

The Devil Did NOT Make Me Do It
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Matthew 4:1-11

I think there might be one or two of you out there who've been around long enough to remember the great comedian Flip Wilson. Along with Bill Cosby, Flip was one of the first African-American standup comedians to break into mainstream culture. Flip never styled himself as a "trailblazer," but his mere presence on our TV screens in prime time signaled a shift in what Anglo audiences were willing to embrace. Edgier black comedians like Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy would follow in his wake but Flip, wisely perhaps, stuck to comedy material that had universal appeal.

Maybe the most famous of Flip's comedy routines was his "the devil made me do it" monologues. Flip took on the persona of various characters who did things that they clearly knew to be wrong and, when confronted, would simply say "the devil made me do it." The tone of these monologues was light and Flip's ingenious delivery style always guaranteed big laughs but underneath the frivolity was a pretty serious observation about human nature. We do bad stuff knowing we're doing bad stuff and then go looking for somebody else to blame. And, of course, one of our favorite scapegoats is none other than the Devil. The Devil is a convenient Get Out Of Jail Free Card because, after all, what mere human can resist when powerful Satan tosses a temptation in his or her direction?

And that's quite a shift in attitude toward Satan from many of our Protestant forebears. There was a time, not so long ago in the grand sweep of history, when American Christians were literally afraid to use the words "Satan" or "devil" for fear of somehow invoking Satan and

bringing his wrath down them right then and there.

One of the most famous sermons in church history was delivered by the 18th century American Congregationalist preacher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards. Called “Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God,” Edwards’ sermon is a very eloquent expression of what we know popularly as “fire and brimstone,” a preaching style that is intended to strike fear into congregations, not inspire them. In the midst of what was probably a three-hour sermon, Edwards had this to say about Satan and the helpless humans he pursued:

“The *devil* stands ready to fall upon them, and seize them as his own, at what moment God shall permit him. They belong to him; he has their souls in his possession, and under his dominion. The scripture represents them as his goods, Luke 11:12. The devils watch them; they are ever by them at their right hand; they stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions that see their prey, and expect to have it, but are for the present kept back. If God should withdraw his hand, by which they are restrained, they would in one moment fly upon their poor souls. The old serpent is gaping for them; hell opens its mouth wide to receive them; and if God should permit it, they would be hastily swallowed up and lost.”

In this version of the inner workings of Hell, Satan is portrayed as a venomous predator who is eternally salivating as he waits for an opening to pounce upon corrupt mortals, which is all of us, all of whom richly deserve an eternity spent burning as Satan stands over them laughing wickedly at his complete triumph over God’s highest creation. I’m sure that Jonathan Edwards’ congregation left church that Sunday feeling uplifted and spiritually energized.

So, how accurate was Edwards’ description of Satan? And let’s keep in mind that there was nothing particularly radical about any of this in Edwards’ day. There were probably

hundreds, if not thousands of other preachers saying roughly the same thing to their congregations.

Let's start with today's passage. Jesus goes off into the wilderness, led by the Spirit with the very specific intent of Jesus facing the devil's temptations. In that sense, the devil has a very important role to play in the unfolding of the Gospel narrative. It was in the cards from the beginning that Jesus must be tempted and successfully resist. It kind of sounds like the devil was actually doing God's work, as weird as that may sound.

And, in fact, that's pretty much how Satan had been portrayed in the Old Testament. In the Book of Job, Satan comes off as an ally of God, testing humans so that God can measure their faith. When God declares to Satan that Job is upright and blameless, Satan questions whether God has not been overly protective of Job. Maybe, Satan suggests, Job would not be so rock solid in his faith if God were not so quick to shower blessings on him. God actually agrees with Satan's plan and thus begin the famous trials and tribulations of poor Job. But it is very clear that God and Satan are working together and not as adversaries.

In the Gospels, Satan will show up again as part of the Holy Week and Easter narratives as he helps set in motion the chain of events that will lead to Jesus' crucifixion. Once again, as despicable as Satan's behavior may seem, all is happening as it needs to happen for the story of salvation to play out and our souls to be saved.

