



## **That Darned Devil**

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

### **Luke 4:1-2, 13**

*And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry...*

*And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until and opportune time.*

That darned devil. You just can't trust him! You can send him away. You can beat him in a deal. You can defeat him in battle. You can banish him from your life. And, he'll go away. He'll give up. He'll surrender. He'll walk off out of your sight. But:

- just when you think you've gotten rid of him,
  - when you least expect it,
  - when you've let your defenses down,
  - when your will power is at its weakest,
  - and all your guards are down -
- that's when that darned old devil is going to slither right back into your life.

It doesn't matter what you might think about it, or how strongly you feel about it, or how sure you are about your power; you just can't trust him to stay away. He keeps coming back.

As today's scripture reminds you: the devil is patient. In Luke's words, he waits for the "opportune time."

That's the way it's been from the beginning of time. If you remember when Adam and Eve were romping innocently in the Garden of Eden, the devil was snaking his way into their good graces.

And in today's scripture, Jesus had no sooner been baptized when he was led away into the wilderness where he spent forty days and forty nights alone. Jesus was alone, except for one companion: the devil.

The devil was there in the wilderness tempting Jesus to give up his mission before he had even started. The devil tempted Jesus with comfort, with fame, with fortune. But, Jesus beat the devil back. Jesus won their confrontation in the wilderness. The devil surrendered. The devil went away. But the devil said he'd be back.

He'd be back when the time was ripe.

He'd be back when Jesus was alone and troubled.

He'd be back when Jesus was drained and weary.

He'd be back at the opportune time.

The devil came back. He was never able to get Jesus. So, the devil's willing to settle for someone else. He's coming back. He's on his way right now. Be on the look-out, because the devil's coming back for you!

He's on his way. He's a patient old devil. He's willing to wait for the right time to invade those vacant spots in your home,

- he'll wait to steal away some of your precious time,
- he'll wait to eat up some of your valuable resources,
- he'll wait for the opportune time to take your soul.

The Bible warns you about that tricky old devil. You just can't trust him to stay away. Let me tell you some of his habits, so you can be a little more aware of his presence.

First, the devil doesn't advertise.

It would be so much easier to resist him if he advertised his arrival. Even I could see him coming if he arrived like Santa Clause at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. Wouldn't it be something if he sent a big brass band ahead, marching down the street with trumpets blaring, drums pounding, and flags waving - announcing to the world that the devil's on his way?

And right there behind the band, would be that familiar figure dressed in a red spandex suit, sharpening the horns on his head, dragging his pointed tail behind him, holding onto a pitch-fork, yelling out to the crowd: "Do something evil today! Cheat, steal, quarrel! Be bad!"

Even I could see him coming if he did something like that; but, the devil doesn't advertise.

One of the things my wife collects is McCoy Pottery. McCoy is a brand of pottery that was made in Zanesville, Ohio up until the 1960's. The

only trouble with collecting McCoy pottery is that they didn't mark all their pieces. Sometimes we'll find a piece of pottery that looks right. It feels right. We pick it up and turn it over, but there's no mark. Sometimes there's just no way to know if we've got "the real McCoy" or some cheap substitute.

That's the way the devil is. He just won't mark his activities. He won't advertise. Sometimes the ways of the devil are hard to identify.

Be careful, the devil likes to work on you especially in the things that just come naturally. He piggy backs on the easiest option for you. He comes like an e-mail attachment to the things that feel good.

If he were to advertise, if he were to put his brand name on every activity, just think how easy it would be to avoid him. Suppose the devil appeared in every home in the Tonawandas this morning, popping into every house dressed in his red spandex outfit, shaking every citizen to wakefulness before the morning alarm clock, spitting fire as he roared out his instructions:

"Stay in bed this morning."

"Sleep late."

"Take it easy."

"You deserve a break today."

"The world owes you a day off."

If you knew it was the devil talking, you'd think twice about doing what feels good. And if the devil topped it off by pointing his pitch fork at you and roaring:

"Most of all, keep your children away from church!"

I tell you, even now, the ushers would still be busy sitting up more folding chairs to make room for the over-flow crowd we would be experiencing.

But the devil doesn't advertise. He doesn't come with his brand name embossed on the bottom.

Every summer when I was a boy, Wednesday afternoons were taken up with free matinees at the Athena Theater. The local merchants handed out free tickets to all the children in town to attend a four hour matinee at the movies. I'm sure it was done to encourage every child's mother to spend four hours of shopping while the theater baby sat.

I don't know what my mother did, but every Wednesday afternoon I would be sitting in that lovely old theater, joined by hundreds of other little boys and girls watching a science fiction thriller like "Godzilla" or "War of the Worlds." Then, we would see a series of comics: Woody Woodpecker, or

Mickey Mouse, or Adam Ant. Then, as the finale, we would watch a western, usually starring one of Ohio's favorite sons: Roy Rogers.

