

## YOUR ADVERSARY

## I.) YOUR ADVERSARY

I wonder how many people here actually believe that they have a non-human adversary who is both powerful and dangerous. Some of you have lived lives of such quiet competence, or have been born into circumstances of such harmony and blessing, that the thought of adversarial living – the contemplation of life as a struggle or a battle against dark forces – is simply alien to your experience. And having found such favor yourself, it does not cross your mind that millions of other humans do not experience the harmony or blessings that you count on. If so, I'm afraid you will have to sit this sermon out.

The rest of us, I surmise, *have* run into opposition in one form or another throughout our entire lives. We have found ourselves in troublesome relationships or in competition with other people. We have had various sorts of struggles within ourselves, some of them severe. We have been in wars where it became overtly obvious that some people were shooting *at* us, and others *with* us. Some of us have been in other kinds of wars: movements for racial justice, or efforts to feed hungry people, improve education, reverse ecological disasters, and on and on. Some of us can even remember trying to defend ourselves, our friends, or our siblings from some form of injustice as far back as the first or second grade.

The rest of us know that we struggle, at least from time to time, with adversaries. And sometimes the opposition cannot be explained by the negative influence we can identify in the world around us. Some days it seems to many of us that life is hard enough just taking it straight, and we wonder why we have to have adversaries. Why don't we all just cooperate more and help each other? Why don't all forces in all of creation cooperate for the good of the whole – for the benefit of everybody? Why would anything or anyone wish to make things more difficult than they already are? Who has so much leisure time and so few interests that they can sit around with nothing better to do than make trouble for the rest of us? The problem is that we have all run into some people who seem to be like that. Apparently God is not the only one who "calls" us; some people seem to get their vocatio from the dark side.

## YOUR ADVERSARY

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Regardless of why, most of us know by now that with every good endeavor, we run into an adversary. Whether in our attempts to grow and develop and fulfill our own lives, or in trying to establish a career, build a family, or accomplish some purpose of justice or compassion or improvement for our surroundings or the society we live in, something always struggles against it. We run into opposition, inside and out. Something tries to block us, tries to undo our efforts, ridicules the approach, turns people against us, discourages us, or even frightens us. Why is that? Are you sure it is wisdom to go on pretending that it's only your imagination? Who or what is the adversary? The old wisdom said: If you do not name your adversary, you have no chance to win through – no chance to reach any of your goals. Do any of you dare to name your adversary?

This is a serious sermon to begin Lent this year. I do not want it to be said that I was here among you as your pastor but was never willing to tell you what we are up against. So here we go.

I will admit that it is a dangerous thing to name our adversary. Once the enemy knows we know, the battle escalates. Yet it is far more dangerous *not* to name the adversary. Unnamed, the enemy can backbite, sabotage, lie, cheat, and steal at will and we never catch on to what is happening until it's too late. Many times, however, we name the adversary and realize afterward that we have only named a minor player in the drama or only one of many strategies being used against us. No worthy opponent uses only one strategy against us. But whenever possible, we like to think of our troubles as coming at us one at a time. We like to imagine that with a little thoughtfulness and effort, we can overcome whatever is going wrong. It is more *comfortable* to think that way, even if not very effective. I mean, if we saw the full warfare, we would have to look for a Savior, and you know how we hate to do *that*. (“Please, Daddy, I’d rather do it myself.”) Yet when did any of us win through for good and for all? When did we overcome all our trials, struggles, and problems? When was it we looked around and realized that we had it made, that the warfare was over, that the adversary would never trouble us or win another round ever again?

So we name one person we are having trouble with, or we name one inner fear, or we name one problem we are having at home or at work – and then we try to pretend that if we can just take care of that one thing, then everything will be all right. It is one of the most famous phrases of our kind: “then everything will be all right.” “If I can just get through tomorrow [or this one meeting, or this next project], then

everything will be all right.” (Peace on earth. They lived happily ever after.) It is called “denial” and it keeps us in our SIN (alienation), just as when an alcoholic refuses to admit that he or she has a problem. As long as the denial lasts, the drinking lasts.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, since I mentioned the comparison, the adversary is clear and specific. In the passage from the Big Book that is read to open every meeting (chapter five, page 58), there is this intriguing sentence: “Remember that we deal with alcohol – cunning, baffling, powerful!” And some of us learn to add, under our breath, “and patient.” You see, now we know what we are up against. But the Scripture reading goes further ...