It's really more in Paul's letters and then the Book of Revelation that Satan emerges not as God's chief faith examiner but as a deadly enemy of God who eternally seeks to snatch the unwary away from the path to Heaven. Secular works like John Milton's *Paradise Lost* then took that theme and ran with it.

So, this would appear to be our dilemma: Theologically speaking, we can't live with Satan and we can't live without Satan. It is Satan who leads us into temptation but, without Satan's help, the event that paved the way to our salvation from sin would not have happened. As a seminary professor of mine once put it: "Don't think about it too hard. You'll just make your brain hurt."

Well, we might not be able to solve all of the mysteries surrounding Satan but we can definitely absorb the lesson that Flip Wilson tried to teach us all those decades ago. Satan or the Devil or whatever other name we may call him is not meant to serve as an excuse for our weakness. Satan may indeed tempt us but it is very much within our power to resist that temptation. The Devil never made any of us do anything.

Jesus, as we see today, managed to resist some very powerful temptations while He was out in the wilderness. And we might dismiss this account as not being terribly relevant to our circumstances because Jesus was Jesus and we are not. Well, we would be half right. We are not Jesus. But Jesus deliberately went to the wilderness and reduced himself to the weakest and most vulnerable condition He could possibly have endured. He fasted forty days and forty nights. I don't know about you but if I fast for half a day I start to feel a little weak. And let us note that two of the temptations that Jesus resists involve the Devil's suggestions that He use His divine side to save Himself. So I don't think we can comfort ourselves that Jesus' heroic acts of resisting temptation were due solely to the divine side of His nature.

I believe that an important element of spiritual growth, of becoming a spiritual adult, is taking responsibility for one's own mistakes and trying diligently to overcome one's own flaws. We are all flawed. We all make mistakes, sometimes very big mistakes. But our human condition

is not an excuse for giving up and failing to try. Perfection is not a realistic goal but progress is very much realistic. Indeed, progress is mandatory to a life of true faith.

Could I have successfully resisted Satan's temptations if I'd have been the one out in the Wilderness instead of Jesus? No. I like to think of myself as a human being with a pretty strong moral and ethical grounding but I am a human being. On the other hand, the reality that I do not have the moral strength of Jesus does not let me off the hook when it comes to making the effort to overcome my personal set of flaws and weaknesses.

And when it comes to temptation, I'm not sure we really need Satan's help all that much finding it. Every day, we are presented with lots of temptations for gluttony, greed, envy, philandering and a whole host of other sinful activities. And we each have something on that long, long list of no-nos that we are particularly vulnerable to indulging. Having the weakness is not really the problem, though. It's what you do with it.

Stepping out from behind whatever defense mechanisms we've built up is a great first step toward true spiritual growth. Blaming Satan is not a great place to start. I will also note that excessive guilt is no better place to start. As Christians, we are bound by the Lord's command to forgive others but we also need to forgive ourselves. Yes, we have made mistakes but if we can treat those mistakes as learning experiences and as major clues to what kind of work we need to do on ourselves then we can approach our quest for growth with a positive attitude and get some very constructive work done.

Flip Wilson's seemingly whimsical monologues about temptation from the Devil all had a pretty serious underling philosophy. It is ludicrous and counter-productive for us to look anywhere inside ourselves in those moments when we are all too human. Whatever the source of

temptation, it is our responsibility to resist. It is our responsibility to remember the values by which we live. It is our responsibility to take responsibility.

And we have another great responsibility here. The responsibility to forgive. Forgive others and forgive self. Every mistake is just that: a mistake. Our mistakes can drag us down in guilt and shame or our mistakes can lift us up as learning experiences. We all will stumble. We all will fall. Some of us will stay down. Others, hopefully the vast majority, will pick themselves back up, figure out what went wrong and move forward with the greater wisdom that such experiences usually bring.

Flip Wilson had it right. The Devil doesn't make us do anything. The Devil just sets the stage and provides the opportunity. Friends, it's not the Devil. It's you. It's me. Imperfect beings striving to be better people, better disciples and better Christians.