

NO, THE DEVIL DID NOT MAKE YOU DO IT

A SERMON BY THE REV. AMOS GLENN

“The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels.” (Matthew 13:39)

God vs. the Devil

We often think there is a great spiritual battle between God and the Devil—a battle for our very souls. This is not a bad picture to have because it explains a lot about how we feel during our spiritual struggles and how we can deal with temptation. It reminds us that the battle is not us against the devil, but *the Lord* against the devil. It is the Lord who draws us into heaven, not we ourselves.

God vs. Who?

But if you take the analogy too far, it begins to break down. We need to understand that there is no person called “the Devil.” There is no one person ruling in hell who has the power to oppose the Lord's will. The Writings for the New Church teach us clearly, particularly in *Heaven and Hell* 544, that there isn't anyone like that. And this becomes obvious when we wonder, “Who are these people? Who makes up hell?”

Just like heaven, hell is made up of people who once lived in this world. The only difference is that people in hell chose to oppose what was Divine while they were in this world. Do those people have more power than others? No, they're just people. They don't have any more power in hell than they did here on earth. But hell is a pretty powerful place. What is the power of the hells? What power does this “devil” have?

To answer this question, consider this passage from the gospel of John where the Lord is telling the people around Him that while they think they are the descendants of Abraham, in fact they are not. Those who hear this message are very offended.

They say, “We were not born of fornication. We have one Father—God.” Jesus replies to them:

If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My Word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears God’s words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God. (John 8: 42-47)

This is a powerful condemnation of these people. They're thinking, “We're the children of Abraham; we're the chosen people. We're God's children because we are the children of Abraham.” But the Lord was denying them this thought by responding, in effect, “No. If you were God's children, you wouldn't be behaving as you are right now. You prefer doing the will of the devil, so he is your father.” Then He explains where the devil's power is: “he is a liar.” The devil, He says, lies from his own resources. The power of the hells is in their ability to deceive and persuade people.

The Power of a Lie

Think about the woman in the Garden of Eden. She knew the difference between right and wrong. Why did she choose to do what she knew was wrong? Because she was deceived. She believed the lies that were told to her. Those lies became part of her belief, her point of view. But good things cannot be built on falsity. When falsity becomes part of who you are, the result is bad behavior. Therein lies the power of the evil spirits. The terrible power of the devil is the ability to lie, and to lie so convincingly that sometimes we can't tell the difference between our own voice and the devil's voice, or between our own

thoughts and the thoughts the evil spirits put into our minds.

Sometimes, we want so much for something to be true that when people tell us it is true, we believe them. We never stop to compare what they tell us with what the Lord teaches in His Word—the source of all that is genuinely true. The only power that the evil spirits have is this ability to lie to us. And they have this power only because it is granted to them by the Lord.

Who Governs Hell?

Many people, as the Writings of the New Church tell us, believe there is a personal devil that governs hell, called the Devil or Satan. But the Writings tell us that's not true. Who governs hell? The Lord governs hell just as He governs heaven. The Lord governs all of creation.

We may wonder, “If the Lord is governing hell, why are there bad people doing bad things in hell? Why are they allowed to influence us?” The answer is because of Divine order and Divine providence. The Lord's providence is His government providing what we need to reach heaven. He protects everything we are, so that we remain human. His government in hell is such that He imposes only as much of Divine order on it as the people there can bear and still remain human beings.

For most of their lives, evil spirits in hell are not allowed to do evil things, only to fantasize about doing them. But they are allowed to lie to us. This is for the sake of our own freedom, that is, for the sake of our ability to rationally choose between what is right and wrong—to follow the Lord and to be elevated into heaven. Without that balance, or equilibrium, we would not be human beings. So the Lord turns the desire these spirits have to do evil to a good end. He uses the evil to protect human freedom, to protect our ability to choose rationally.