### II.) YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL

Our New Testament passage for today is not content to explain all the mayhem in terms of our own troubles and mistakes and inadequacies alone, and not even if we add the troubles and mistakes of all the other people around us. It puts it quite succinctly and unequivocally: It does not just say “*your adversary*.” It says “*your adversary the devil*.” Do any of you really think that Jesus did not believe in, encounter, or experience the Devil? I wonder how many people here today actually believe they have an adversary greater than all the lesser enemies and struggles and issues they face – an adversary who *uses* all of the lesser adversaries and issues, yet who is greater than all of them put together.

Some people do not want to speak of Satan or the Devil for fear it will make them seem kooky or superstitious in the eyes of others. Some of us do not name Satan or the Devil because we are afraid it will turn into an excuse: “The Devil made me do it.” And then we are afraid we will slough off our own responsibilities and no longer try as hard as we can. At least this is what we say overtly. The truth is that the inner being hates to conclude that Satan is real and that we really have such an adversary. It is too frightening to contemplate. It means our *need* – our plight – is far greater than we thought.

So I suspect that the real truth is actually the other way around: People who do not take Satan seriously do not take the rigors of the spiritual life seriously either. They have a relaxed attitude toward evil. They can pay attention to prayer, the Bible, and the church, and maybe work the disciplines Jesus taught us – when they feel like it, if they happen to be in the mood. And if not, they think nothing very serious will happen as a result. The fellowship of the church is nice; it’s a good thing for people to band together, to care about each other,

to worship and play and pray together, and even to teach their children some of the basic Christian values – when it’s convenient. And if not, nothing very serious will happen as a result. I mean, it’s not like it really and truly matters. It’s not like it’s a matter of life and death.

For instance, I have tried to gather our members into Disciple Bands and have even encouraged them to come on spiritual-life retreats. Many have responded and I am grateful for that, and we have had some good retreats and very helpful Disciple Bands. But many of our members just figured, “Well, do I or don’t I feel like doing this?” Do you understand what’s going on? We have been heightening the spiritual awareness around here, and that means we are in a battle, like it or not. You think Satan is going to watch us turn into a redemptive community of faith and love and not try to stop it? We are too small for Satan to care about, of course; everybody knows that what matters is big numbers. What are twelve disciples, in the larger scheme of things? What is one man going to a cross, in the larger scheme of things?

Guess again! It turns out that **WE REALLY NEED EACH OTHER, AND IN ANY REAL CHURCH, WE REALLY NEED JESUS THE CHRIST.** We never know how long we have to build the bonds, but it is never long enough. So I have said to you in various ways: “Please help us to build up this faith community.” The truth is, I have been getting more help than I ever expected, and I am exceedingly grateful for it. But I have been under attack from many quarters, and I have needed the rest of you to come help too. And don’t you know what has happened in our country? The church has been growing weaker and weaker, and fewer and fewer of us are committed to the Path or to living out the disciplines of the Christian Life. What kind of alarm bells have to ring before Christians rally and get serious about following Jesus again – for real?

At times, Satan is able to turn even loyal friendships and love to his own ends. But they are still among his toughest customers. If they are true and patient, they have a way of rising out of the mayhem and working for God despite everything Satan can do. So build up the church, build the bonds, make friends with each other in Jesus’ name. You are going to need each other. And always we all need Jesus the Christ. We do not need more human wisdom; we need Jesus the Christ.

In any case, many Christians seem to take the Devil with a grain of salt, so to speak. An old New England saint used to chuckle and say, “If you do that, the Devil will return the favor.” Meaning, he will put salt on you and gobble you up, tasty morsel that you have made of yourself. Nevertheless, many of the people I know do not believe in the battle. They do not really believe there is a spiritual battle going on here – a battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Why is it that I see this battle going on everywhere I look? Some folk get so weary or discouraged they can hardly see straight, and still they do not name the real adversary. They do not identify with this bit about “*your adversary the devil.*” They imagine themselves living “in the middle” somewhere – living on neutral ground. So they are not living “at the ready.” They are not “on alert.” They do not expect a struggle or an attack at any moment or under any circumstances, dark or light. So they have no particular religion, by my definition. Or they gravitate toward one of the religions that does not believe in Satan. Or they go into standard churches but maintain for themselves a sleepy, comfortable approach – with minor spiritual disciplines and half-hearted measures – while keeping a camp with no sentries posted.

