

# THE DEVIL'S FAVORITE FOOHOLD

## Sermon, October 24, 2021

### Texts: Ephesians 4:25-32, I Peter 5:6-11

As mentioned during the Scripture reading, I inadvertently omitted two verses from the second reading: *"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you."* (1 Peter 5:6-7) I had even considered naming the sermon, "Don't Worry, Be Humble" (but wasn't sure how many, if any, would have understood the joke as a play on that old 1988 pop hit by Bobby McFerrin, "Don't Worry, Be Happy"). In our reading from Ephesians, Paul is warning about giving the devil a foothold, a place, an opportunity. By implication of where Paul puts that warning, I think he is indicating what might just be THE favorite foothold of the Adversary (*we'll come back to that reading from Peter in a moment*). When we last read from this passage in Ephesians on August 8, I paraphrased Paul's marching orders to the Christians there, and by inference, to all Christians through the ages: *"Put off falsehood. Speak truthfully. In your anger, do not sin. If you're stealing, stop it. Do honest work so you may have something worthwhile to share. Stop the corrupting and destructive talk, just stop it. Rather, say GOOD things, encouraging things, things that build people up rather than tearing them down or apart. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, slander, malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."*

And as I said on August 8, that's all pretty straightforward; I could probably just end the sermon now ... but I won't. Much of what follows is what was left on the editing room floor from that sermon and also from my sermon of September 12, the day after the twentieth anniversary of the most devastating attack on our republic in my lifetime (*NOT January 6!*). This basically is one of those sermons I'm referring to when I say, "But that's another sermon!" *"Be angry and do not sin."* Paul writes. *"Do not let the sun go down on your anger, do not give the devil a foothold."* I've always liked Phyllis Diller's paraphrase of this verse: *"Don't go to bed angry ... stay up and fight!"*

Paul says in so many words we need to learn how to be angry at the right things and for the right reasons and in the right ways. Because, you see, not all anger is wrong. It says it right there in the Bible; it says, "Be Angry." Now don't go home after church and use that as an excuse for your bad temper unloading on someone, and then say, *"I was just doing what the Bible says."* Yes, do what the Bible says, but do the whole thing. Be angry and **do not sin**. Anger does have a proper place; in fact, there are times an absence of anger can be a sign of moral laxity. Blatant evil should make us angry. We are made in the image of God, and the Bible tells us even God can get angry. To be sure, His is a holy wrath, a perfect anger, but it is a divine reality. Frankly, I worry about someone who does not (or *can not*) get angry; as someone once put it, *"The person who cannot be angry at evil usually lacks any enthusiasm for the good."* Righteous anger can be a powerful impetus for good, and if we love what is good, then evil will and should anger us! However, righteous anger unchecked and uncontrolled has a way of turning into UNrighteous anger, which can work its way out in all kinds of destructive ways. Aristotle wrote: *"Anyone can become angry. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way ... this is not easy."*

Some other select quotes on anger, some of which I've shared before from this pulpit: *"Anger is just one letter short of danger."* Thomas Jefferson: *"When angry, count to ten before you speak; if very angry, a hundred!"* Mark Twain later wrote, as if in rebuttal: *"When angry, count to four, when very angry, swear!"* (*I'm just quoting; endorsement is not implied!*). From author Frederick Beuchner in his book Wishful Thinking: *"Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and you are giving back - in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself, the skeleton at the feast is yours."* From that great theologian ... Ann Landers: *"Anger is an acid which destroys its container from within."* Finally, from seventeenth century Bible commentator: John Trapp, *"He that will be angry and not sin, let him be angry at nothing BUT sin."*

What begins as justifiable and righteous anger can very quickly devolve into sin. The justifiable anger at sin and evil can become a smug self-righteousness, which is sin; which then can become an occasion of personal resentment, which is sin, which then may become an occasion of outright animosity, which is sin, and so on. Of all the places Paul puts the imperative to not give the devil a foothold ... or, as Peter might express it, to not give that prowling lion a paw-hold ... Paul puts it right here after the admonition: **"Be angry and do not sin."** Don't let the sun go down on your anger. Don't let the devil get his foot (or paw) in the door, don't let him get a foothold to climb and claw his way into your head and heart, don't give him any opportunity to metastasize your anger into evil. The literal translation of "foothold" is "place," so this could be translated, "Don't give a 'place' to the devil. Don't make any room for him." As the old saying goes, "GIVE THE DEVIL AN INCH, AND HE'LL BECOME YOUR RULER." You see,

when someone is always angry, when someone festers in anger, and/or if anger is the underlying disposition of a one's temperament, the devil loves that. It's his favorite foothold. *"I'm angry about this and I'm annoyed about that and I'm irritated by this, and last month she said that to me and twelve years ago he did this and yesterday she didn't do that and three Sundays ago he ignored me, and today she gave me a dirty look and all night long I've been just STEWING about this and that and the other thing, and da ding, da da, da ding ..."* That's marinating in anger, and it'll eat your soul! Add the devil's first initial "D" to anger and you have "danger." He'll play that violin all the way to the end of the symphony (*and then take that fiddle down to Georgia to compete with the Charlie Daniels band!*) That's why Paul admonishes: *"You forgive each other as in Christ God forgave you!"*

