

The Children of Light & the Children of Darkness

This sermon was preached in New York on Sunday, January 13, 1991 when then-President George Bush Sr. had issued an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, demanding that he withdraw his armed forces from Kuwait or risk war with the military forces of the United Nations.

Text: St. Luke 16:1-8

The parable I read to you is known traditionally as The Parable of the Unjust Steward. Jesus ends the parable with the words, "The children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light."

The parable has always been difficult because in it Jesus appears to praise a crook. The unjust steward cheats his master, yet his master seems to commend him for his treachery. This is the difficulty frequently mentioned; but it has never been a difficulty for me. Read the parable remembering that a parable usually has only one lesson to teach, and that when you have found it, you have received its message. Don't torture it beyond that; don't disturb your faith or confuse your thought by worrying about the details. Grasp the main point of the teaching which is always expressed with clarity and power. John Calvin offered us excellent advice on the matter: "How stupid that we try to interpret it at every point," he said. If you don't try to interpret it at every point, the main point is massively simple. Our Lord wishes that His followers were as astute in goodness as the wicked are in wickedness. He tells us that "the children of this world are in their day wiser than the children of light."

Drawing from this text, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a book which he called *The Children Of Light And The Children Of Darkness*. In it he makes the same point that our Lord made: Let the children of light be as shrewd in goodness and in virtue as the children of darkness are in wickedness and evil. As is so often true, the best commentary on the parable is found in words spoken by our Lord on another occasion. As He sent His disciples forth on their mission of teaching and preaching, He warned them to be "as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves."

What does it mean to be as harmless as a dove? It means that we should have a kind of innocence about us; that we should be eager to believe the best. Our actions and attitudes should not express suspicion and hostility, but openness and trust. To be as harmless as a dove is the opposite to being cynical. There should be a directness and honesty about us; what the New Testament calls purity of heart; so that our speech and attitudes are without dissimulation and marked by generosity of spirit.

If this behavior sounds sentimental, and naive, then we ought to remember that it expresses a serious and important truth: that faith, hope and love make possible what fear, suspicion and hostility render impossible. If our attitude to others is marked by wariness and distrust, then relationships wither before they have properly begun. We know this, for we commonly recognize that a person who cannot trust

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anyone is poorly adjusted. We do not regard their inordinate suspicion as an expression of wisdom and mental health, but as an unhappy disorder of the personality. Such people do not have many friends.

Chesterton, as usual, puts it splendidly when he tells us that the greenhorn is constantly being taken in, and that is why he sees the inside of everything. Jesus tells us to be as harmless as doves.

Notice that the advice is given by our Lord to His disciples. His exhortation is individual and personal, for the individual has little responsibility beyond himself. He can choose to accept the risks of trusting others, and will himself bear the consequences if his trust is misplaced. It is more difficult for a government or a nation to act in the same way. The politician who carries his harmlessness too far will not be long in office; and the risk he takes affects not his own life, merely, but the security of his country and the lives and welfare of others.

What does it mean to be as wise as a serpent? It means that we should not be foolish, but vigilant and perceptive. Eager to believe the best, we do not close our eyes to the worst; we do not allow ourselves to be constantly out-manuevered and taken advantage of, so that we come up lean time and time again. Limits are set on our trustfulness by our wisdom. If our openness towards others is taken as an opportunity to exploit us, then it behooves us to adjust our stance and preserve our interests.

It is apparent that to be as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove is not easy. It takes a great deal of self-assurance to do it. Happily, our Lord not only exhorts us to do it, but shows us how. He lived His own advice to us. Was there ever a man more open to the needs of others; more aware of their goodness and nobility; more accepting of their love and good intentions? But He was nobody's fool. St. John records that no one needed to tell Jesus about any man, for He Himself knew what was in a man. He was not deceived, not ever. He came to others with openness of heart and transparency of spirit, meeting them with eagerness to believe the best and with inexhaustible patience and unwearied hope. But He was never taken in, and He never lost a confrontation with those who hated Him. He knew that Herod was a fox; and that the disciples had within them the power of denial and betrayal; and that some of the Pharisees were all show and no substance. When Herod had Him in for questioning, He answered him nothing, knowing that Herod no longer had it in him to do anything but trivialize His words. Our Lord refused to cast his pearls before swine. He answered Herod with the most awful silence the world has ever heard, a silence that has thundered its appalling message for twenty centuries, telling us there are times when nothing can usefully be said, even by Christ.