After all, with no real enemy except ignorance and bad luck, a reasonable caution and a little common sense should do well enough, don’t you think? At work, at play, in our relationships, and in our efforts to do good or be helpful, it ought to be sufficient just to give it an honest try – to do a little bit when and where we can. But no “all night in prayer.” No fasting. No full-hearted conversion or commitment. No daily discipline of humility and study and prayer and forgiveness and thanksgiving. Don’t you think ten percent of our income is a little strenuous and inconvenient? After all, the church of Jesus Christ is perfectly adequate as it is – against a symbolic or nonexistent foe – so two percent is more than generous. Why should the church of Jesus Christ need resources anyway?

In AA, the enemy is named. It is alcohol. In AA, the desire to drink is the temptation of the Devil. Salvation means being saved from this Devil. All the steps and promises and all the hopes for a new and better life depend on finding release from bondage to this Devil. Many times, having named the enemy, it still takes considerable time to find some escape, some release. But it is always a surprise – fascinating and disconcerting – to realize that for some extended period of time, *we believed alcohol was our friend!* We were convinced that it was doing wonderful things for us. So naturally, we were not marshaling any forces against it, since it was the welcome friend. Just like some

of you still think that pride, self-confidence, and being independent are your friends. And I did just name the things that work against love, fellowship, friendship, conversion, and giving our lives to God. It is called SIN – alienation from God – which is what leads to alienation from ourselves and from each other.

It is obvious, yet ever new, that the Devil never acts like the Devil. The Devil always smiles and talks and acts like a friend for as long as possible. It is a classic theme since the dawn of time that, over and over, we humans travel a long way with the Devil before we even suspect that something is amiss. Sometimes nearly everyone around us can see the ugly reality, but we are still hypnotized by the smile. (“Oh, you really told ’em that time ... That was really brave and courageous of you ... Nobody can tell *you* what to do ... You have to stand up for your rights ... A casual affair once in a while really puts spice back into a marriage, you know ... I don’t have time for morning prayers; I can get myself plenty well-tuned to God while I’m driving to work. *You stupid, incompetent, twerp – watch where you’re going! Who taught you how to drive? Okay God, now where were we?*”)

So is alcohol really cunning? It sits there in a bottle, inert – just a chemical composition minding its own business. Is alcohol baffling? Is there really very much we do not know about it? In some ways, it’s one of the more predictable substances on earth. It will treat you pretty much the same way every time, with only minor variations along the way. Is alcohol powerful? In kind of a reverse way. It surely has enormous impact on our society.

Alcoholics personify it, just like many of you feel Christianity personifies the forces of evil. And it works much better when we do. We have an adversary out there. For alcoholics, it waits and watches – like a cunning, powerful, living being – for any careless moment, for just one split second of pride or self-control. For me, it does not terrorize me in the least anymore; it’s no problem at all – unless I forget: forget that it is waiting for me, plotting and planning – waiting for me to neglect the steps, get careless with the principles that helped me, get forgetful of the Higher Power who saved me, get overconfident, get in the right mood (“I can handle it,” or “What difference does it make?”).

You don’t think alcohol is cunning, baffling, powerful, and patient? You think it’s just liquid in a bottle? This liquid in a bottle has destroyed the lives of millions of people. As a killer, it is always among the top three. Alcoholics who do not personify it do not recover.

Just as Christians who do not personify Satan do not recover, because they do not take the full Message and program of the Christian Faith to heart – they do not take it seriously. Alcoholism has every mark and trace of Satan’s ways and principles all over it. I name the outer manifestation of my enemy so that I know what I am up against, and I stop kidding around with the battle. That outer manifestation may seem foolish and small, but if I once identify it with the true enemy, then I know what I am up against, and I know that no half-measures will work. Shouldn’t every Christian know that about Satan?

Let me ask you something: How do you explain God’s compassion? Why do you suppose God keeps offering us such deep and incredible mercy and grace and forgiveness? Do you ever wonder why God would send the Son into such an ordeal as Good Friday? It is said that Jesus was sent out of love and concern for us. If there is no Satan – if it is merely our own stubborn, willful blindness and rebellion – *why* is God so compassionate?