The great thing about those old western movies was always being able to tell right from wrong. The good guys always wore white hats. The bad guys always wore black hats. I always knew, right from the start, no matter what happened in-between; I knew that by the end of the movies, the good guys would always win.

But life isn't like a 1950's western movie. The devil doesn't make himself so easily known. He won't wear a black hat.

Second: the devil is willing to start small.

The devil doesn't take you by surprise and try to convince you to do some great big sin. No, he nibbles away at your resolve piece by piece. The devil always starts small.

You don't suddenly steal a million dollars from the company payroll; you begin by lifting a quarter out of your mother's purse.

The devil nibbles away at you in small, innocent seeming, bites. No one starts out with the intention of sinning big.

The Bible gives you a clue as to how to avoid the devil. The first Psalm (verse 1) says:

“Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers...”

St. Paul continued this thought when he wrote in 2 Timothy (4:7)

“I have fought the good fight,  
I have finished the race,  
I have kept the faith.”

The devil knows all about all of that. He's counting on you to get tired of running that race. He knows you're going to slow down to a walk. He's laying money on the chance that you'll get tired of walking and you'll stand still. He's betting his future that the day will come when you'll get tired of standing, and you'll sit down.

He's the one who tempts you to slow down, to stand still, to sit down, to take it easy, to relax, to give up the race, to stop the fight, to forget the faith.

That's how the devil gets good Christian men and women. He doesn't convince them to go out and do some monstrous sin all of the sudden. No, he gets them to slow down and take it easy.

Years ago the New Yorker magazine showed a cartoon that was entitled “Highway Accident.” A truck approached a bridge. A sign on the bridge stated, “Load Limit - 8 tons.” On the side of the truck was a sign that read, “Weight - 8 tons.” No problem. The truck drove out onto the bridge. Everything was fine.

When the truck got to the middle of the bridge, a bluebird flew down and landed on the truck. Right then, the bridge started cracking and crumbling. The bridge fell apart. The truck and one surprised bluebird went crashing down to the river below.

That bridge could hold 8 tons. What it could not hold was a truck weighing 8 tons and one bluebird. The added weight of that one bluebird put that bridge beyond its breaking point.

Every man, every woman, every child has his or her breaking point.

The devil knows that. He’s willing to work in small ways to push you past yours.

So watch out for those small temptations. They may not seem very important at the time, but they keep piling up. They keep adding additional weight. They keep disarming your resolve bit by bit. They keep adding to the load you carry around, ounce by ounce, until one of these days, you’ll come tumbling down.

And third, the devil is a stubborn fellow.

It would be great if you could have a final battle with the devil, one mother-of-all battles, in which you could pound the devil into submission. You could chase him around the countryside until he slithers down a hole. You could send in your army and pull him from his hidey hole, throw him in chains, and declare your final victory. But that’s not the way it works!

One victory over the devil doesn’t put an end to the war.

It certainly wasn’t that way for Jesus. His ministry began with a series of temptations. Out there in the wilderness, far removed from the distractions of daily life, cut off from every living person, at least twenty miles away from every known temptation; the devil came to tempt him.

Three times the devil tempted Jesus. Three times Jesus defeated the devil. At the end, did the devil give up and go away to stay? No, he just went away until an opportune time.

That’s bad news for you. You may beat back the devil today, but he’ll be back tomorrow.

He'll bide his time until you're vulnerable. He'll wait until you're at your weakest, your lowest, your most breakable moment. He'll come looking when you're unprotected, when you're exposed, when your defenses are down.

The good news is you don't have to fight the devil all by yourself. Jesus beat the devil at every turn, and he wants to help you do it, too. Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to help you out. The Holy Spirit will be with you - every moment, every day, through every temptation, as you fight the devil for control of your soul.

And even though you've given in in the past, even though the devil has swayed your thoughts and your actions, even though you've lost a few battles over the years - the final victory can still be yours.

The promise of the Christian faith is that although you made wrong choices yesterday - you can make right choices today.

Although you have given in to temptation in the past - you can say "no" to temptation today.

Although you carry around a heavy load of shame and guilt that weighs you down, and drags you down, and puts you down - you can lighten your load today.

Forgiveness is yours. A second chance is yours. A glorious future is yours through Jesus Christ. And the choice is still yours!

The devil is out there, lurking about, waiting for you. You have to be careful. You have to be watchful. You have to be aware.

But thanks be to God that he sent Jesus Christ to show you the way, that the Holy Spirit is present to strengthen you in your battles, and that your sisters and brothers in faith are here to encourage you along the way.

Sure, the devil is always going to be around. He'll dangle his sweet temptations in front of you every chance he gets. He'll work on your resolve, on your doubts, on your fears. He'll do everything he can to get you. He'll show up at the opportune time.

But the victory can still be yours, if you run the race of faith with perseverance.