

“Satan? So What?”

Matthew 6:13

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If you are under 35, I want you to imagine you are sitting in a university classroom among many other students and the professor poses this question to just you.

If you are over 35, I want you to imagine you are standing among a large group of your neighbors at a block party and in a voice that everyone can hear one neighbor asks just you the same question.

In both settings the same discussion provoked the question.

Someone retold the account of the woman, as I recall it, who this last week pushed her handicapped son out of a third-story window to kill him because he wasn't as attractive as her other two sons.

She then went to the neighbor's to watch television before checking to make certain he was dead.

As your class or your neighborhood pondered the source of such an evil act you were asked:

“Do you believe in the devil?”

In a nanosecond a flood of thoughts run through your mind.

How do I answer this?

You search for a clever response – but the question was too seriously put.

Some of the people around you know that you are religious and so if you say “no” you run the risk of undercutting your credibility when you say, other times, that you believe in the Bible.

On the other hand if you say “yes” you may be instantly categorized with the Ayatollahs and crazy people who kill their children because the devil made them do it.

In our day and age it is usually only fanatical religious groups that use such exaggerated rhetoric as “devil” or “Satan” or even the word “evil”.

That latter word, “evil”, has seen resurgence in usage in recent years but only in extreme situations and even then it seems oddly out of place such as when President Reagan called the Soviet Union an evil empire and when more recently President Bush used it of the forces behind 9/11.

Pundits were embarrassed by Reagan’s use of the word evil.

But Bush seemed to get by with it because of the heinous nature of the Trade Center and Pentagon attacks.

People don’t know how to account for the holocaust, the genocide of Rwanda/Burundi or the war crimes of Bosnia.

But to credit it to some force called “evil” or worse yet to a “devil” flies in the face of our naturalistic, scientific, closed universe worldview.

M. Scott Peck in his book *People of the Lie* tells of fifteen-year-old Bobby hospitalized for depression.

Bobby’s older brother had killed himself with **a .22 caliber rifle**.

Bobby had almost totally shut the world out by the time Peck saw him.

He was unresponsive to almost all questions.

Shortly after Christmas Peck saw Bobby and attempting to initiate casual conversation asked him what he had received as a favorite present.

After prompting, Bobby finally said he had received a gun.

What kind of gun?

A twenty-two.

A twenty-two pistol?

No, a twenty-two rifle.

After a pause, Peck asked tentatively if he understood correctly that it was with a .22 rifle that Bobby’s brother had killed himself.

Bobby said yes.

Bobby had not asked for a gun for Christmas.

Peck went on to ask, “How did you feel, getting the same kind of gun that your brother had?”

“It wasn’t the same kind of gun,” Bobby corrected him.

Peck said that he felt a little better but said, “I thought it was the same kind of gun.”

But Bobby responded, “It wasn’t the same kind of gun. It was THE gun.” (M. Scott Peck People of the Lie p51)

How could parents be so cruel?

What IS the **source** of such evil?

In our final week of reflecting on the Lord’s Prayer we come to the last request that Jesus teaches us to make in our own praying.

Let’s hear it again in context:

Matthew 6:9-13

“This, then, is how you should pray:

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one. ”

It is that last request that has our attention today:

“lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one.”

What do **you** do with that prayer?

Of all the things Jesus **could have said** we should pray he included this.

Is it reasonable to suggest that Jesus thought it was important? DO WE?

How long since you have prayed for God’s help to withstand temptation?

How long since you have prayed for God to protect you **from the devil?**

Isn't it true that we have largely dismissed from our minds the whole idea of a devil or Satan?

Don't we find it embarrassing to even say the words in any serious way?

So then in Jesus' model prayer he forces us to answer at least two questions:

Is Satan real and if he is, so what?

This time I ask you, "Do you believe in the devil?"

I think I am right to say that many of us don't or at least we don't act or talk as if we believe in him.

- Some of us don't believe the devil exists **because we are ignorant of him** – at least we don't recognize him.
- Some of us don't believe in him because we are **embarrassed by the actions of those who say they do.**
- Some of us don't believe in him because **we don't think it matters.**
- Some of us don't believe because **we don't believe what we can't see.**

For you who don't believe I will **not** attempt to convince you through accounts of the supernatural.

There **is** truly amazing evidence in our world of the existence of Satan and his demons but **all the anecdotal evidence in the world** probably wouldn't convince you.

And for many of us even if we saw it with our own eyes we would not believe – we'd just shake our heads knowing there must be a natural explanation.

We are inclined to say with many in the western world, "Satan is simply **a symbol** for the bad things that happen in life.

He is to religion what Darth Vader is to Star Wars.

And Satan as **a person** is simply the product of ancient superstition and medieval fantasy.

