

## I WISH THE PREACHER WOULD TALK ABOUT? *Is the Devil Real?*

Ephesians 6:10-18

August 23, 2026

For a time in my life, I was a proud devil. Blue Devil. But make no mistake, my schedule was built entirely around its rituals. I missed two home games in four years. One night freshman year, chest painted blue for Coach K's five-hundredth win, crown of horns on my head, I made the front page of the student newspaper, the *Duke Chronicle*. I was the middle zero of the 500. I was the religion major.

Walking distance from Cameron Indoor Stadium, there is another cathedral, Duke Chapel. Just beyond that, the religion department, where I spent the majority of my time when I wasn't cheering in the student section.

In Cameron, devotion to the devil was mimetic. A few thousand obnoxious overachievers bowing toward a hardwood court.  
*Coach K Court.*

I was eighteen years old. In classrooms, I was learning new ideas, expanding my narrow thinking, assembling knowledge like a toolbox for building a life.

But there was this other world, just a few yards away. There were mornings when I would stop in the rush between classes or just before lunch, and I would sit in that massive gothic sanctuary. Sometimes all by myself. Light came through the stained glass, slanting across the pews, and mystery flooded in with that light.

The community I found at Duke Chapel was asking big questions. Why are we here? Who is God? Is suffering a part of the divine plan? What about evil? Not a mascot, but a malicious force.

In that space, something took hold of me, and it has never let me go. It's the reason I am still asking, still seeking. It is the reason I am standing here. Is what we see and what we touch and what we hear and what we can know all there is to reality? Is there more?

That—I think—is the question beneath all of our preoccupations with the devil. It's never been about horns or pitchforks. It's about what Paul calls the spiritual forces of this age, or the powers of the air.

I find it unfortunate that the project of modernity has made light of this language, calling it nonscientific. Pre-enlightenment thinking. And so, for centuries, we have built a world without mystery, and then we wonder why it feels so thin.

There is a generation now starving for something stranger and deeper than what they've been told and taught. They want to know about beauty that points not toward itself, but beyond itself. They want to know about love that is more than brain chemistry, or about connections that no algorithm can track. And, yes, they'd like to hear about evil that is larger than human failing or cruelty.

C.S. Lewis saw this hunger generations ago, and he also saw how easily evil can twist it. In his wonderful preface to *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis wrote that human beings make two equal and opposite errors regarding the devil. The first is to disbelieve in his existence entirely. And the second is taking an unhealthy or excessive interest in him. Both errors—Lewis wrote—please the Evil One equally.

And I would suggest that both extremes pull at the church today. On the one hand, total denial. On the other, absolute obsession. Scripture offers a different way.

Paul is writing to a church that is fracturing along the oldest faultline of our faith: Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider, us and them. For five chapters he repeats one fundamental truth to this divided church. *Christ has broken down the wall dividing you. You are one body because you are his body.*

And then here, at the end of the letter, the Apostle tells this fragile, fractured community that they are at war. War? Paul, what happened to unity? You said Christ broke down the walls, built up the body.

Well, it all depends on who the enemy is. Paul is insistent on this point, that the enemy is not within the community. "Our struggle," he writes, "is not against flesh and blood, but against...the cosmic powers of this present age."

I think we believe that. So why is it so hard to live like it?

Last season, I picked up my very first technical foul coaching my son's basketball team. In my defense, the official was demonic. Ten fouls on our little guys, two on the opponents—they were giants! In that moment, I could see, with absolute and utter clarity, the forces of evil wearing a whistle and a striped shirt. A quarter century removed from my days as a Cameron Crazy, and I had learned absolutely nothing. It was, in a word, embarrassing. But it was also revealing.

So, before you judge me, when was the last time you saw a devil in disguise? It happens without our permission. Sometimes it happens without our noticing. But the words come from our mouths or live in our hearts.

That politician is demonic. The school board is satanic. A TikTok video signals the antichrist. An algorithm or an HOA rule or a coffee cup or a halftime show or a book sitting silently on a shelf—suddenly every point of tension in modern life has become an attack from the pit of hell.

I do try to avoid the comment section on the sermon videos. Because if you want to see how quickly Christians can turn minor theological disagreements into an excommunication trial, that's where to look.

You know how it happens. Someone disagrees with us about something that matters deeply to us, and before long we're no longer arguing ideas. We are hunting monsters. I have heard people I respect, good and faithful people describe their enemies as pure evil, and even openly root for their destruction.