Implications of the Lord's Government

We may readily accept the simple idea that the Lord governs

everything but may not often think of its far-reaching implications. Dramatic ideas arise when we really delve into the truth that the Lord governs everything and that there is no devil governing hell. It means that Divine order is all there is. It means that Divine providence leading to heaven is all there is. There is no such thing as infernal order and no such thing as infernal providence. There is no force acting on the world to lead us without our knowledge into hell. There is only the Lord's Divine love leading us toward heaven.

The only power the evil spirits have is to lie to us. Think about the man who planted wheat in his field. At night, when men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares—weeds—into his field. As the wheat began to grow, so did the tares. Perhaps the enemy was hoping that the man who owned the field would tear up the weeds and destroy all the wheat, too. Similarly, the evil spirits would like nothing more than for us to confuse what is good and what is evil and to tear up all the foundations of our spiritual life.

There are many people who think of themselves as Christians who are ready to give up all religion because of some of the false doctrines that their churches teach. Instead of being able to pull up only the tares of the trinity of three persons or only the tares of faith alone, they pull up the wheat with the tares, leaving the field bare and their religion empty. The hells lie to them saying, “If you can't believe this one part of the religion that's being taught to you, you can't believe any of it!”

The Hells are Powerless

Can evil spirits make you stop believing it? No! They can only tell the lie that if you don't believe this then you can't believe that. You can dismiss this lie outright and say, “That's ridiculous! Why would you even think that?” And then the hells have no power over your life.

Remember, those tares were put into the field where the wheat

was growing. The evil spirits could not have grown tares where there wasn't wheat growing. The enemy of the man in the story didn't come to rip out all of the wheat seed and plant all tares—they couldn't grow—the hells just don't have that kind of power. The Lord can create worlds. The Lord can endow people with freedom. The Lord can create love. The Lord can teach people. The Lord can make it rain. The Lord can make seeds sprout.

Can the hells do that? The hells can't make it rain. The hells can't make a seed sprout. The hells can't create anything because they are nothing else than people who don't want to follow the Lord. That's all. We may cringe in fear of them because they seem so powerful. They seem so powerful when we think of life as a great battle between the Lord and the Devil, and that they are somehow equal in power. But they are not. The Lord has all power and the hells would have no power at all if the Lord didn't give it to them.

Lies of the Devil

There is a saying: The greatest trick the devil ever played was to make people think he didn't exist. And there is some truth to that. But, in fact, the devil *doesn't* exist. So maybe the greatest trick that the hells can do is to make people think that the devil does exist *but not hell*. Evil spirits are very skilled at these lies. They can make the human race think that there is something just as powerful as God called Evil, that evil can cause bad things to happen to people, and that the Lord cannot stop all of them from happening because the devil is equally powerful. And then, to top it all off, they may say there is no such thing as the devil after all, and therefore there is no such thing as good either.

They lie to have us believe that everything is fine. “What you believe is fine,” they say; “there's no judging anything as right or wrong.” But there *is*. There *is a difference between right and wrong*, and we understand the difference by going to the Lord's Word and learning what is true.

And when you do go to the Word to learn what is true and good, it is then that the serpent whispers lies, saying, “This is the Lord telling you not to do things because He doesn't want you to have any fun” or “This is the Lord telling you not to do things because He wants to control you” or, even worse, “These stories aren't the Lord telling you anything. They are the words of old men who died long ago who have no idea of what modern society is like. Forget the whole thing and just do what you think you need to do.”

No Force for Evil, Only for Good

There's no force in the universe leading us without our knowledge towards hell. Evil spirits can only lie to us, deceive us, and persuade us to do bad things and to oppose the Lord in our own lives. That's the only way we can become part of hell. Living that way and doing those things is a free, rational choice that we make. The hells cannot make us do anything. We are free people. The Lord guarantees that we are free, rational people able to make choices between right behavior and wrong behavior—able to know what is good and what is bad and choose what is good and right. And when we do that, there is nothing that the hells can do to stop us. *Amen.*

Lessons: Genesis 3:1-13; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; *Heaven and Hell* 544.



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