



**Critical Evil Theory**  
**Matthew 4:1-11 & Ephesians 6:19-26**  
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Washington Street UMC  
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Last Wednesday we marked the start of the season of Lent as we joined together for Ash Wednesday. We had a wonderful service, with members present from each of our churches in the Church of South Washington, and each of our pastors participating in the service. The message was on the invitation of the apostle Paul to be reconciled to God, acknowledging that to be reconciled to God, the scripture invites us to repent, to name that which has separated us from God. And we heard how such an invitation calls for us to do more than simply say, “I have sinned,” but further, it invites us to dig deeper, to see our sin as a failure to love, and to be honest about all the ways our lives are actively working against God’s love.

This is the invitation of lent – to be honest about how we might better reflect the love of God in this world. This morning, we’re going to look at a few areas we might not even be able to recognize as being against God’s love. There are times when, if we don’t stop to look more intentionally at our actions, we don’t see the error in our ways because it blends in so well with the happenings of the world around us.

Both of our scriptures this morning call attention to, what’s titled, spiritual forces that often go unrecognized in our presence.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the narrative is about Jesus in the wilderness interacting with the one called, “the devil.” As he fasted and spent 40 days preparing himself to embark upon the ministry of teaching, healing, and witnessing to God on earth, he was tempted by this devil to turn from God and to trust in the forces of earthly powers. The first temptation was to turn rocks into stone – to feed himself in the midst of an intentional fast when his body would have been yearning for real food. The second temptation was to test God’s ability to save him should he throw himself off the top of the temple, certain that such a fall would kill him. The third temptation was to embrace the empires of the world, and to be given, by the devil, authority over the kingdoms of human creation.

Perhaps this is an oversimplification of these three episodes, but these temptations of the devil offer to Jesus material gain, physical safety, and empirical power. This is the lure of the evil one, that if we turn from God, we can still trust in the devil to provide sustenance, security, and power.

Hold on to this thought as we turn to Ephesians: the devil, even as offered to Jesus, promises sustenance, security, and power.

In Ephesians, the apostle is writing to the early church about these very concerns. The apostle writes, “Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our

struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the comic powers of this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Paul, in his own writing to the early church, believed just as much as Matthew did when writing about Jesus in the wilderness, that the challenges we face as people of faith living in the midst of God’s creation are challenges championed by evil – by a physical and present force – defined many times with the title, “devil,” but also referred to more broadly as “powers and principalities.” These are “spiritual forces whose agenda runs counter to the way of God.”<sup>i</sup>

These spiritual forces are, as Scholar Robert Williamson, Jr notes, “nonhuman forces.” To use Paul’s words, these forces come from beyond flesh and blood. In his book, *Good and Beautiful and Kind*, Pastor Rich Villodas defines the powers and principalities as, “Spiritual forces that become hostile taking root in individuals, ideologies, and institutions, with the goal of deception, division, and depersonalization.”

Jesus faced these forces in the person defined as “the devil,” but even if we don’t find ourself face to face with “the devil” today, such nonhuman forces are still present in our world. We are constantly bombarded with invitations – sometimes by other people, sometimes by institutional doctrine, sometimes by empirical statutes – to prioritize and claim the invitation for sustenance, security, and power over and above the more faithful call of God to community shalom, the well-being of creation, and the ultimate authority that resides in the Lord.

Paul believed that these forces were so present in the world that we needed to be prepared to defend ourselves against them as if we were members of the Roman Guard. It’s important to highlight here, Paul was not inviting the faithful to go on an offensive – Paul believed that God had already won out. The battle, in Paul’s mind, was already over, with Christ being the victor over death – over the grave. But Paul knew, nonetheless, that these spiritual, nonhuman forces, were still present in the world, seeking to undermine the work of God.

So Paul invites the faithful to don the whole armor of God: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, shoes that will lead you to proclaim the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Going back to Pastor Villodas’ definition, which says that these spiritual forces have a goal of deception, division, and depersonalization, I want to spend a few moments looking at these three in reference to the devil’s offering to Jesus in the wilderness of sustenance, security, and power. As we’re looking at how these exist in our past and present society, I want us to consider how the armor Paul offers leads us to faithfulness in the midst of such corrupt offerings.

Deception is a key component to the lure of powers and principalities – the presence of evil in the midst of our society. It doesn’t take much digging to find the ways in which deception offers sustenance, security, and power to those willing to engaged in the art of deception. We see this all the time in the realm of politics these days, on all sides of the halls of congress and throughout the realm

of social media. It feels like we are beyond the days of “half-truths” and “lies of omission,” and are more often than not dealing with blatant deception. How bad does it have to be that we need a website like *Snopes* to qualify how truthful a statement, a website, or a media headline really is? But deception is not a new thing, it has long been a tool for those seeking to maintain power, to hoard sustenance, and to ensure personal security. I know I’ve shared this in the past, but I’m still distraught that for over half of our nation’s history, Christian slave owners only allowed their slaves to read the parts of the Bible that spoke of how slaves were supposed to be faithful to the masters; they removed every part of the Biblical text that talked about God as a liberating God, including the removal of the entire story of the Exodus.

