betrayal. Only by following Jesus to the Cross can we see God fully.

KEYTEXTS: Mark 14:1-10; Mark 8:22-34

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: Assuming Judas was simply evil doesn't make sense out of why he tried to give the money back or hanged himself. But Mark gives us a clue to why Judas would decide to betray Jesus in Mark 14. At a feast hosted by a former leper named Simon, Jesus is anointed by a nameless woman. We're told she uses nard, and Jesus announces that she's prepared his body for burial.

Tensions during Holy Week were running high. And to all those who thought Jesus was their conquering Messiah, it looked like Jesus was giving up, surrendering to the Romans and accepting that he would soon meet the same fate as all the other would-be Messiahs: crucifixion.

Using a strange healing story, Mark warned us in chapter 8 that the disciples would misunderstand. Jesus healed a blind man, but it took two tries. The first time, the man could see, but only blurry objects. The second time, he could see clearly. Following that healing comes the confession at Caesarea Philippi, where the disciples realize for the first time that Jesus is the Messiah. Coming halfway through Mark's gospel, they have been healed the first time. They see (that Jesus is the Messiah), but not clearly (because they think he is a conquering king, not a servant who will die). It will take the Cross for them to see Jesus clearly. But Judas won't make it there. He tried to force Jesus' hand, put his conquering Messiah in a position that he had to defend himself. And when Jesus was arrested and sentenced to death, Judas realized his terrible mistake. He didn't make it to the cross because he was too faithful to the wrong God.

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND: The most alluring idols are not the statues of ancient gods. They're the pictures of God that are just slightly off from true. The Jesus who promises us health and wealth. The God who promises us we'll always be on top. The Messiah who only died for me and mine. In other words, the gods who fit neatly into our cultural expectations of who we think God is. Like the disciples, when we are too committed to these gods, we can't hear the voice of the true God, even when he's telling us point-blank that he's going to be crucified.

As you prepare, consider exploring what vulnerability looks like in your own life, and how you make space for God to challenge you.

WEEK 7 – SATAN

BIG IDEA: Christians who refuse to extend God's grace to others are truly satanic.

KEY TEXTS: Revelation 12:1-17; Matthew 9:9-13; 1 Peter 5:6-9

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: Most congregants will be unaware of the origins of the Lucifer myth. First constructed by Origen around 200 CE, the Lucifer myth uses verses out of context to place the War in Heaven before the creation of humanity. But the Bible suggests a different story. The Satan appears in three places in the Old Testament, in each place functioning as a sort of divine prosecuting attorney. ('Satan' is a Hebrew word that means 'Accuser'). The Satan's function was to record the sin of humanity and prosecute them before the divine court.

This is the figure John the Revelator sees as an enormous Leviathan in Revelation 12. It threatens the woman – a symbol of Mary and Israel – and her child, who is Jesus. The child is born, then immediately caught up to Heaven – the whole of Jesus' earthly life compressed into half a verse. It is this that triggers the war in Heaven. Why? After Jesus' resurrection, there is now 'no condemnation' for those in Christ. The Accuser is out of a job. This is a failure of grace – an attitude Jesus faced again and again in his earthly ministry.

In the Old Testament, Satan is 'the Accuser'. In the New Testament, he becomes 'the Devil', a Greek word that means 'deceiver'. The Accuser could only tell the truth – God's justice was perfect. But now, he is no longer in heaven and is a liar. Because we are in Christ, all the devil can do is lie to us, convince us we and others are unworthy of God's grace.

CONTEMPORARY BACKGROUND: Often the most religious among us are the least interested in welcoming those far from God. There's a particular impulse in religion that makes us forget we are as in need of God as anyone else. The devil builds pedestals for us, lie by lie, and we happily climb up on top so we can look down and judge those we consider different from us.

Entire groups of people have been excluded by the Church, made to feel unwelcome and unloved, unworthy of God's grace. We would do well to reflect on those we would deny a place at the table - and remember those with whom Jesus chose to eat

The preacher might consider sharing a way they have struggled to welcome those who are different from us. Hopefully your church has a story of how you have created a safe, welcoming and judgment-free space for those outside the Church. Share these stories. Celebrate what it looks like when both the sinners and the Pharisees dine together around God's table.