Our Lord loved deeply but He saw clearly. He trusted them all with His whole life, yet knew that they would bring about His death. He sought to make men and women one with the goodness of God Himself, all the time knowing their capacity for treachery. He was as wise as a serpent and as harmless as a dove. How can we be like Him?

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I. First, by recognizing that the two are not unrelated.

It is by being as harmless as doves that we become wise as serpents, for the condition of moral insight is goodness. There is an astuteness, a shrewdness, that comes not from cleverness or subtlety of mind, but from honesty of spirit. It imparts a clarity of vision, a direct and immediate understanding of what is going on. Mother Teresa possesses it in abundance. Her simplicity clears her sight and gains her insight. She sees to the heart of things in an instant, cutting through and pushing aside the complexity of our mixed motives and divided interests. I met her in London once when she was about to take on the London City Council concerning how many homeless people could sleep in one of her shelters. I found myself pitying the Council! She is as wise as a serpent because she is as harmless as a dove. There is no deceiving her, for her wisdom is born of her goodness. Her moral insight is the expression of her purity of heart.

II. Those who are as wise as serpents recognize the advantages of wickedness.

People are wicked because it gives them an edge over people who are not. There is an obvious benefit in it. In telling lies, for example. We tell lies to deceive others, and that is to our benefit, at least initially. We know the truth while they do not. We distort the truth we know to achieve our ends, and by so doing enjoy an advantage over those we deceive. The consequences to our own character are devastating, of course. But the whole purpose of a lie is to put us ahead of the person we have deceived.

It is the easiest thing in the world to prove this to a New York congregation. All I have to do is invite you to go into almost any of the stores in Manhattan that sell cameras, tape recorders and radios. You will find that buying a tape recorder can be a tricky business. Some salesmen are dishonest and will take advantage of you if they can. It is hard to find out the real value of the model you are buying, or whether it is this year's model or last year's. Some will offer you an article at a fair price because it has been discontinued; and another store will offer the same article at twice the price, telling you it is the very latest model. You move in a world of twilight and shadows, not knowing if you are being deceived, or to what extent. There is a way to deal with all this. Wise people read Consumer Reports before they go shopping; they know exactly what they want and what it should cost them. They compare the prices at several stores. They will not allow themselves to be cheated. They recognize that a person who lies to them enjoys an advantage over them and can take their money.

There is a benefit in wickedness. When people play by different rules they can destroy you. I have seen it happen even in churches. Most churches work by the goodwill, restraint and honesty of their members. This is their expectation and, for the most part, their expectation is not disappointed. But if an individual or group within the church begins to behave with little regard for the well-being of others, they can work great mischief. They are playing by different rules and are able to take advantage of the restraint, trustfulness and good manners of others. A person

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without conscience can act unconscionably, exploiting those who are honorable and gracious. Of course, this doesn't go on for ever, for the good learn wisdom quickly. But while it lasts, the unscrupulous often have things their own way at great cost to the well-being of the whole.

The same thing happens between nations. All through the Cold War, the democratic nations were at a disadvantage, for they played by rules which totalitarian regimes changed or ignored. We made new treaties with governments that hadn't kept the old ones. A totalitarian regime always enjoys that advantage over a free society. We need to recognize this. We have recognized it. If one side believes that treaties are made to be kept, and the other side believes that treaties are to be kept only if it is to its advantage to keep them, the two sides are playing by different rules, and the advantage is with the unscrupulous. Freely elected governments are responsible to their citizens and must give an account of what they do. Totalitarian regimes are not accountable to anyone.