But when Jesus prays the way he does and instructs us to pray the same way, he puts us in a bind.

Let me put it this way:

Do you believe in Jesus or more precisely, **do you believe Jesus?**

Then secondly, **does Jesus believe in the devil?**

Twenty-five times in the gospels Jesus speaks of Satan.

- Matthew 4:1 “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.”
And there it is recorded that Jesus actually engaged the devil in conversational battle.
- In the very Sermon on the Mount that we are studying this year, we hear Jesus saying in Matthew 5:37 “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”
- Instructing his followers on how some people respond to the gospel Jesus included this: Luke 8:12 “Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”
- Then in his prayer to his Father just before his death he pleaded, in John 17:15 “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one

Can we with any integrity say we believe Jesus and reject belief in Satan?

I won’t take the time to show you how the Old Testament declares that Satan is a real person, but I will tell you that every NT writer refers to Satan and he is named in 19 of the 27 books.

- Luke in Acts 5:3 “Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit.”
- Peter in 1 Peter 5:8 “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”
- Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:5 “...Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

- 2 Corinthians 11:3 “But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.”
- 1 Thessalonians 3:5 “I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.”
- 2 Thessalonians 3:3 “But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen and protect you from the evil one.”
- James in James 4:7 “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.
- John in Revelation 20:1-2 “And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven... He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

Can we, with integrity, say we believe the Bible and reject belief in the person of Satan?

May we never again seriously doubt the existence of Satan.

But that raises the second question: “So what?”

The first answer to that is that Jesus takes “the evil one” so seriously that of only six things he mentions, indicating their importance, he teaches us to pray for protection from the evil one. That sounds serious!

He takes Satan so seriously that **in his last prayer** for his disciples **HE** prays that the Father would protect them from the evil one.

John 17:15 “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one

And one of **his ministries to us today** is refuting the accusations of Satan toward us.

Romans 8:34 “Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

The second answer to “So what?” is found in Satan’s designs on us.

1 Peter 5:8 “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

The Bible says that Satan's desires the destruction of our souls.

According to Acts 5:3 he has the power to influence us:

Acts 5:3 "Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit..."

Paul teaches that Satan devises schemes against us.

Ephesians 6:11-12 "Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against ... the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

Jesus said that Satan desires to make you fail.

Luke 22:31-32 "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail."

These are serious matters.

Satan's intentions are not simply to get you to do naughty things.

The temptations of the evil one are not just about the urge to tell a lie, eat some grapes in the produce department, look at a suggestive picture, exaggerate your charitable contributions on your tax forms or stay in bed longer than you should.

It is far more significant than that – temptation at its worst would draw us away from God.

Temptation is not about little indiscretions, it is about our souls.

Like young people who think they are invincible, we too live as if our souls are in no danger.

I have seen too many friends slide ever so slowly away from Jesus.

Jim was an elder in our church, taught the Bible to others, memorized large portions of Scripture, apparently had it all together spiritually.

Ever so slowly Jim slid away –he began rationalizing all sorts of unbiblical behavior BUT he didn't reject Jesus he just adopted other philosophies along with Jesus.

The last I heard he was still a religious man, but he accepted all religions.

I can't remember how many times I have observed people disobeying what to all other Christians is the clear instruction of the Bible and at the same time heard them tell of how much stronger their Christian faith and experience is now.

Deceived! It's the only word for it.

That's why Jesus says "beware", "watch out", "be vigilant".

Our problem is that we don't see it happening!

It is for a reason that Satan is described also as the great deceiver (2 John 1:7), schemer (Ephesians 6:11), liar (John 8:44), and wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15).

Helmut Thielicke wrote,

"There is one thing we must understand clearly, and that is that we hardly ever sever our relationship with God standing up and shaking our fist at heaven... and renouncing God with a planned defiance. As a rule this decision against God is made in a far (less obvious) way; it occurs almost unnoticed..." (Thielicke 120)

The most dangerous temptations are not those we see but those we don't.

In fact **the** most dangerous temptations don't come as temptations at all but as good things to do.

There's nothing in the most dangerous temptation that says, "I'm tempting you to do evil."

No, the very thing that makes it so dangerous is that we led to think it is good, honorable, and even spiritual.

Let me illustrate.

When Satan came to Jesus in the desert to tempt him, he didn't appeal to self-centeredness, or pride or greed.

Satan appealed to Jesus' altruism. He appealed to the very purpose for which Jesus came!

There Jesus was alone, hungry, and in a desert when he was supposed to be the Messiah of the world.

Satan came and said why don't you turn these stones into bread.

Do you realize how quickly you could get a following, how quickly you could achieve your goal of saving the world if you would do that?

Jesus resisted the quick path to his real goal.

Satan came next and said why don't you jump off the temple and have the angels catch you.