Some people do not have very much compassion or pity when they see others in trouble. Oh, there’s a twinge of compassion here or there, but in many cases it is shallow and short-lived. I suspect it’s because they do not believe in Satan. They explain the trouble or hunger or hurt in human terms alone, and they think people would be fine if they would just wake up and try a little harder. They have no real appreciation for what people are up against. But Jesus does. And historically, the Christian church has known it too. That is why it has seen itself as the product of – and known itself as the Message-bearer of – God’s mercy. God is not compassionate because humans are just being a little spoiled and naughty; a judgmental, punishing God would do just fine, if that were the extent of our problem. God is compassionate because we have an adversary of great cunning and skill. And God knows we need all the mercy and grace and forgiveness and second chances and HELP we can get.

### III.) YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL PROWLs

We each call it as we see it. Anything else would be coercion. So I don’t know how you see it, but I know how this passage in First Peter sees it: *“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. [Have you ever seen anyone devoured? In so many different ways, and all your lives long.] Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.”* (NRSV) Sounds like bad news, but it makes

my heart sing! What a relief to know it's not only me. So *that's* what's going on, and I am not alone. Satan is tracking *all of us*, all the time. We are being tempted to throw it all away, or go be self-centered and self-indulgent for a while, or just relax and take it easy and try to live the good life for ourselves. And that's only the beginning – the seemingly harmless first whispers of the Evil One. How nice to know. It is therefore important to me – immensely important – that my brothers and sisters in the faith do not quit or give up, but that they stay in the battle, train all the time, and keep trusting in God. And even though sometimes it doesn't seem like it very much, it must be important to *them* that I stay faithful too. (Not “get perfect” – stay faithful.)

When your children go off to school in the morning, do they expect the Devil to be prowling around, looking for somebody unwary? Naturally we do not want them frightened or troubled or overly concerned about such things, do we? Well, maybe a *little* concerned wouldn't hurt – about drugs, strangers, sex, and not doing their homework. So you talk about those things with them. But seeing themselves on a spiritual Path and being instant suckers for Satan if they step off of it? Is that also what you teach your children? And do you shield them and teach them how to trust the Holy Spirit?

When you got married (those of you who have been married), did you consciously realize that the moment you made vows of love, Satan would take that as a relationship challenge and make it difficult, turn it bad, and ruin it entirely if he possible could? Satan hates relationships. When you go to work in the morning, do you think your only adversaries are idiot drivers or the bad moods of fellow workers? When you try to help somebody – from a personal friend, to the homeless, to improving the community, to joining some group that is going to save the environment – do you think it will go easily, that everybody who understands will help, that you will not run into an adversary of great skill and cunning?

Satan has many wiles – many ways to tempt, discourage, distract, and undo us. It is my growing conviction that Satan's chief and constant purpose is to weaken and destroy relationships whenever and wherever he can. I don't think Satan cares who we work for, what we are trying to accomplish, or which nation, race, religion, political persuasion, or sexual orientation we belong to. Satan knows that if he can just disrupt and destroy our relationships, he will have accomplished his purpose. If God is the God of love, what will best serve the purposes of the chief antagonist of God's Kingdom? Duh!

Have any of you ever had problems keeping any of your relationships open, whole, loving, and healthy? Our adversary works constantly to weaken, confuse, and if possible *destroy* our relationships. And does this adversary play fair? Does Satan have qualms about telling lies, misrepresenting things, sowing suspicion, watching for when we are overtired or afraid or lonely or stressed? If you pray five days in a row and skip the sixth, when do we suppose Satan is most likely to be whispering in your ear? I don't mean to imply that relationships are Satan's only target – just the primary one.

You can explain some of it; so can I. But how does the opposition get so focused, so consistent, so persistent? Why does it feel so organized and frequently seem aimed at our most vulnerable points? We cannot do everything at once, so there is always a vulnerable spot. We can do things well for months, even years, and suddenly, just when we start to relax, it all starts to unravel. Why is that?

It is hard to get used to the spiritual warfare, isn't it? Truly it is not fair. I can stay sober for a year or two or ten, but if in a careless moment I take one drink, I am back to the old life again. I can be loving, patient, thoughtful, and caring to my wife for six months running, but in one moment of anger or accusation or unfairness, it all goes back to square one. She will no longer know that she is loved, and we have to repent, forgive, and learn trust and caring all over again.