If Neville Chamberlain had kept this in mind, the world might have been saved a great deal of anguish. He dealt with Adolf Hitler in 1939 as though the Fuhrer were a civilized English gentleman incapable of doing anything that "wasn't cricket." Chamberlain thought they were playing the same game by the same rules. Hitler wasn't, and that gave him an enormous advantage. Churchill saw this clearly and did not trust Hitler, for he knew that he was a bad man and that his promises, treaties and reassurances were worthless. What point is there in signing an agreement if the other signature is that of a liar and a cheat? Yet that is what Chamberlain did.

Have I made the point? We were aware of it already, for we knew the words of the Psalmist who declared, "I was overwhelmed when I thought of the prosperity of the wicked." He wondered why it was that all the advantage seemed to belong to evil.

III. Notice, next, that if we are to be as wise as serpents we must recognize the varied forms of evil.

This seems an obvious thing to say, but it needs to be said, because it is difficult for good people to believe that evil is as evil as it is. We are constantly astonished and horrified by it. My own reaction to it is often one of incredulity and disbelief. I know that there are people who violate little children, but there is a part of me that doesn't quite believe it. Some time ago, a young man was stabbed to death in the New York subway, and those who are alleged to have done it went dancing afterwards. The callousness of that action is so appalling that it staggers my imagination. I feel the same way about the horror of evil as I feel while watching a Boeing 747 take off. It happens in front of my eyes, and I know it to be true, yet I cannot believe it.

Yet it ought not to astonish us, for the depravity of the human heart is part of our Judeo-Christian understanding of our nature. The doctrine of Original Sin is part of the religious tradition that shaped our civilization, and it is one of the great doctrines of our faith. We prove the truth of it every time we read a newspaper, or

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our own heart. The doctrine expresses what we already know: that evil is universal, pervasive and intractable.

This has often been denied by liberal optimism and the idea of progress. At times even the church failed to take it as seriously as it deserves. The confession of sin has been eliminated from the services of worship of some churches because it is a "downer." Richard Niebuhr once said that we have made Christian faith "the story of how a God without wrath, brings men without sin, into a Kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross." The trouble with optimism is that reality has a habit of catching up with it. Even when we have managed to eliminate any mention of evil from our faith and the confession of it from our worship, it is impossible for us to ignore its presence in our world. Emil Brunner once suggested that an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree should be conferred on Adolph Hitler on the ground that he had demonstrated more convincingly than any theologian or preacher, the fallenness and depravity of our nature. If the church has sometimes failed to remind us of the evil of evil, our novelists, poets and dramatists have not. Sometimes they remind us of it with an unforgettable phrase. Matthew Arnold spoke of "the something that infects the world." Flannery O'Connor wrote a chilling story and called it *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. Ray Bradbury called his reminder, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.

Sometimes they do it with an apt phrase or title; and sometimes they go even farther and show us the very shape of evil. No one did this better than Herman Melville. He said that evil is like a whale. It is very like a whale. It is like a great white whale. Spalding Gray says it is an invisible cloud that moves around the earth and now and then settles at a particular place, now in Germany, now in Russia, now in Cambodia. George Orwell's picture of evil is "a boot stamping on a human face for ever." But the most powerful and chilling image of all is in *The Second Coming*, a poem by W. B. Yeats, written at the beginning of The Great War. It is a difficult poem, but the meaning is clear and terrifying. The poet's vision is of a new dispensation of evil loosed upon the world. Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. The ceremony of innocence is drowned in blood. The best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity. And somewhere in the sands of the desert, a rude beast with the body of a lion and the head of a man, with a gaze blank and pitiless, is moving its slow thighs, sending the desert birds reeling in dismay, and slouches towards Bethlehem to be born. It will inaugurate a new era of horror, hatred and destruction.

IV. If we wish to be as wise as serpents, we must not only acknowledge the reality of evil, be aware of the advantage it conveys and recognize its varied forms; we must take account of its intractable nature. Evil is persistent, unwearied.

