

The Devil's Greatest Trick

One of the most iconic movies from the 1990s is called *The Usual Suspects*. And *The Usual Suspects*, in a sense, could even be seen as an analogy for what is going on—especially in the first reading—in terms of deception.

The final line of that movie goes something like the following: “The greatest trick that the devil ever played was to convince the world that he didn’t exist.”

I actually don’t think that is true. Now, don’t get me wrong: the devil hiding himself, or making people not believe in him, is a really good trick and a very dangerous one. Father John Riccardo, in the series we did last Lent called *The Rescue Project*, talked about people not believing in the devil. It is kind of like living in a neighborhood and being unaware that a very dangerous predator has moved in next door. Because, of course, if a very dangerous predator moved in next door to you, you would want to know, wouldn’t you? Obviously.

So although that’s true, that’s not the greatest trick that the devil ever played. The greatest trick that the devil ever played is very much related to our first reading. And for believers like you and me, this trick is a lot more dangerous. It is something that, if we’re honest, has been played on us, and one that we have to flex out of.

The greatest trick that the devil ever played was convincing you, and convincing me, in different ways, that God on some level isn’t good: that because of what’s happened in my life, God does not actually have my back; that God does not actually have my best interest at heart. That is the greatest trick that the devil ever played, and he plays it and plays it and plays it.

That is the root of the temptation in today’s first reading. It’s not hunger. It’s not any of the other stuff. It’s that the devil gets Eve to believe that the Lord does not actually have their back and cannot be trusted. He is holding out on them.

So today, I want to talk about what I’m going to call the anatomy of a temptation. That’s right: I said the anatomy of a temptation, because it is all the same stuff. Let’s look at the sequence here, because if we’re honest, all temptations include at least two of these parts, and often all four of them.

The Anatomy of a Temptation

Where does the devil start? He starts with a question—not an accusation and not a temptation directly. He starts with a question: “Did God really say to you?” He’s already beginning to get her to question her reality. The truth is beginning to shift here a little bit.

So the first part starts with a question: “Did God really tell you?” We can think about this in terms of any temptation: “Is this really a big deal? Did I hear that right? Does Scripture really say that?”

Then Eve begins to dialogue with the tempter. Bad idea. Jesus can dialogue with the tempter because He is Jesus. You and I should not dialogue with the tempter, or even with the temptation.

Mindfulness holds that if a thought comes—say resentment, a resentful thought about something that happened—you recognize the negative thought. You know it is not going to go in a good direction. You acknowledge it, and you let it pass by. You don’t engage it.

Eve is making the mistake of dialoguing with the tempter, just as if we dialogue with the temptation, we are likely to lose. She says, “Well, the Lord said it’s only the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not to eat, or even to touch it.”

Did God say anything about touching the tree? No, He did not. The command actually given to Adam, which he would have passed to Eve, was before Eve was created. There are all sorts of interesting things you can get into about that, and First Timothy does, but we don’t have time here. Basically, she is already confused. By beginning to dialogue, she’s confused now about what the command is, because God didn’t say anything about not touching it.

By dialoguing with the temptation, she is becoming confused. And by the way, confusion is one of the most common signs in the spiritual life that you are listening to the devil.

So you have the question, you have the dialogue, and now you have the lie. Eve responds, and the serpent says, “Oh no, you will not die by eating the apple”—the fruit, I should say. We don’t know if it’s an apple, but I was going to use that as an analogy. Snow White, right? You eat the apple, you die immediately. Maybe she’s thinking that.

The devil is already lying. He is telling a half-truth, because they are not going to die immediately after eating the fruit. So he is kind of telling a half-truth: you’re not going to die—not right away. But certainly you will die, and it will bring death into the world.

Then he says, “You will know good and evil like God.” That is also a lie. No one can know good and evil like God. And the word for “know,” by the way, gets really sinister. The word for “know” is the same word used for spousal relations. So it is a really deep experience. It is not just intellectual knowing. It is the same word in Hebrew: Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived Cain.

So maybe Eve is thinking, based on how the devil is messing with her, “Well, yes, I’m going to intellectually know good and evil.” No. What the devil is saying is: you are going to know and experience evil. Sinister, isn’t it? He is telling the truth, and he wants them to experience evil—not just intellectually know it, but to know evil. It’s really ugly stuff.

Then comes a suggestion. The devil doesn’t actually say anything in the suggestion. He has just laid it out. He has planted the seed of doubt in Eve’s mind that God is good, that God alone is enough to give them happiness, that their beautiful walks in the breezy time of the evening in the garden with the Lord speaking to them as a friend is not enough for them. They need something else, because He can’t be trusted. He’s holding out on them.

So the suggestion—he doesn’t even have to say it. He has already suggested it.

Jesus doesn’t fall for this. By the way, the anatomy of the temptation is the same with Jesus. We’ll see how He defeats these four pieces of the ploy. But unfortunately, then comes self-deception. And this is something we all experience. We self-deceive. We think, “Okay, maybe this will bring me happiness. Maybe having this attitude about things is going to keep me protected.” Whatever it might be, we have self-deception about what is going to keep us safe and happy.

Then comes the shame. They recognize their nakedness. When we’re not really living in union with the Lord, we experience shame on some level, even if we bury it. There is a lot of modern scholarship written in psychology about shame and its effects on us.

They are experiencing shame, separation, and hiding their face from the Lord. So they make fig leaves. What do we call that? It is one I preach about a lot: self-sufficiency.