Satan prowls. Whether you personify him or not, he is cunning, baffling, powerful, and patient. Any discipline you do not build into your WAY, your temperament, your very lifestyle, Satan will eventually steal or ruin: from the weight you want to lose, to the good thoughts you want to think, to the purposes you want to live for. Yet how can we stay disciplined all the time? We cannot. Somewhere along the line, we have to start wanting and valuing sobriety more than drunkenness. We have to start wanting and valuing love more than being right or safe or independent. That is what the Spirit eventually does for us: leads us into a New WAY.

So we are not defenseless if we do not wish to be. If we practice the disciplines and keep growing in faith and hope and gratitude and humility, Satan will not have an easy time knocking us off the Path. We also know who to call on for help and guidance, if Satan has not stolen our faith. Always, if we stop to notice, the Holy Spirit is there, trying to help and encourage and guide us. But always, your adversary

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the Devil is prowling about, waiting for a careless moment or “an opportune time.” He did with Jesus, if you remember the story. And you think you will escape his efforts?

YOUR ADVERSARY THE DEVIL PROWLs. Life is more than a one-act play with ten good guys and two bad guys. And you can win against Satan over and over and over and he *still* owns the game. So I hope we are not just playing parlor games with the LIFE that Jesus has invited us into.

Did you know that there are people who go to AA, work the steps, and then go back to drinking? There are even people who go into treatment centers and go back to drinking after they come out. Why would a person go into a treatment center if they liked their life the way it was? That is almost as foolish as going to a Christian church if you already like your life the way it is. Anyway, these people know they have a drinking problem, and by their own admission they do not like themselves or their lives under the increasing influence of alcohol. Yet after they get free, they go back to the way it was. I was just wondering if you knew this, and if you ever thought about the significance of it – about what it means.

The ancient formula says: “Jesus came to save us from sin, death, and the Devil.” We have every reason to be confident and joyful and certain of the outcome – but not if we are asleep or fail to call upon Him. “*Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.*” I would just as soon it not be any of you.

Your adversary. Name it.

Your adversary the Devil. Know it.

Your adversary the Devil prowls ... just waiting for any opportune moment ... cunning, baffling, powerful, and patient. Never forget it.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THIS DOCUMENT AND ANY RECORDING  
ARE DUE TO COMBINING REWORKED VERSIONS OF THIS SERMON  
INTO ONE DEFINITIVE TEXT VERSION.

SUPPLEMENT I

For many years now I have had a recurring experience: I get into a conversation with some person who assures me that they have never had a spiritual experience – that the Holy Spirit simply does not talk to them. A few days or weeks later, this same person tells me about a fairly dramatic encounter, or sometimes even several encounters, when God was close, helping them, making it clear that God cared about them.

Similarly, but not as much fun, I talk to people who tell me they do not believe there is a Devil – that there is no sentient being who works to undo them, discourage them, or make them feel worthless, unloved, or useless. They live pretty happy, satisfying, comfortable lives – they say. And that, of course, is wonderful.

These people do not often reverse themselves and tell me they now believe in Satan, but we do get into further conversations as time goes on, and sometimes they tell me about the other side of life. Things are not always pleasant or hopeful or satisfying, and they are in deep spiritual warfare – trying to keep from going into despair. They do not use my language and they seldom realize they are under satanic attack, but from my perspective, the marks of Satan’s influence are all around them.

I did not grow up believing in the Devil either. “The Devil” was a euphemism we used to refer to our own mistakes and blunders, and sometimes it was an excuse we used to explain what seemed inexcusable in the behavior of ourselves or others. Liberal Christians tend not to personify the Devil – or the Holy Spirit either, for that matter. It is one of the reasons they so often have lackluster spiritual lives, and lackluster commitments to go with them. Of course, they often have exciting lives in the area of social justice or environmental awareness.

Somewhere in the chaos and concerns of pastoral counseling in my first parish, I began to notice a strange phenomenon. Every time a person had a spiritual breakthrough, became aware of something or someone they truly loved, or came awake to what they really wanted to spend their life working on, they got “hit.” Something tried to make them turn away from their new awareness. Something tried to tell them they were being stupid or unrealistic. Something wanted them to know that this was not possible; that they were unworthy; that it was just a passing mood or phase, or maybe something they ate.

Something tried to convince them they needed to go back to the way life was before the breakthrough.

At first I thought it was just a coincidence. But I started paying closer attention and keeping a better log on what I thought I was seeing. It was not occasional – it was every time! Eventually it opened up a whole new world for me. I was raised a Quaker, and I already believed in the Holy Spirit. From my perspective and experience, the evidence was and is everywhere. But I had not realized that we also have an adversary. How I could miss that, after reading about Jesus' experience in the wilderness, I do not know. But I had missed it. We are supposedly followers of Jesus, and it is clear and obvious that Jesus believed in Satan and took Satan very seriously. But I had missed it.

