

God Talk vs. Satan Talk aka Love vs. Approval

Luke 4:1-13

St. Marks United Methodist Church, Charleston, WV

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¹And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ²for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing during those days. And when they were ended, he was hungry.

³The devil said to him, “**If you are the Son of God**, command this stone to become bread.” ⁴And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’”

⁵And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will.” ⁷**If you**, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸And Jesus answered him, “It is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”

⁹And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “**If you are the Son of God**, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written, “‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,’” ¹¹and “‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”

¹²And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” ¹³And when the devil had ended every temptation, **he departed from him until an opportune time.**

In his book “Lessons in Lifemanship,” Bryan Bell writes,

”The word ‘love’ is used very loosely in our society. People say they ‘love’ various kinds of food, places, events, and things, as witnessed by bumper stickers. They announce they love Coors beer, or Washington High School, or the famous “I  New York” bumper sticker ...

“[But], if a person “loves” New York and makes a visit there, only to be mugged and to endure several other adverse events, he or she may be disillusioned, come home vowing not to return and rip the bumper sticker off the family car.”

His “love affair” with the Big Apple would be over just that quickly. Nothing, like what real love might entail – of going back and dedicating his life to improve the City. We say “we love” but actually we most often mean “***we approve***” or “***we approve of the idea or notion of.***” Actually what many people mean when they say they “love” is, at best, “**conditional love.**”

There are some who have come up with the phrase to distinguish this kind of love, when they say someone has “**UNconditional love.**”

But “**unconditional love**” is as much a **REDUNDANCY** as “**conditional love**” is an **OXYMORON**.

The love that is spelled out in the Bible, notably described in 1 Corinthians 13, is always about love that is not based on conditions.

Sheryl Paul, a counselor, writes in her book “The Conscious Bride” that the term “unconditional love” is as inappropriate as the term “close proximity.”

Or, to further elaborate, I would add as inappropriate as “pizza pie” meaning “pie pie” or another incorrect one: “your PIN number” – your personal identification number number.

However, people see a need to qualify love as unconditional, based on far too many life experiences, like these:

- I know my parents say they love me, but if I come home with bad grades, they surely don’t act like they do.

- I know my mom said she loved me, but when I accidentally broke that plate when I was a child, she didn't act like she loved me at all.
- I know that my wife said she would love me for better or for worse, but when I got fired from my job and we lost a lot of our stuff, she left me for another man.

Counselor Sheryl Paul writes that in none of these – and many, many more -- is love being talked about.

- It's APPROVAL.
- Because LOVE does not need to be earned.
- LOVE does not need to be proven.
- LOVE is NEVER based on "IF certain circumstances are met."

“When a baby is born, the parents don't look at that baby and say, ‘We'll only love her if she gets straight A's, is beautiful, dresses well, is tidy and polite, excels at sports, and attends an Ivy League kindergarten.’ No, they love the baby because she exists, because she is a miracle, because she's here.” [Paul, “The Conscious Bride”]

A child's deepest need is to be loved. The problem is that when we've been raised as children on a steady diet of “conditional love” we often develop into perfectionists, as adults. The underlying belief is ‘if I figure out how to do it perfectly enough I'll be loved.’ (*Ibid.*)

Dr. Greg Baer, in his book “Real Love: The Truth About Finding Unconditional Love and Fulfilling Relationships” puts it simply:

“Real love is ‘I care how you feel.’

Conditional love is ‘I like how you make me feel.’

It's critical that we be able to distinguish between Real Love and conditional love. When we can't do that, we tend to settle for giving and receiving conditional love, which leaves us empty, unhappy, and frustrated.”

Do we remember the words of the children's song, taken from 1 John:

We love, because God first loved us.

If we don't know REAL LOVE -- that is the UNCONDITIONAL LOVE that comes from God -- then there's not much chance that either our childhood nor our adulthood desperate need for love will be met.

And, too often, as Mark Twain once said: **God made us in His own image and we humans have tried and tried to return the favor.** So often, in our imperfect ways, we have brought God down to our level, in **trying to re-create God in our image, the image we have experienced** – turning **God into a capricious, tyrannical lover whose rules we are stuck following if we ever hope to be loved by this conditionally loving God.**

Does that sound too harsh? Heretical?

Listen to a quote from the Rev'd Nadia Bolz-Weber in her book "*Accidental Saints*" as she described her youth minister preaching to her youth group on retreat:

"His main point was that God was waiting to see if we were grateful enough about Jesus' crucifixion that we would start living in a very particular way. The implication was that God was waiting to see if we did not use swear words, or lie about anything, or listen to rock music, or have any kind of sexual inclination toward someone of the opposite sex before we were married. God was waiting to see if we were always cheerful and never drank alcohol or were snarky. Then we would become worthy of God's favor. ...

"What would your lives look like, if you really believed?" said the man with the floppy Bible. As a twelve year old, I believed. At least I thought I believed, but no matter how hard I tried, I just never seemed to be able to make myself into something worthy of God's favor. Perhaps IF I had a personality more naturally predisposed toward clean living and clean speaking and clean

thinking, I could have pulled it off, but as it was I was just me and all the guilt-tripping in the world never seemed to change that
(*Accidental Saints*, pp. 66,69)

In today's scripture, we are able to see clearly the difference between God-speak and the accusatory language of Satan.

God speaks, as in our Baptism, in unconditional love terms: YOU ARE MY BELOVED CHILD, PRECIOUS AND BEAUTIFUL TO BEHOLD.

Satan, however, almost always speaks in conditional / approval based terms, and almost always uses the word **IF**.

"If you are the Son of God, command this stone

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here

At the end of the Gospel lesson we are given a clue that Satan is not finished: "And when the devil had ended every temptation, **he departed from him until an opportune time.**"

Fast forward to Jesus on the cross – about to finish his earthly mission – when Satan comes in one more time and throws his voice through the mouths of the chief priests, soldiers and passers-by, in hurling the *insult-temptation-accusation*: **If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.** (Matthew 27:40, cf. 43; Luke 23:35-36)

As we enter early into this season of Lent, this time of self-reflection, let us take time to reflect upon the words that we use in the Church.

How often does Satan comes in one more time and throw his voice through the mouths of today's religious folks and say things like:

- **“you’re not good enough”** OR
- **“IF you want to know the love of God, then you’d better ...** then add in whatever is the formula that we believe God has told us -- God’s lips to our ear as the only way ... OR
- **IF you don’t want God to send you to everlasting damnation, then you’d better ...** then add in whatever is the formula that we believe God has told us -- God’s lips to our ear as the only way ...

Because if we are not careful, we may one day be surprised to discover that we have been guilty of creating God in our own image, which specializes in **conditional / approval-based love ... which is not love at all**. And that may drive someone away from the only real love that they would ever know.

As we are early into this season of Lent, this time of self-reflection, let us take time to reflect upon those words of scripture:

- **We love because God first loved us.**
- **Nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus.**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.