

Rich Lusk

On Ash Wednesday, I preached on pride -- the first of the seven deadly sins. One thought that didn't make it into the sermon concerns the devil. G. K. Chesterton said that the devil fell "by force of gravity" -- that is, he took himself too seriously and got too consumed with his own "weightiness." Meanwhile, angels, taking themselves so "lightly," are able to fly.

More than anything, persons who take themselves too seriously cannot stand to be laughed at. Traditionally, Christians have mocked the devil for taking himself so seriously. The image of the devil as a red-suited creature, with horns and a pitchfork, derives from this kind of mockery, as do gargoyles on medieval cathedrals. If there's one thing the devil can't do, it's laugh at himself. Because of his pride, one of the best ways to defeat the devil is to laugh at him.

Paul tells us in Colossians 2:15 that Jesus made a "public spectacle" of the devil after dying on the cross. The language of this "triumph" describes what Roman generals would do to their defeated opponents after they conquered a city. They would chain up the leader of the fallen army and march him down mainstreet while the Roman masses jeered and mocked those they had beaten in battle. Apparently, after Jesus died on the cross, he descended into hell, and proceeded to make a "public spectacle" of the devil in this way, "triumphing" over him. Jesus thoroughly humiliated the devil, leading a victory march right through hell. (If you've wondered what Jesus was doing when he "descended into hell," as we confess in the Apostles' Creed, this is at least part of your answer -- he entered hell to mock Satan and his demonic army on their own turf, since they had now been defeated! It seems he also freed the old covenant saints who had descended into sheol/hades at their deaths, so that he could take them heaven with him when he ascended on high [Rev. 1:18; Eph. 4:8-10; Heb. 11:40; Rev. 15].)

Martin Luther is someone who understood this point well, and never hesitated to engage in mockery of the demonic. Thus, he wrote:

Why should you fear? Why should you be afraid? Do you not know that the prince of this world has been judged? He is no lord, no prince any more. You have a different, a stronger Lord, Christ, who has overcome and bound him. Therefore let the prince and god of this world look sour, bare his teeth, make a great noise, threaten, and act in an unmannerly way; he can do no more than a bad dog on a chain, which may bark, run here and there, and tear at the chain. But because it is tied and you avoid it, it cannot bite you. So the devil acts toward every Christian. Therefore everything depends on this that we do not feel secure but continue in the fear of God and in prayer; then the chained dog cannot harm us. But this chained dog may at least frighten him who would be secure and go ahead without caution, although he may not come close enough to be bitten...

Luther did more than throw ink at the devil. He mocked the devil as a barking dog on a chain. In other places, he talked about how to "put the devil in his place":

Satan may be overcome by contempt, but in faith, not in presumption. However, he is certainly not to be invited; for he is a powerful enemy, seeing and hearing everything that lies before us and that we are now talking about. And God permitting, he spoils everything that is good.

When the devil comes during the night to plague me, I give him this answer: "Devil, I must sleep now; for this is God's command: Work during the day, sleep at night." If he does not stop to vex me but faces me with my sins, I reply: "Dear devil, I have heard the record. But I have committed far more sins which do not even stand in your record. Put them down too. . . . " If he still does not stop accusing me as a sinner, I say to him in contempt: "Holy Satan, pray for me! You never have done anything evil and alone are holy. Go to God and acquire grace for yourself. If you want to make me righteous, I tell you: Physician heal yourself....

The devil has often raised a racket in the house and has tried to scare me, but I appealed to my calling and said, "I know that God has placed me into this house to be lord here. Now if you have a call that is stronger than mine and are lord here, then stay where you are. But I well know that you are not lord here and that you belong in a different place - down in hell." And so I fell asleep again and let him be angry, for I well knew that he could do nothing to me.

