

THE THREE BIGGEST DEMONS

Years ago, I heard a preacher declare that he knew what the three biggest demons in the church were. (He was being facetious, of course.) We were all very curious and somewhat nervous to find out. When he told us, we were a little disappointed, because we were expecting some new insight from heaven.

The three biggest demons are: Me, Myself, and I.

Egoism. Self-centeredness. Narcissism. Vanity, Self-absorption. Conceit. Self-delusion. Egocentrism. Arrogance. Boastfulness. Insolence. Megalomania. Overconfidence. Ostentation. Self-indulgent. Pomposity. Smugness. Self-glorification. Self-deification.

Later on I read a book that helped me to understand the preacher's insight: The Kingdom Of Self by Earl Jabay. The author recalled a conversation with a client who was struggling with selfishness:

The problem with you is that you are a god-player. You have tried to create your own little world with yourself placed squarely in the center of it. God has no place in your world because you have taken His place. Your whole life is a story of how you have tried to set things up according to *your* will and plans. You wanted to be a king and build yourself a kingdom. The truth is that you are not a god, not even a king. You are a plain, ordinary human being....



The author went on to say – and this important for all of us: “You are a god-playing king. So am I. Everyone is. You failed as a king. I, too. We are both failures – in fact, we even failed to fail successively.” In reality Jabay’s book depicts a phenomenology of sin. He described the quest for autonomy as the root of all sin:

The authority issue – we might call it the “god-problem” – is the core problem in human life. And it is almost insultingly simple. It seeks to answer the question, Who is Number One? The candidates are only two: God and those who represent Him, and self.

He suggested that the Kingdom of Self is expressed in our lifestyles, attitudes, and values through seven priorities: I am power. I am truth. I am right. I am above time. I am the messiah. I am the law. I am perfect.

Later still, when I attended seminary, I learned more about the nature of sin. I discovered that the issue is more profound than the classic definition that stresses bad behavior: “disobeying or not conforming to God’s law in any way.” Another, more comprehensive explanation is provided by Louis Berkof:

The essence of sin lay in the fact that Adam placed himself in opposition to God, that he refused to submit his will to the will of God, to have God determine the course of his life; and that he actively attempted to take the matter out of God’s hand, and to determine the future for himself.

Similarly, Herman Ridderbos explains sin is god-playing or self-deification and idolatry: “man’s willing-to-have-command-of-himself” or “wanting-to-be-as-God.” I learned, therefore, that the root of sin is idolatry, specifically, self-deification.



Genesis 3 explains how Adam and Eve made an alliance with Satan and acted upon their aspiration to become "like God." By asserting their own supremacy in knowledge and ethics they exalted themselves as the final arbiters of truth, supreme judges of good and evil, and the ultimate interpreters of reality.

By eating the forbidden fruit and coveting hidden knowledge Adam grasped the right to *redefine* himself, to claim royal autonomy for and over himself. He became *self-referential*, though he was infinitely unqualified for this task. This was the case, as well, with all of creation, for Adam and Eve took to themselves the authority to re-identify everything over which they were stewards.

In an important sense Adam and Eve conspired to obtain the privilege of God alone -- self-identity. With their newly acquired self-awareness and aspiration to self-sovereignty the first couple tried to "rearrange existence around the self," so that they would become their "own creator, healer, and sustainer." This is self-deification, idolatry -- choosing not to live life on God's terms, for His sake, and for the well-being of His creation.

For Adam and Eve their autonomous, self-definition, lust for power, and grasping for illicit knowledge were equal to self-idolatry. In other words, the original players in God's divine drama rebelled and attempted to rewrite the script. They were prideful and "played God," insisted on creating their own worldview and personal identity. They wanted to be in charge. They did not to remain within the limits set for them. They did not want to listen to God's voice or acknowledge His revelation all around them. They ignored God and listened to an alien voice, and in this way they conspired against their creator.

According to the biblical worldview, however, we are all descendents of Adam. We are all god-players in our individual kingdoms of self. But, we are not qualified by knowledge or character to be God, any more than Adam and Eve. So, we repeat their sin with its disastrous consequences for ourselves and others.

Only another King, more powerful and wise than we are, can deliver us from ourselves and pay the penalty for the evil done by our treasonous, alternative kingdoms.

And that, of course, is Jesus Christ.