So for those who tell me today that they have never experienced spiritual warfare, I don't believe it. I will try to be polite if you tell me that it is true for you, but I don't believe it. I have been around too long and have seen too much. Wondrous and wonderful people have talked to me in the pastor's study for too many years now. All the coins have two sides. Where there is light, there is shadow, at least in this realm. When we go to our prayers, we encounter not only the Holy Spirit but also Satan. There is always more than one voice trying to influence us. Because of Jesus we do not have to be afraid of such encounters, but there is every reason for us to be alert, aware, and eager to stay faithful. I suspect that is a good summary of the Scripture passage we read today.

We are on the Christian Path together, and one of the best and most helpful parts of that Path is that we get to be honest and supportive of each other. That is not possible if we sweep our trials, our mistakes, or our fears under the rug. So let me assure you that by whatever language or vocabulary we use, we have all experienced the adversary in one form or another throughout our entire lives.

SUPPLEMENT II

As everybody knows: Liberals are optimists, and conservatives are pessimists. Liberals are compassionate (“bleeding hearts” is the way it is often put), and conservatives are stingy and tight. Of course, what “everybody knows” is very seldom true or right. “All general statements are false, including this one.” On the other hand, it really is true that “things are more the way they are today than they have ever been before.”

If I thought that what “everybody knows about Christianity” were really true, I would definitely become a Buddhist. On the other hand, if I thought that what most Americans “know about Buddhism” were really true – well, this is fast becoming complicated. We all realize that labels can be misleading. But misconceptions often remain popular enough to keep the rumors alive. So I have reminded you to be careful, because I am about to indulge in some generalities.

Most liberal Christians – and yes, I do know some exceptions – do not like to think about Satan. They do not like any constructs which suggest that some people are evil; that some penalties are just and necessary; that sometimes we need to go to war; that sometimes we need to reject and separate from some people; that sometimes exclusivity is more godly than inclusivity. And liberal Christians seldom understand or agree with one of Jesus’ major principles (using the language of AA): “Attraction, not promotion.”

At this point you may be thinking that this is a strange array of disjointed and disconnected comments. And they are, except that they have a common source: the existence of Satan. Liberal Christians have a tendency to discount evil. They do not take evil very seriously. Some of them explain evil in different terms: evil is the result of a bad environment, inadequate education, or poverty. Liberal Christians think Jesus was in favor of being good to people and helping people, but they do not believe that Jesus is the Savior. That is, they do not think we need “saving” in any theological sense. They actually believe that if we gave everybody enough money, opportunity, education, food, clothing, and shelter, evil would disappear from the earth. If you don’t believe me, listen to the rhetoric; pay attention to the design of the appeals and programs they sponsor. They do not think people need Jesus. They do essentially nothing to bring people to Jesus. They believe in money, education, food, shelter, health care, economic opportunity, and the like. Well, such things are surely important; everyone would like to

have them. But letting them usurp the place of God? That is maybe not such a good idea.

Most of us come out of liberal backgrounds, so our first reaction is to respond favorably to most any plan or effort that claims the intention to help people. And some of you are already saying to yourselves: Jesus *apart* from money, education, food, shelter, health care, and economic opportunity is of no help, is of no value, and is quite irrelevant. There are no real Christians; there are only “rice Christians” – that is, if you don’t feed people, they cannot hear the Gospel. Over the years, many people have told me, sometimes with considerable heat and forcefulness, that this is the truth. In other words: Jesus was wrong. Man *does* live by bread alone. Or at least the bread has to come first. There is no salvation from sin, death, or the Devil. Jesus died on the Cross to increase our material prosperity. Unsure how to connect that up, most liberal Christians do not have much to say about the Cross either. But they do have a lot to say about feeding the hungry and giving money to help the poor.

There is an alternate religion living inside many of the structures and constructs of the Christian church in our time. When it is named, it is most frequently called “humanism.” It believes that all true power and true potential reside in humans, and that if any good is to be done, it will be done by humans. Christianity would, of course, see this as idolatry. Humanism is a religion of its own. As such, it has as much right as any other religion to seek followers, make its bid for influence in our world, and win the hearts and minds of any who are persuaded by it.