But note that there is a great lesson for us here as well. We obviously do not want to be devil-like! And nothing is more demonic than pride!! One of the best ways to defeat your pride is to learn to laugh at yourself (and even laugh with others who laugh at you). The gospel shows us that life is a comedy, and believers should approach life with a kind of light-hearted joy. Even the devil will serve God's purposes in the end -- everything ultimately turns out for God's glory and our good. There's no way we can lose! We certainly have to take God and his Word seriously; we have to take sin and our Spiritual warfare seriously; but we should not take *ourselves* too seriously. Sometimes we forget to make those distinctions. The humble man laughs easily -- most especially at himself. Yesterday, I mentioned that in C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, he has a great section on loving the sinner and hating the sin, modelled on self-love. This is one of the keys to forgiveness. That section was way too long to read in the sermon, but here it is in full (emphasis mine):

Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive, as we had during the war. And then to mention the subject at all is to be greeted with howls of anger. It is

not that people think this too high and difficult a virtue: it is that they think it hateful and contemptible. "That sort of talk makes them sick," they say. And half of you already want to ask me, "I wonder how'd you feel about forgiving the Gestapo if you were a Pole or a Jew?"

So do I. I wonder very much. Just as when Christianity tells me that I must not deny my religion even to save myself from death by torture, I wonder very much what I should do when it came to the point. I am not trying to tell you ... what I could do--I can do precious little--I am telling you what Christianity is. I did not invent it. And there, right in the middle of it, I find "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sinned against us." There is no slightest suggestion that we are offered forgiveness on any other terms. It is made perfectly clear that if we do not forgive we shall not be forgiven. There are no two ways about it. What are we to do?

It is going to be hard enough, anyway, but I think there are two things we can do to make it easier. When you start mathematics you do not begin with calculus; you begin with simple addition. In the same way, if we really want (but all depends on really wanting) to learn how to forgive, perhaps we had better start with something easier than the Gestapo. One might start with forgiving one's husband or wife, or parents or children, or the nearest N.C.O., for something they have done or said in the last week. That will probably keep us busy for the moment. And secondly, we might try to understand exactly what loving your neighbor as yourself means. I have to love him as I love myself. Well, how exactly do I love myself!

Now that I come to think of it, I have not exactly got a feeling of fondness or affection for myself, and I do not even always enjoy my own society. So apparently "Love your neighbor" does not mean "feel fond of him" or "find him attractive." I ought to have seen that before, because of course, you cannot feel fond of a person by trying. Do I think well of myself, think myself a nice chap? Well, I am afraid I sometimes do (and those are, no doubt, my worst moments) but that is not why I love myself. In fact it is the other way round: my self-love makes me think myself nice, but thinking myself nice is not why I love myself. So loving my enemies does not apparently mean thinking them nice either. That is an enormous relief. For a good many people imagine that forgiving your enemies means making out that they are really not such bad fellows after all, when it is quite plain that they are. Go a step further. In my most clear-sighted moments not only do I not think myself a nice man, but I know that I am a very nasty one. I can at look some of the things I have done with loathing and horror. So apparently I am allowed to loathe and hate some of the things my

enemies do. Now that I come to think of it, I remember Christian teachers telling me long ago that I must hate a bad man's actions, but not hate the bad man: or as they would say, hate the sin but not the sinner.

For a long time I used to think this is a silly, straw-splitting distinction: how could you hate what a man did and not hate the man? But years later it occurred to me that there was one man to whom I had been doing this all my life--namely myself. However much I might dislike my own cowardice or conceit or greed, I went on loving myself. There had never been the slightest difficulty about it. In fact, the very reason why I hated the things was that I loved the man. Just because I loved myself was sorry to find that I was the sort of man who did those things. Consequently Christianity does not want us to reduce by one atom the hatred we feel for cruelty and treachery. We ought to hate them. Not one word of what we have said about them needs to be unsaid. But it does want us to hate them in the same way in which we hate things in ourselves: being sorry that the man should have done such things, and hoping if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere, he can be cured and made human again.