What a spectacular demonstration of your power – right there in Jerusalem instead of here in this desert or in that backwater area of Galilee.

They'd make you messiah/king instantly.

Jesus again resisted the wrong way to his purpose.

Finally Satan showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world and offered them to him.

Isn't that exactly what you came for Jesus?

I can give it to you, right now, without the cross, without suffering.

And Jesus resists again knowing no matter how lofty the goal, it must be done according to the Father's will.

Satan didn't offer Jesus obviously sinful choices; he offered him apparently good choices.

His most dangerous temptations come to us in similar forms:

- He suggests to us that this new relationship instead of our spouse will finally allow us to be the person God meant us to be.
- He suggests that saving money (actually hoarding our money) is for the purpose of making certain our children are cared for.
- He leads us to rationalize that buying bigger and bigger homes is the way we can host larger church groups.

- He convinces us that spending the inordinate time we do at work and away from our families and unavailable for service to others is justified by the money we will be able to give to kingdom work.
- He urges us to excessive exercise because our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit and God wants us to take care of them?

Even the very best things of life may be the things that draw us away from God.

We enjoy and spend so much time on our work, our play, our entertainment, and our families that there is no time for reflection on life, on God or on eternity.

It is the good things in life that tempt us most and are most likely to keep us from God.

What is it that Satan uses to draw you away from God?
What good things are slowly eroding your soul?

This is so serious that Jesus tells us to pray.

And the prayer is in two parts both seeking God's intervention.
"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one."

When we pray "Lead us not into temptation" **we are not praying** that God would never bring us to place where we could be tempted.

Clearly the Holy Spirit led Jesus to the desert where he was tempted.

And **we are not praying** that God would never allow us to be tempted because clearly Jesus was led to the desert for that purpose.

And the Bible makes it clear that God will allow that for our good – as hard as the experience may be.

We are also not praying that God would never tempt us to sin because he promised he wouldn't do that (James 1:13).

When Jesus prays "Lead us not into temptation" he is asking the Father to intervene.

He is asking the Father to empower us.

He is asking the Father to support us so that we will not succumb to the temptations.

And when we pray “deliver us from the evil one” we are not asking to be delivered from God’s testing of us but to be delivered from the stranglehold the evil one would put on us if God didn’t intervene. “Don’t let me succumb to temptation and don’t let Satan have his way with me!”

As I alluded earlier, I think there are **two reasons why we don’t take Jesus prayer for protection from the evil one seriously:**

We are ignorant of Satan and his ways and we think we are self-sufficient.

I’ve spoken to the first danger all ready; we will not be ignorant of the evil one if we believe Jesus and the Bible.

But we may still be self-sufficient.

More than 50 years ago a philosopher ruled the day with his atheistic, man-centered pride.

“Live dangerously” was his motto.

By it he was protesting against the status quo, against the safe, comfortable lives of so many who were content with security alone.

A very few years ago another motto with the same protest came along; it was “Carpe Diem” – seize the day!

“Live Dangerously”, “Seize the Day”

But implicit in both mottoes was the throwing off of law and authority and even pushing God aside in order to live life however.

The go-it-alone attitude is that I can handle life and even if I’m wrong, I can withstand the consequences.

No religion, no cross, no forgiveness and no bail-out in the end if I blew it.

We face life on our own, we even submit to temptations with the attitude that we can overpower them whenever we wish.

With the alcoholic we convince ourselves “I can quit any time I choose!”

And because we believe we can handle it ourselves, we don't pray!

But Jesus says that prayer is the primary means of fighting the enemy of our souls.

I have not talked today about exorcism (the deliverance from demons) or even about our active resistance of Satan spoken of in Ephesians 6 (armor) and 1 Peter 5:8 (faith) and other places – that is for other sermons from those texts.

I speak today of our great need for God's intervention and the need for us to ask for it.

“We can never put too much trust in Jesus and we can never put too little trust in ourselves... Jesus directs us to resort to prayer when we meet the tempter, and thus shows us that contact with the Father is the chief means by which to challenge the tempter. Only the Father's hand, which we hold on to, can ward off the devil's onslaught.” (Thielicke 129,127)

I have attempted to paraphrase and expand the prayer as follows:

“Father in heaven lead me today. I will follow you as a sheep follows its shepherd. I don't know what the day holds so I ask that you not let me go where I will be tempted. But if in your plan and by your permission I must be tempted this day, don't let it ruin me, don't let it stain my life, don't let me slip from following you. And Father, keep the Tempter away from me for I know his power and my weakness. And if I must withstand his temptation today, protect me and let the temptation, by your grace, produce in me the fruit you intend – making me more like my Master, Jesus.

Jesus believes in the devil, do we?

Jesus prayed and called us to pray that the Father would protect us from the evil one, do we?

“Father, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.”