But humanism is a parasite in our culture. It lives in the structures and organizations that were originally built for Jesus. It uses the money and devotion and caring that were called forth by Jesus. It has twisted the goals and purposes of Christendom away from Jesus and toward its own purposes. Of course, that is what parasites do. No cowbird apologizes for using the nests of other birds, for killing their young, or for letting the parents of a different species labor to support and raise their cowbird chicks. The rule is: if you are stupid enough to let them get away with it, then the parasites will thrive while you grow weaker and weaker. The liberal church is the Kirtland’s warbler of our time, endangered both by habitat loss and because they are busy raising cowbird chicks instead of their own young. (I would tell you more about this parable, but you can doubtless fill in the details for yourselves.)

In any case, humanism believes that the belly is more important than the soul, and that material benefit is of greater value than spiritual development. Since physical well-being is the highest purpose in life, people who believe in prayer, who worship God, or who think obedience to some Holy Spirit is more important than pleasing people are obviously deluded. And anybody who believes in Satan is ludicrous and should be laughed to scorn.

Most of you know that I think Satan is very real. Satan is a sentient being from spiritual realms. I do not think all the mythology that surrounds Satan is accurate in some documentable way. The tail, the pitchfork, and the horns would make it very difficult for Satan to maneuver effectively among us. I suspect we all have unanswered questions about Satan, and about how the realities of temptation and evil that we experience have come to be the way they are. But that is small reason to get careless or to turn away from the subject entirely. Clearly Jesus and all of His first-century followers took Satan very seriously. They assumed that Satan was one of the “principalities and powers” with whom they had to contend. They further assumed that Satan’s wiles were never an excuse for any of their behavior, but they equally assumed that without God’s presence and help, they did not have much chance against the Devil.

SUPPLEMENT III

It can be quite irritating to be discussing, for instance, the sociological factors that seem to be contributing to the relentless breakdown of the public school environment in our inner cities. What can be done? What can we do to alter this situation where more and more of the youth of our country are growing up in an environment that fights against their personal welfare and against the welfare of the society? Where all the forces around them lead to immorality, irresponsibility, a lack of self-esteem, and a future devoid of security or peace at home, at work, in community, and in personal life? The very institution of public education upon which our democracy based its hope of a well-educated and responsible populace has now turned into a breeding ground of violence, drugs, abuse, despair – the destruction of all personal and social values. It can be annoying to be trying to have a concerned conversation about such a serious situation and then have somebody sum it all up as “the work of the Devil.” And yet ...

And yet it is precisely satanic that the institution our culture has built as the bulwark and training ground for our entire society – built at enormous expense of time, dedication, and resources across the land every single year, and a thing almost every one of us participates in – should turn out in so many places to be working against the very purposes for which it was intended.

The fact is that many high schools are wonderful for the majority of their students. Imperfect in an imperfect world, they nevertheless make marvelous contributions to the lives of their students and to society year after year. The fact is also that this is not the case in East Los Angeles or in Chicago or even in some other nearby high schools we know. For every one student graduating from an uplifting and fulfilling experience, how many are dropping out or have been trained in reverse of all we had hoped? Fifty? A hundred? If you were going into battle with the odds 100 to 1 against you, would you be concerned? That is exactly what our society is doing: going into battle for the survival and prosperity of our culture with odds 100 to 1 against it. And *every year* the forces of hope and contribution get one recruit for every one hundred recruits going to the opposition – to the forces of despair, anarchy, and destruction. How long will the society survive? (Remember, the recruits keep coming.) And what does any of it have to do with Satan?

That is not the whole story, of course. Along the way, some of the troops get converted. They switch sides. And in real life, most of the troops are a mixed bag, living sometimes and in some ways for good and at other times and other ways for evil. Some people see the mission of the church as a way to gather people of good intentions so they can pool their resources and try to help: give money to the poor; reeducate the willing; call attention to the ills of society so that people will rally and vote, write letters, and make a difference.

And as you know, I consider it to be the primary mission of a church to be a faith community in the midst of society – a place where people who become aware of the full extent of the battle (inside and out) can come to study, to share, and to support each other as they themselves increasingly leave the ways and methods of a world run on self-will, despair, and rebellion (alienation from God). Or, if you like it the other way around (which I do): a church is a place for people who respond to the reconciliation offered in Jesus Christ – people who run to the ways of mercy, of grace and peace, of obedience and humility.