

“Old Scratch Bites the Dust”

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Text: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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Saint Anthony wrestled with him. Martin Luther taunted him. John Milton immortalized him in *Paradise Lost*. To the apostle Paul, he was the ruler of this world. He and his helpers figure in the New Testament nearly twice as often as the Holy Spirit. Satan – the Devil – Old Scratch. It’s been suggested that next to Jesus Christ, Satan is the most familiar figure in Christianity.

Who or what do you think of when you hear the word, Devil, Satan? According to classic Christian tradition, the Devil is evil personified in the figure of Satan, an angel created by God whose pride led him to rebel again his Maker. Though he wound up being cast out of heaven into everlasting torment, Satan and his legions of lesser demons were still free to roam the earth, tempting, harassing, and even possessing human beings – especially Christians. Through the serpent, Satan successfully tempted Eve in Paradise and this was instrumental in causing Adam to fall from grace. He also tempted Christ – unsuccessfully – and his grip on humanity was broken by Christ’s death on the cross. Nonetheless, he retained a power that would not be completely quelled until Christ returned to earth at the end of time.

In Decatur, Texas, a church has erected a billboard – “I hate Victory Church” – a message from Satan. Our popular conception of the Devil is a composite drawn from many sources – many are notions that originated outside the Scriptures. The Book of Genesis, for example, does not specifically identify the serpent with Satan, and while we’re told in Job, John, and Revelation that Satan first dwelt in heaven, neither the Old or New Testament contains an account of his origin and fall. Much of the popular belief about that comes from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

So why are we talking about Satan today? Were you listening to the scripture? Jesus is the one that brings up the subject in the 10th chapter of Luke.

The Lord sends advance evangelism teams out two-by-two. While the mission of the twelve disciples represents the church’s mission to the twelve tribes of Israel, this commissioning of 70 others represents the mission to the nations of the world – which according to Jewish tradition, numbered 70 or 72 (some manuscripts even say the Lord appointed 72). So evangelism teams go out in pairs. Now that may seem to be an insignificant assault on the world. They’re sent out in teams not to prevent boredom or to shore up one another’s arguments with the unbelievers, but because together they are the church in mission (co-mission). If they are to do what the church always does, they must be in teams so that they can love one another, pray in and for one another, suffer together, and rejoice together.

Jesus instructs the 70 as He did the disciples in chapter 9 of Luke, they are to go out like persons on an urgent mission, making no advance preparations for their work and carrying nothing that would encumber them as they journeyed. They are not to trouble themselves about matters of eating and drinking, taking whatever is offered them. As I suggested last week, like Blanche duBois in a *Streetcar Named Desire*, they are to depend upon the kindness of strangers. Their message is to be simple – the Kingdom of God is near you. This would alert the truly devoted persons but probably infuriate others. Against the latter, they are to shake the dust off their feet.

Now we’re not told how much time elapse, but the 70 return from their mission in great joy – they’re elated by their success. Laughing, jokes, giving Hi-5’s, “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us.” They report on exorcisms, even though there is no mention of casting out demons in their instructions. The focus is on the evidence of Jesus gaining power over the forces of evil. Yes, Jesus is thrilled as well with this report. “Yes,” he says to the 70, “your ministries are meeting with success. Do you know what that means? It means that you are participating in the overall defeat of the Evil One. It means the Kingdom is coming.”

Then He says it, “While you 70 were out there ministering, I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.” I saw Satan plummet to earth! Where? When? Is this version of Jesus descriptive only of what has happened in the mission of the 70, or of what will happen as the disciples receive the Holy Spirit when Jesus departs and then move that mission to the whole world? Now undoubtedly, the successful mission of the 70 prompts this reply of Jesus, but it’s not a reply confined to their missions only. If we look at the text we notice a mixing of tenses:

Verse 17: The demons submit to us – present.

Verse 18: I watched, literally was seeing Satan fall – continuing past.

Verse 19: Nothing will hurt you – future.

Jesus, therefore, acknowledges and appreciates and rejoices in the successes of the 70, but also sets it into the larger frame of God's reign. Satan has fallen, Satan is falling, and Satan will one day fall for good.

Have you ever seen Satan fall? I have. Haven't you? I have – I saw Satan fall when several of our young people entered the waters of Christian baptism. I saw Satan fall when a husband and wife learned to trust one another again. Do you ever see Satan fall?

Satan loses influence when a young man turns his life over to God at an AA meeting. Satan falls every time you bring someone new with you to worship or share your faith story with someone around you. Satan hits the dirt when we confront and speak out against gossip, or inappropriate humor, or prejudice.

Let me read to you from an article written by a man whose sister is mentally handicapped. He speaks of her leaving for school each morning.

And I watch the bus disappear around the turn and I can't help but remember the jokes. The short bus. The "retard rocket." No matter what she does, no matter how much she loves those around her, she will always be the butt of some immature kid's joke. She will always be the butt of some mature kid's joke. She will always be the butt of some "adult's" joke.

By no fault of her own, she will spend her entire life being stared at and judged. Despite the fact that she will never hate, never judge, never make fun of, never hurt, she will never be accepted. . . . I don't think you understand how much you hurt others when you hate. And maybe you don't realize that you hate. But that's what it is; your pre-emptive dismissal of them, your dehumanization of them, your mockery of them, it's nothing but another form of hate.

. . . I'm [writing] this so that each and every one of you, student or teacher, thinks before the next time you use the word "retard," before the next time you shrug off someone else's use of the word "retard." Think of the people you hurt, both the mentally handicapped and those who love them.

When we speak out against prejudice and hurtful words – when we help reconcile two friends – when we remove from our lives anything that keeps us from being in relationship with Jesus Christ, we fight evil. When someone or something other than Christ is Lord of our lives and we turn away from that idol, Satan falls. Satan plummets every time this congregation opens its doors to an individual needing to talk to someone or to groups needing a place to call home. We drain power from evil every time our congregation chooses to minister in our community – when we're about doing the work of the church in the world, when we work for policies and laws which promote justice and equality for all of God's people. Christ has given us the authority to do just that. Our efforts don't hinge on the slickness of the church's program, or our own eloquence, but on the authority of Jesus which He gives to His people. Without that authority, we would simply be goodwill ambassadors but not messengers of the Kingdom.

We would be preachers of ourselves and not of God. But because we have received the authority and the command of Christ, no special skills or equipment are needed, and we don't have to spend time and energy fretting about the results. Jesus tells us, as He told the 70 – travel light and keep moving. However, Jesus warned the 70 and He warns us, that triumphalism is not an appropriate spirit among disciples. Jesus says, "You've been allowed to participate in unusual power. But don't rejoice in this. Rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven – that God had already received and accepted you." Lest we are tempted to think that the mission is our own cause and success our own achievement, we must remember that it is God working through and with us which causes Satan to fall. We are to rejoice then that God has called and chosen us – you and me – to help in the establishment of God's reign. So what's on your calendar for this next week? Satan hasn't fallen far enough. Let's go take him on.

Let us pray: Loving God, Satan has fallen, and is falling, and will one day fall for good. Your Kingdom is near us. Let it convert us to the very depth of our being, and let us in turn witness to its life changing presence and power. Amen.