“Well, I’m experiencing shame. I can’t turn my face to the Lord. I’ve had this experience of evil through my disobedience to the Lord. And now, in that separation and shame, I have to be self-sufficient. So I’m going to make fig leaves for myself.”

The Lord will later make them more proper clothes before He sends them from the garden—again, a sign of the Lord’s providence continuing even in sin.

Now let’s see how Jesus does this. Same thing. The devil begins with a question: “If you are the Son of God.” He phrases it as “if,” but he is really asking, “Are you really the Son of God?” The devil has already begun with the question.

Then the devil moves directly to the suggestion with the first temptation, though he tries the other parts of this as well: “Command these stones to become bread and feed yourself.” Jesus says no and quotes Scripture.

Then the devil comes back with the dialogue. Remember: question, dialogue. Now the dialogue begins as he starts to speak Scripture at the Lord. The devil does not know that Jesus is God, by the way, just so you know. He knows that He is especially the Son of God. Something has been spoken. But the Church Fathers are very clear: the devil didn't actually know that He is God incarnate. He wouldn't try Him if he knew that Jesus is God.

So he starts quoting Scripture at Him. He tries this dialogue thing. All the ways that, in dialogue, we try to justify ourselves: justify the way that I acted like a jerk in the situation—"Well, they did that first." Or, "This Scripture says that Jesus turned the tables over, so I'm right to be mad at this person and angry at them." We can quote Scripture all day to justify what we want.

The dialogue comes. Jesus doesn't fall for it, of course.

Then the lie comes in the third temptation. The devil claims that he has authority over all the kingdoms of the earth and will give them to Jesus. And he does have authority, so he's telling a half-truth here. The devil usually does not tell outright lies. He tells half-truths, so they kind of have the ring of truth to them.

And Jesus says what? "Get away from me, Satan." That is actually what we are supposed to say, in the name of Jesus, if a temptation comes upon us. We say, "No. Jesus, You are Lord. Get away from me."

Our second reading talks about this in beautiful terms: if the sin of this one person, this human person, caused all this destruction, how much more will the one righteous act of the Lord Jesus lead to a greater restoration and glory than we even had in the beginning? That is our access to grace.

We are not to be afraid of temptation. We are not to be afraid of the devil. But we have to stand our ground in our identity as beloved children of God. That is why Jesus wasn't tempted. He is secure in His identity as the Beloved of the Lord.

The Fallout: Self-Deception, Shame, and Self-Sufficiency

For the last part of the homily, I want to talk for just a couple of minutes about the fallout that Adam and Eve experienced because of this, because we experience the same thing.

After they sinned, what we have is self-deception. All of us do this on some level, somewhat willingly. We deceive ourselves. All of us experience shame on some level, even if it's buried. And all of us then operate in self-sufficiency.

Those are the bad S-letter words: self-deception, shame, and self-sufficiency.

What do we do with these? I'm just going to suggest that we pray about the following this week.

In terms of self-deception, the Lenten season is about light. It's like, "Lord, give me light. Help me to see. If there's a place in my life where I'm really self-deceiving, either willingly or maybe not, Lord, I allow You to convict me and give me light."

A really simple example: usually self-deception sounds like, "It's not that bad. There are people way worse than me," right? One that I'm kind of thinking about this Lent for myself is my relationship with my phone. I know that it's probably the case, but I kind of justify: "I might get a text that I really need. I'm always on call. I might get an emergency call." But if I'm honest, I'm sometimes on my phone checking stuff during my prayer time. It's kind of a self-deception that I'm admitting to you.

So in what ways do we self-deceive? "Lord, give me light about what You're asking of me and the truth about reality."

Second, shame. There is one thing above all that uproots shame, and it is what happens in that little room over there: the Sacrament of Penance. The Lord designed and knew that a place where we can be transparent and safe is the greatest way to uproot shame.

That is why a lot of people who are not religious go to counseling and find such catharsis in counseling, because they can bare their souls and be really honest about the stuff that causes shame—and that undoes the shame. That's why it is a person-to-person encounter with the Lord Jesus: to be honest about our faults and to receive not condemnation back, which we might put on ourselves, but mercy.

Counseling is really good, by the way. I think most adults probably need counseling at some point in their life. So I'm not denigrating it at all. It is a beautiful thing that God intends. What I'm saying is: we need that sacrament. So make use of it this Lent. I really, really encourage you in that. It is the best uprooting of shame.

Finally, self-sufficiency. The solution for self-sufficiency is essentially prayer. This is a tough one, because it is hard to undo this muscle. We have to spend time in prayer.

Final point: conversion. That is the entire point of our Christian life, and especially the Christian season. Conversion is nothing other than aligning ourselves with the truth.

In these three areas, the truth means the following. First: "Lord, show me the truth about areas of self-deception." In areas of shame, the truth is that you are a beloved child of God. You are not the sum of your failures and weaknesses. You are the sum of the Father's love for you. That's the truth.

And the truth in terms of self-sufficiency is that not only are you not alone, but you can't do it alone. You need the Lord.

So dear friends in Christ, as we continue our Lenten journey, let us ask the Lord to help us be firm and rooted in our relationship as beloved of the Father, and ask for the grace, by the Holy Spirit, that the truth the Spirit brings may bring us greater conformity to Christ and greater rootedness in our belovedness. Praise be Jesus Christ.