Deception is not maintained or constricted in anyone, or any group of persons, but it is a tool of evil. It is a force that seeks to stand against God. This is why Paul says, put on the belt of truth, and be prepared to stand against division that is sought by deception.

Division is another force used by evil to work against God in the world. In every episode of human existence, division had claimed that there is not enough sustenance, security, and power to go around. Division is at the heart of our current national strife, and is the one of the primary forces that sparks hatred and war. Pastor Rich Villodas writes, “Much of our society holds the conviction that if two people disagree on important issues, they must be enemies.” Just turn on the news, and it doesn’t really matter which anchors you’re watching, almost every news source sows division to some extent. There’s a “us versus them” mentality attached to almost every event and belief one might engage.

Again, just consider our national history, division has been sowed into the fabric of our society. We’ve had the Jim Crow laws, and redlining, which limited housing access to black Americans in specific neighborhoods. Even here in Old Town, you can still see the remnants of racial division in our churches, many of which have balconies which were built specifically to ensure black church-goers didn’t sit on the main floor of the sanctuary. This is just one example that is still present here in Alexandria.

In the face of division, Paul offers that we need to put shoes on our feet to make sure we’re ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. In the New Testament Greek, the word is *eirene* (I-ray-neigh), which carries the same weight of the Hebrew word *shalom*. Peace as it is offered in the Biblical text has in mind not simply the absence of war, but the holistic well-being of humanity at large. In putting on these shoes to proclaim the gospel of peace, Paul is advocating for us, as a people of faith, to ensure that everyone has sustenance and security. Division should not ensure the well-being of a few, but should be focused on the care of the whole. And Paul never wanted us to yearn for power, for Paul believed that the only power worth acknowledging was that of God.

Finally, the forces of division and deception turn to depersonalization. One way evil maintains its presence is by convincing us to look beyond the individual, and to lump people together into categories and classes. Similar to the force of division, depersonalization makes the offer of sustenance, security, and power an “us versus them” competition. But going a step further, “when we depersonalize, we stop seeing individuals as sacred creations of God.”<sup>ii</sup> Depersonalization allows us to criticize and hold judgement on another simply because they’re part of “that” group ... and we all hold a few of those

groupings in mind, whether it's the "homeless," or the "conservatives," or the "rich," or the "poor," or "Black Lives Matter," or "the Catholics," or the "Muslims."

Depersonalization allows us to demonize the other simply because they look, believe, act, or exist in a certain way. It allows us to ignore their sacred worth, because a force uncharacteristic of God has convinced us their presence, or their mere existence, is a threat to my sustenance, security, and my power. It is depersonalization that makes us fear low-income housing project being built in our backyards; it is depersonalization that leads gunmen to gay bars; and it is depersonalization that advocates for laws, which strip individuals of bodily autonomy.

But against such depersonalization, Paul says, put on the armor of God. Take the helmet of salvation, which offers new life to every individual (regardless of what group you want to lump them into), and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And what does the word of God proclaim? That in the person of Jesus Christ, there is no individual, no matter how othered they may be, that is not worthy of God's love. From the Samaritan, to the Canaanite, to the leper, to the bleeding woman, to the dying child, to the spoiled son – every person, everyone that is "othered" even by the most faithful of Temple leaders, is within the realm of God's creation, and is therefore loved by God.

I know it may be a stretch for some to allocate such evil forces to being beyond human recognition, but it's not hard to see that such forces are constantly at play. The invitation to receive sustenance, security, and power is a constant part of our global struggle. The forces of deception, division, and depersonalization are also constantly working against the will of God in the world. While we may chastise the individual who is visibly working with these forces, and as such, we may attribute such forces to human error, in the Biblical text, there was a firm belief these forces stemmed from beyond blood and flesh. These are, by scriptural perspective, cosmic powers of darkness.

If we can embrace this reality, even if in the form of a philosophical debate, we can at least call ourselves to be on guard such that these forces do not impede our own discipleship. In this season of Lent, we are invited to name the areas of our lives that interfere with the beauty of God's blessings. It would do us well to center the forces of division, deception, and depersonalization, and to accept that in God, we do not need to fight with one another over sustenance, we do need to pit ourselves against one another for security, and we do not need to exert ourselves over the other with power. We can, according to the witness of Christ and the teaching of Paul, share with one another in a greater joy, in a greater witness, and in a greater proclamation of God, of God's love, and of God's witness to true life in Jesus Christ.

When we acknowledge that which is broken in our midst, we give space for God to bring healing and new life. That is the invitation of lent. That is the invitation of the gospel. And in its place is the promise of new life – new life for you, new life for me, new life for all of our neighbors ... indeed, new life for all of humanity. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rich Villodas. *Good and Beautiful and Kind*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> Villodas.