And Peter tells us, "RESIST THE DEVIL." You can do that, and a good starting place is resisting the evil of unrighteous anger. (*And this is the part of "that's another sermon" that got edited out September 12.*) There are basically three ways in which we can resist evil. **First, we resist evil by resisting rage.** As mentioned, anger is appropriate. As mentioned, God Himself can get angry. However, while anger is appropriate, rage is something else. To become enraged is to allow the Adversary to convert us, to make us into his image; in a word, we become our enemy. The main difference between anger and rage is that anger is something you possess. Rage is something that possesses you. And being possessed is always the work of the devil. Do not allow rage to possess you. If you do, the adversary wins. Both Peter and Paul tell us, you have the power to resist rage. It is how you resist evil.

**Second, we resist evil by resisting fear.** Peter writes in verse 7, *"Cast all your anxiety on God because He cares for you."* We resist evil by resisting fear. Evil loves to wreak his havoc and maintain power by keeping you afraid. But, the devil cannot make you fear. To be afraid is a human choice; in fact, it's one of the few genuine choices we do have. We choose whether or not to be afraid. Resist the temptation to be afraid and anxious. Those who would control us love to keep us in a state of fear, anxiety, worry ... when we are afraid, we are easily angered, frustrated, divided, discouraged and irritated with each other, with ourselves, and with life in general and easily immobilized for doing any good. Twenty years ago we heard so many stories of courageous actions, stories of heroic people who resisted evil by resisting fear: The plane that crashed in Pennsylvania fell far short of its target because of the heroic and bold efforts of the passengers who resisted fear. The number of New York firefighters who perished September 11, 2001 was nearly three times those lost in a typical year across the entire nation. The **Wall Street Journal** ran an excellent editorial at the time entitled "Common Valor," which praised their heroic and selfless efforts ... while everyone was scrambling down the stairs of the World Trade Center to escape the carnage, these firefighters were racing up the stairs to fight it. A quote from the column: *"In the academy, recruits learn that a firefighter performs but one act of bravery in his career, and that's when he takes the oath of office. Everything after that, it is said, is simply in the line of duty."* How appropriate for all of us who have taken an oath of allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is simply our duty to resist evil, to resist fear, and to cast our anxiety on God. That is why we are called to live by fear's opposite emotion, which is faith. Faith in the perfect love of God which casts out fear. How do we resist evil? By refusing to be afraid. Some of you with especially good memories may remember my telling you twenty years ago that during the week before 9-11, I saw the movie **The Princess Diaries** with my oldest daughter; one memorable line from the film almost salvaged the whole movie for me: *"The courageous may not live long, but the cautious do not live at all."*

We resist evil by resisting rage, we resist evil by resisting fear, **and we resist evil by resisting despair.** It's another human choice we get to make. We can choose whether we will have hope, or whether we will have despair. Despair come out of and/or produces a whole host of "D" words: Disappointment. Doubt. Disillusionment. Defeat. Discouragement. Dismay. Despondency. Depression. Distortion ... especially distortion, as things are magnified all out of proportion by fear and despair. All start with the same diabolical letter D that turns anger into Danger. Every day we hear news commentary and people-on-the-street comments full of D words saying that this is just the way it is; things will never get better, that civilization is inevitably going to hell in a hand basket and there is not all that much we can do about it. **That is not true.** That is a lie from the master of hell. All kinds of good things can be done in response to evil, especially when motivated by a sense of moral and righteous and loving anger. These good things can best be done by those who choose to have hope in their hearts and refuse to give in to the *Disappointment, Doubt, Disillusionment, Defeat, Discouragement, Dismay, Despondency, Depression and Distortion of Despair.*

I close with this from I Peter 5:10. *"And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you."* These are the words that we will, we must, claim by faith. When you choose to believe that, you have hope. Choose hope because without it you cannot be a source of hope to a broken world. Choose hope because it is the only way to resist despair, and if you don't resist despair, then evil wins. Choose hope because greater is He who is within you than he who is out roaming in the world seeking whom he may devour.

*"Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you. And to Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen"*