In my congregation in Ireland, there was a little man, a farmer, well-acquainted with country ways and therefore worth a Ph.D. any day. But he had little formal education, and sometimes his use of words was quaint and unusual. When he found an answer to any problem that vexed his mind he would declare with delight, "I have

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solved the solution!" He really meant that he had solved the problem, but he claimed to have solved the solution. Maybe he was a better philosopher and used words with greater precision than I realized. Many have solved their problems who have not been able to solve their solutions. Reinhold Niebuhr agrees with my former friend by observing that history solves no problem without creating another one. The basic unit in the pattern of history is a simple one: The problem, the solution, the problem of the solution.

It was the discovery of this simple pattern that shattered for ever any idea we had of inevitable progress. Do you remember when we boasted "the difficult we do at once, the impossible takes a little longer?" The idea of evolution, carried into every sphere of life from its place in biology, assured us that everything gets better all the time. It was true even of character: "Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better" chanted the chorus led by Emile Coué. The First World War slowed us down a bit; but it was, after all, the war to end war, and we had the League of Nations and the great Russian Experiment, and prophets who saw the future and declared that it worked. But the war to end war set the scene for another; and the totalitarian paradise built its concentration camps in the Gulag; and we discovered that wars are of two sorts, for some are hot and some are cold. And when, seventy weary years later, communism began to disintegrate along with so many of the other "isms" of our time, we began to think of a "peace bonus" and to sigh a collective sigh of relief and believe that all our troubles were over.

We should have known better, having lived in what a play at the Abbey Theater called "The Morning After Optimism." Having solved our problem we have yet to solve our solution. The rough beast stirs in the sands of the desert and once again there is a blood-red tide and a drowning of innocence. The world is not full of nice people waiting to be gracious; it suffers from evil men ruthless in their pursuit and exercise of power. Vigilance must be unwearied. Evil should not be permitted to take us by surprise. We are not allowed any time off. To be as wise as serpents means recognizing the intractable nature of evil and taking it into account in all our deliberations. There are problems beyond our solutions that have arisen out of them. We are in it for the long haul. The race is not a sprint but a marathon.

V. Notice, next, that if we are to be as wise as serpents we should be aware of the pervasiveness of evil.

No person, and no part of our nature, is untouched by it. The world, then, is not divided neatly into the good and the bad. It is not as simple as that. When Reinhold Niebuhr speaks of the children of light, he does not mean that the children of light are all light. It is easy to demonstrate the truth of that. To do so, we need only look into our own hearts and judge ourselves, not when we are at our worst, but when we are at our best. When are we at our best? When we are most loving. But if we take even our most perfect love and scrutinize it, we discover that it is permeated with self-interest, so that our love for others and our love for ourselves are inextricably bound together. We cannot tell where one leaves off and the other begins. Somebody once said that when a young man tells a young woman, "I love you,"

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what he really means is "I love me and I want you." No motive is simple, single and pure.

The same thing may be said of the love of parents for their children. We all know "selfless" parents who by their very selflessness are controlling their children. Even our best love is mixed with selfishness. And the best people know it in themselves. The difference between sanctity and sanctimoniousness is that while good people are aware of the evil that is in them, the sanctimonious are not. Sanctimoniousness lacks self-knowledge; it is self-deceived. Sanctity is aware that we are never as good as we look, or sound. Those who do not see this when they read their own hearts are sentimental. They profess to be good but are without self-knowledge and so overestimate their sanctity. The one thing that distresses Mother Teresa more than any other is to be called a Saint She disclaims it, for she has read her own heart and knows something of what is in it. As the old hymn puts it:

And they who fain would serve Thee best
Are conscious most of wrong within.

It is not only individuals who must be aware of this; governments and nations should be aware of it. Niebuhr felt the need to remind us often that our particular temptation in America is to think that our prosperity is the result of our virtue; that we are blest because we are good; and that we are better than we are. Pretension is the sin of all good people. Patience and humility are always fitting.

