

“Beyond Illusion”

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I'm a child of the '70s, and in the '70s we had a whole lot of changes taking place. The 1960s seemed to be an innocent and naïve time, but by the '70s, everything seemed to be bitter and cynical. You look at the 1960s and you have the glories of the space race. Science was going to do everything. What did the 1970's have? Watergate. The 1960s had economic growth. The 1970s had the recession and a gas shortage. The 1960s had Woodstock and everybody having free love and joy and happiness. The 1970s gave us Altamont, where the Rolling Stones were playing and the Hell's Angels killed people. That was the end of the large concert movement. This bitterness and pessimism created an environment ripe with fear and angst; so it is not surprising all of the things that came out of the 1970s.

One of the things that developed in the late 1960s but really boomed in the 1970s was the Church of Satan started by Anton LaVey, a carnival act guy. He had an idea to make himself some bucks and started the whole Church of Satan in Los Angeles, California. It grew, because he was kind of liked what Scientologists are doing today.

In the 1970s he knew that was the way to bring people into the organization was by bringing in celebrities; so Jayne Mansfield - the big pinup girl - was a big part of the church. Sammy Davis, Jr. was part of the church; Liberace was part of the Church of Satan. And then later others, like Marilyn Manson and others became part of this church. But these celebrities helped give legitimacy to this very sick and demented form of religion.

In the 1970s it wasn't just the Church of Satan, it was also all of the movies and TV shows; they almost seemed to be overwhelmed by this fascination with evil and the devil. *The Exorcist* was one of the most profoundly powerful, most-watched movies of all time, all based on the devil. *The Omen* was another amazing, interesting, theologically warped and incorrect idea, but it was huge in the 1970s. *Omen I, II and III*, and I don't know how many *Exorcist* movies there are, there have to be at least 5 or 6. You couldn't make them fast enough, and people would just go. But the theology of this was so bad and they would always put a couple of Scripture passages in there to try to show its legitimacy.

I think the thing I disliked the most about these movies and the whole focus in the 1970s on Satanism or the devil, was all of the power that we as a society, at that time, gave the devil. It isn't biblical. You look anywhere in the Old or New Testaments - the devil is only a puppet of God, and over and over again in the Bible, the devil really didn't do that many horrible things and there was no power.

In *The Exorcist*, for example, the devil really never loses at the end of the movie. (Be careful or I am going to blow this for you.) Father Damien literally throws himself out of a window to die in order to hold Satan in him rather than have it be in the child. The devil never dies because we have four or five more sequels after that. The devil never gets away. The devil on earth seems more powerful than God's presence in the world.

But that is not what we find in Scripture. That's not what we even find in the darkest moments of human history. God always, as well as holding us and faith ethics, always wins out in the end. That is not what we find when we watch these movies and see these situations at work. And often the Church is the worst culprit, because we have given - we being the whole of Christendom - the devil too much power.

Here is what I wanted to explain to you: First, let's just look at the temptation account and see what the devil did and did not do. First he tests by saying to Jesus, "Look at all of these stones." Now, if you have ever been to Israel, they [that country] may not have a lot of water, they may not have a lot of things, but they have a lot of stones. Man, it is a desert full of rocks.

All of these rocks lying around and the devil says, "Why don't you take these rocks and turn them into bread? Then you could eat. You have been fasting for 40 days. The least you could do is eat some bread. And then think about it: You could turn all of these rocks into bread if you really are the son of God; and you could feed the hungry with these." That makes a lot of sense.

Later Judas will say the same things, "Why, Mary, are you pouring all that expensive ointment on Jesus' feet when you could be using that money to feed the poor?"

The temptation isn't, "Are you going to join the Church of Satan and burn in hell, or are you going to join Jesus and go to Heaven?" It is much more subtle, what the devil does. And, it is not evil personified, cruel and eternally damn firing that takes place in the devil's actions. The devil twists lightly. It becomes about intimate interpretation, about how you will live out your faith. It's about the devil trying to guide you and prod you away from a relationship with God, and if you are having a relationship with yourself or with him. It is much more subtle, and we do a disservice to God when we make the devil powerful or too simplistic.

The second temptation portrays the devil as the ruler of the world, who can manage and govern all of the world's kingdoms. Here is where the devil is a liar; he lies saying he has control over the world. A lot of people try to take authority that they don't have unto themselves, by making promises they can't keep. (I mean we are in a political cycle right now, let's face it. We hear a whole lot of people making promises they are never going to keep if they get elected.) Yet, the devil makes it sound so good. "I will give you everything. All you have to do is follow me. I will make it easy on you. You can do it great, Jesus, because you are so special. You can do it better than anybody else, better than any of our elected officials, certainly better than the Roman Empire."

Now, the devil is poking fun at Jesus for allowing the Roman Empire to continue to have authority. "You can have authority, Jesus. Why are you allowing the Roman Empire to have power? They are destroying Christians; they are abusive; they are unethical; they don't have God's goodness in their hearts, so why are you letting them continue to have power? Take power and I will give it to you." That makes a lot of sense and yet Jesus isn't fooled by the lie.