Friends, we who rightly insist on honoring the humanity of the stranger and the marginalized must not make hypocrites of ourselves by denying that same image in those whose actions we deplore. God will not be mocked. Even by us.

In my experience, here's how it works. We begin by reducing complex people to labels—liberal, conservative, traitor, bigot, threat. Once I stop seeing a person and instead see a label, something dangerous shifts. A permission structure for contempt is built.

We exaggerate evil and trivialize it at the same time. On the one hand, we take a human being, a person just like us, who is wrong or perhaps even guilty of something terrible, and we inflate them into a cosmic enemy. We make them the representation of all that is evil and broken in the world. On the other hand, if the devil is just another name for someone you dislike, then evil becomes small and manageable. You can win an argument, or an election, and you have won the war.

Somewhere along the way, we domesticated evil. We made it too familiar, too manageable, too human-sized. We drained it of its mystery and then went looking for it in those we fear.

In March of 2020, when this congregation, in the chaos of a surging global pandemic, made the decision to close this space and move our worship online, reactions were varied and deeply emotional. One member wrote to tell me that closing our doors was not just a mistake. It was demonic. To them, my leadership was a betrayal of the church's central call to gather together. I had caved to the forces of evil instead of preaching the power of faith.

I don't doubt their sincerity. I don't doubt that we were two people who loved this church, who were caught in a terrifying moment neither of us had ever lived through. But somewhere between *you're wrong* and *you're evil*, that fear twisted disagreement into a holy war.

I think that's how sin works. Evil does not create out of nothing; it takes the best parts of us and twists them. Conviction is twisted into contempt. Justice is twisted into vengeance. Loyalty is twisted into tribalism. Courage is twisted into cruelty.

I thank God that was not the end of our story. It took time, but reconciliation happened. The pain was real, but grace was persistent.

Paul does not deny the existence of evil, but he also does not insist that evil is kept by our narrow vision. It's larger than that. In fact, Paul speaks of evil as a power or a force. It moves through our institutions and our ideologies. It moves through the systems that teach us whom to fear and whom to forget. These forces can inhabit a crowd, or a church, or a nation. And if we are honest in our confession, those same powers make a home in every human heart, which is why Scripture will never let us confuse the powers with the people.

One chapter after Eden, Cain kills his brother. God is keeping a watchful eye. God sees what Cain has done.

God grieves over what Cain has done. And God's response is utterly astounding. Entirely mystifying. God does not approve of the action. Does not offer easy forgiveness. But neither does God respond with vengeance. *An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth.* What God offers is protection.

In her book, *Reading Genesis*, Marilynne Robinson recalls teaching this story at her church when a woman in the class, a university student, raised her hand and her voice in shock and asked, "What kind of a God would not kill a man who killed his brother?" Robinson's response: "An excellent question."

What kind of a God, indeed. Perhaps one who refuses to define any human being by the worst thing they have ever done. What kind of a God? Maybe one who knows both the terrifying power of evil and the fragile weakness of humanity.

John Calvin had no illusions about the depth of sin's hold on us. And yet, you might be surprised to learn that John Calvin also held a remarkably high view of the human person. The image of God, Calvin wrote, can never be erased. It can be defaced. It can be distorted. It can be buried beneath a pile of sinful words and actions, but the image of God can never be fully swept away.

This means that when you look into the eyes of your worst enemy, you will be staring into the reflection of God. It also means that every weapon we sharpen to destroy another person strikes the face of Christ.

I wish I could tell you this is simple. It might be the hardest thing your faith will ever ask of you. We would never have thought of it ourselves. It's not natural. It's not strategic. And therefore, it is commanded. The armor of God turns the world's warfare upside down. The only weapon put into our hands is the Word of God. It is a blade that slashes the lie, not the liar.

Here's the twist. We don't destroy our enemies. We reclaim them. Paul tells us to put on armor that is not ours. Paul says, "Withstand on the evil day."

Stand firm, because there is a battle. But every screaming voice wants you to believe the devil wears a human face, wants to convince you that you can label enemies, and write off neighbors, and demonize strangers, and know with absolute certainty the line between good and evil, that you can crush the Evil One. But you cannot. That is the oldest lie in the book.

No devil's deceit deserves your devotion. The church must be the one place on earth that refuses to play along, that refuses to justify hatred. Because a church that does not withstand does not have to be defeated. It has been recruited.

Yes, the devil is real, but your neighbor is not him. And neither is your enemy. Look again at the person you are most tempted to call evil. God's image may be buried. Distorted. Disfigured almost beyond recognition. But it has not been erased. Not in them. Not in you. Look closer. You'll see it.