

Sermon on Luke 11:24–26

Gerhard Forde

Luke 11:14–28

My talk this morning consists of a few thoughts on an old formula, often used by the fathers of the church: Evil is the absence of the good. As you may recall, this formula was used to solve the problem of the dualism of good and evil. Evil, they said, is not a positive power existing in its own right: it is simply negative, the absence of the good. And the formula was often criticized because, it is said, evil has more power than that, more power than mere absence or negation. And perhaps that is right.

But I don't wish to become involved in that metaphysical argument. I would like to consider whether the old formula does not have, after all, more immediate and practical significance, especially against the background of the passage we have heard from St. Luke's Gospel. Here, the unclean spirit – finding his former home vacant and swept clean – brings with him seven more evil spirits to dwell there. Evil is the absence of the good. Where there is no positive goodness – no real, concrete, good action – there is evil. There, the demons enter and have a field day!

You see, it seems that in our pietistic tradition we have tended, somehow, to reverse the formula. We have tended to say that good is the absence of evil: that if we manage simply to avoid evil – if we keep our houses swept and clean – then we are, supposedly, by that very fact, good. You don't really have to do anything actually; you simply have to avoid doing a lot of evil things.

Good, we tend to think, is the absence of evil. But this reversal of the formula can only have disastrous consequences. It can only lead, as I am afraid it does too much among us, to a stultifying ethic of conformity. We don't look for the real signs of positive, creative goodness – either in ourselves or in our fellow human. We look only for the absence of a whole set of assumed evils. And that goes too for a whole set of supposed social evils which make a person of the type that doesn't really “fit in” with our cozy little group.

We can't really take the person who is a little bit kooky, the person who doesn't avoid our assumed set of evils, no matter how much creative goodness there may be in him because we have, consciously or unconsciously, reversed the formula. Good is the absence of evil. So we value conformity before creativity, accommodation before sincerity. You don't have to do a thing just be a general, all-around nice guy. You don't even have to do honest work in your studies – let alone creative work. Just avoid the evils the group has decreed, turn on the saccharine smile and don't bother anyone, don't upset them, don't disagree, even if you feel you should. And you'll get by. Just be "nice."

But I suggest that there was practical wisdom in the old formula. For mere absence of evil does not make good, but rather evil is the absence of the good. Where there is no positive good – no creative action, no actual doing of something – there is evil. For when the house is empty and vacuous, you can be certain that the demons will find a way to return. And the last state of that man will be worse than the first.

We can take a lot of kookiness if there is something really worth doing. We can bear with a lot of sins if something positive is being accomplished. As our Lord once put it, "Where there is much love, much can be forgiven." But we really can't live long in the arid and vacuous desert where the mere absence of evil is equated with the good. And certainly that is something of what the gospel is all about. For if Christ comes really to set us free, it's pretty difficult to see how that could result in a stultifying conformity. If Christ came to set us free, that should result in the positive goodness of actually doing something. For only then will evil begin to lose the battle.

Amen!

SOURCE

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