The third test: Finally the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the Temple and says to him, "Throw yourself off and then let God catch you. Then they will know." This isn't the devil

saying, "Commit suicide, Jesus." That isn't what this is about. It was about the devil tempting Jesus to make Jesus be an authority. Then all will worship Jesus.

The problem is, what the devil was doing in this particular lie was tempting Jesus to attack the religious leaders and the Priests in the Temple. And, again, the devil made a lot of sense, because the Temple Priests were corrupt. They were taking money. They were hoarding dollars and making themselves rich in the Temple at the expense of the poor and suffering people of Israel.

So why was the devil wrong? The devil was right. Let Jesus take control. Jesus is faithful. Jesus could turn that corruption of the Temple around. Yet Jesus said, "That is not my role. God will do it in God's way. And [to the devil], "You do not have the right to decide when God will take control over the Temple. In the same way God that had the right to determine - and not you devil - when the Roman Empire will fall. God will decide when I eat my bread, when the poor will be fed, and when justice will reign, and not you, (because your lies do have control over this world.)"

The reason that I bring all of this up is to put the devil in the devil's place. The devil is not the personification of evil with horns and a pitch fork and tail. The devil is the evil that is often very subtle in our world. There are moments of grand, horrid evil like the Holocaust, but most of the time it is much more subtle and seemingly benign. The reason that I want you to know that is - for us to deal with it - because it is in the subtlety where we make our mistakes and we fall to temptation. It requires of us in those temptingly evil moments to be able to pray regularly to seek the Holy Spirit, to make our decisions sacred, so that we don't fall into the true, subtle manipulation of evil.

I will give you an example. You probably have heard about it in the last few days: There is this couple who lived a very wealthy blessed life. Their names are Marty Burbank and his wife Seon. They have been faithful Christian people going to church every week for many years. They have been blessed with a great deal of money, but they also have a real heart for service. They have been going to a kindergarten class and giving of their time as a couple, reading to the children and getting to know them. Over Christmas break, they were at Christmas services and they heard their pastor give a sermon about charity over the Christmas holidays.

It changed the two of them, as a couple. Their plan was to retire early, buy this huge sailboat - like a yacht - and retire and sail everywhere. They had over \$1 million for this yacht. But when they heard that sermon (I would like to get a copy of that. I would like to use it. You need one that works once in a while.), they were so dumbfounded because they realized everything that they had been planning for their retirement was about *them*.

Now, there is nothing wrong if you have the money to buy things for yourself. There is nothing wrong with having a sail boat. If you are tithing and giving your gift, there is nothing wrong with benefiting from what you have earned and worked for.

But, he [Marty] felt, in his heart, a temptation to focus more on himself than others, so he and his wife sat down and talked about what they wanted their legacy to be. Who they wanted to be, and how they could represent Jesus Christ to the world.

When they went back to that kindergarten class to read to those kids and care for them - this class was not in the wealthy area where they lived, but in a very poor area of Anaheim California, in a school where almost none of the parents had ever been to college, in fact in that kindergarten class not one family member of those 26 children had ever been to college - he and his wife [Marty & Seon] decided they were going to take their \$1,850,000, put it in a trust and keep that money available. With interest they would be able to make a promise to these children that when they graduated in 2032, each one of those children would get two years of community college and the final two years at Cal State University. Not just tuition - but room and board and expenses.

They knew that those children were not going to get the financial support to do anything unless they were fully supported, and that is what they [the Burbanks] did.

There will be no sail boat. It may mean they have to work a little longer before they get to retirement, but they decided that their legacy of faith meant it was more important to reach out than to give in. I wouldn't even say that sailboat was a temptation, but maybe it was. But, what happened in that moment was that the Holy Spirit said, "I have a new way, a new call for your life, Marty and Seon Burbank. I have a plan for you where you will feel greater joy than you could ever feel on that sailboat, with that salt water spraying you in the face. You will have changed the lives of 26 children who for the first time in their lives will view themselves as college graduates. They will know that they have that opportunity and they will view themselves differently. Their families will never be the same. You will impact hundreds of lives, perhaps thousands, as others get the idea in their heads and they try."

The subtly of the devil's temptation is to constantly have us focusing on what we individually - in our selfish motivation - need. When we are wondering if we are being tempted, or whether the Holy Spirit is working in us, the question we always ask is: "Is this about me or is it about God? Is this about me or about others?" When the answer becomes "me," I need to drop on my knees and pray, and question my motivation and what is tempting me. When it is about God and reaching out to others, then I know the Holy Spirit is working in and through me - and in and through you.

The devil is not the pontification of evil. The devil can even be a benefit for it shows the way through temptation. It marks our fear and concern for temptation, so that it challenges us back to the Holy Spirit who will take us off the wrong road and move us back to that narrow road of justice, righteousness and love.

Let us, this day, push aside *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* and not worry about our salvation or about our soul being snatched, but about a loving God who says, "Satan, get in those pigs and right off the cliff for saying, 'I answered the three temptations.' Now go away." The devil didn't argue. He turned and left. We need not fear, for we have a God of grace who will take us gently home. Our job is to keep seeking the Spirit and to be guided by God's will.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.