

FROM THE PASTOR'S PEN



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THE DECEPTION OF EVIL

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I'm in the midst of Presbytery Pastor Eugene Peterson's fourth volume (of a 5 volume series) on Spiritual Theology entitled "Tell It Slant." It has been an excellent series and Peterson's Christian ability to combine Christian depth with probing prose never ceases to amaze me. In his discussion on the parable of the barn-builder, Luke 12:13-21, Eugene writes probing words about the life of the Christian that is often seduced and deceived by evil pretending to be good:

There is nothing more common among those of us who hang out in the company of men and women who follow Jesus than using what everyone agrees is a good thing and essential to the kingdom of God to disguise our sin. Those of us who have committed ourselves to following Jesus and being taught by him are not conspicuously liable to overt sin. We do not want to sin. We do not deliberately set ourselves in the way of evil. But our good intentions are no sure protection from the wiles of the devil, the seductions of the tempter. Nearly all the sins that we get drawn into are packaged as virtues. We think we are asking for or doing something that is biblical and true and right. And, in fact, we are. . .

[Yet] Virtually every temptation that comes to those of us who are committed to Jesus and have thrown ourselves sacrificially into a life of following Jesus comes in the form of something right and necessary and obviously good. The devil doesn't waste his time tempting us to do something that we know is evil. He hides the evil in something good and then tempts us with the good. We have been well warned that the devil comes as an angel of light. Why do we continue to live in such naiveté? The old camp song has it right: "The devil is a liar and a conjuror too, and if you don't watch out he'll conjure you."

One of the wonders of the world is the rampant sin that flourishes to applause in Christian communities and organizations. Ambition and pride and avarice are uncritically given places of honor

and then "supported" with a proof text and sealed with prayer. Jesus is not an uncritical prayer-answer. He has been through this before. Those forty days and nights of desert temptation allowed no room for naiveté in these matters. Everything that the devil put before Jesus was wrapped in Scripture packaging. Jesus was not tempted by the obvious evil but by the apparent good. He saw through it and stood fast. We can't be too careful in these matters.

The longer I am a Christian, the more I see that the obvious, and "clear and present" evil is rarely the seduction I fall prey to. It is more the evil that pretends to be a good that sinks its talons into my heart. Remember at the beginning of the Word when the serpent asks – "Did God really say . . . ?" As Peterson notes, the temptation of Jesus, of course, is the scariest example of such a thing – when the devil actually uses Scripture to tempt Jesus to engage in an apparent good when it is actually a catastrophic evil. Therefore "vigilance" is necessary. It requires that we be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the evils we cannot readily see or too quickly rationalize away. Therefore, it must start from honestly acknowledging that we often don't "see through it" and are not "too careful in these matters." This is the heart of Christian confession and repentance. When that is real, the Holy Spirit can really begin to clean house.