This does not mean, however, that there are no differences between governments and nations. All nations are imperfect, but that does not mean that they are moral equivalents and that one is just as good or as bad as another. That conclusion would not only be cynical it would be untrue and dangerous. Dictatorships and democracies are not morally equal. Totalitarian regimes and free societies may both be bad, but they are not equally bad. The reason why they are not has to do with the nature and the exercise of power. Our democracy exists, not because we believe ourselves to be so good that we deserve a say in government, but because we are so bad that no one can be trusted with much power for very long. We are democratic because we believe the old dictum that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." For this reason we preserve the right to vote one lot of sinners out and another lot of sinners in. We insist that our leaders be accountable.

Not so the totalitarian regime and the dictatorship. They are accountable to no one and may exercise power without restraint. Yet there are those within this great Republic who seem unable to discern this difference, who denigrate this country, and forget that with all her imperfection, America is still the land of the free, not only in our own eyes, but in the judgment of the world. They forget that if they were living under a totalitarian government their power to criticize would be curtailed. That is why I thank God for the freedom of this pulpit and this society. That is why I have a passionate hatred of those societies that demand conformity and punish those who dare to differ. That is why Solzhenitsyn, aware as he is of the decay of Western

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Civilization, is nevertheless grateful to be here and to be free to write of the oppression and the cynicism of the government of the Soviet Union.

VI. To be as wise as a serpent means an awareness of the nature of evil such as I have described. It also means knowing where to draw the line.

Morality draws a line. I don't need to persuade you of this, for we have discovered it in our personal relationships. We may reach out to people in love and truth, welcoming them to our mind and heart. We may open our life to them, allowing them to see and know something of what is in us. But if we discover that we reveal ourselves only to be exploited; if what we show is used against us; if love is met with hostility, and generosity with cynicism, then sooner or later we call a halt to it. We draw a line. We don't keep setting ourselves up to be knocked down. Our patience comes to an end and we do not allow our forbearance to make us foolish and subservient. Out of a proper self-regard we refuse to allow others to walk all over us. If we have any self-respect, any sense of integrity, any regard for our own values, opinions, convictions, we draw a line and defend it against any further invasion or violation of the self. We may find it difficult to determine where and when to draw the line; opinions may differ on that; but we know that lines must be drawn or the self will be lost. Chesterton stated it clearly: "Art and morality have this in common, that they both know where to draw the line."

I remember a line being drawn which was both temporal and geographical. It was drawn by the British Government in 1939 when it told the German Government that if it didn't get its troops out of Poland by September 3rd, a state of war would exist between Britain and Germany. If this line had not been drawn, one of the greatest tyrannies our world has seen would have grown stronger and advanced unresisted.

VII. Notice, in closing, that to be as wise as a serpent means believing in the reality of judgment.

Wise people know that actions have consequences; that the chickens come home to roost; that God is not mocked; that whatever we sow we reap. Indeed we may sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. It matters little whether we call this judgment the wrath of God, or dramatic irony, or fearful symmetry. It is the fact, the reality of it, that matters. It was Martin Buber who said: "When Germany ruled, even at the height of their rule, I nevertheless believed that they would fall and that they would be punished." That is what happened. "The mills of the Gods grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small." The regime that was to last for a thousand years endured for less than a decade. And who would have guessed even a short time ago that the Soviet Union would crumble so quickly? Not long ago, I preached a sermon in this church, which I called "The Gods of the Copybook Headings." The title is from a poem by Kipling. Last week I came across an article in *The Economist* with the same title. What is the poem, the sermon and the article about? Their message is that the lessons we wrote in our copybooks when we were children at school are the true, important and enduring ones. What are they? They are the lessons that tell us that water will surely wet us as fire will certainly burn. They warn us that the moon is not made of stilton, and pigs do not have wings. They advise us to stick to the devil we

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know, and remind us that the wages of sin is death. They tell us that all that glitters is not gold, that two and two make four, and that when we refuse to heed them, "The Gods of the Copybook Headings with terror and slaughter return." They remind us that life is moral because God has made it so.

May God guide us. And keep us. And bless us.

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