

How Martin Luther Dealt With the Devil

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Thoughts from the reformer on how to handle the assaults of the devil.

Because he was on the front line of the battle to restore the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Church, Martin Luther had numerous encounters with the devil and demons. How he dealt with the devil provides a classic illustration of walking the line between ignorance and obsession. Read his words carefully.

Luther compares the devil to a chained dog.

Why should you fear? Why should you be afraid? Do you not know that the prince of this world has been judged? He is no lord, no prince any more. You have a different, a stronger Lord, Christ, who has overcome and bound him. Therefore let the prince and god of this world look sour, bare his teeth, make a great noise, threaten, and act in an unmannerly way; he can do no more than a bad dog on a chain, which may bark, run here and there, and tear at the chain. But because it is tied and you avoid it, it cannot bite you. So the devil acts toward every Christian. Therefore everything depends on this that we do not feel secure but continue in the fear of God and in prayer; then the chained dog cannot harm us. But this chained dog may at least frighten him who would be secure and go ahead without caution, although he may not come close enough to be bitten.

Christians should face the devil with the Word of God.

Experience is required, gathered in many kinds of bouts and temptations, to be able to meet the devil when he comes and enters into judgment with us, wants us pious, and, on the basis of the Law, argues with us about what it means to have done right or not. Before an untried and inexperienced Christian has learned his lesson, the devil has so disturbed him that he must fear and tremble and does not know which way to turn. Therefore we must learn to cling to Christ's Word and comfort alone and to permit the devil no argument about our own works or piety.

Luther saw the "white devil" as the greater threat.

Let us learn clearly to recognize the tricks and subtleties of the devil. No heretic comes in the name of error or Satan, nor does the devil himself come as devil, especially not the white one. . . . In spiritual matters, not the black but the white devil operates and presents himself in angelic and divine guise. . . . Therefore Paul ironically calls the doctrine of the false apostles, the minister of Satan, a gospel.

The white good-looking devil is the one who does the most harm, the devil who eggs people on to commit spiritual sins, which are not regarded as sins at all but as pure righteousness and are defended as such. . . . Therefore he must embellish them with a fine appearance and gloss them over with these holy names: God's Word, the worship of God, a divine life, etc.

Luther would have little good to say about those who enter into lengthy dialogue with demons in their alleged "deliverance sessions."

One does not gain much ground against the devil with a lengthy disputation but with brief words and replies, such as, "I am a Christian, of the same flesh and blood as is my Lord Christ, the Son of God. Settle your account with him." Then the devil does not stay long.

In the great hymn of the Reformation, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," Luther wrote:

Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us none, he's judged; the deed is done; one little word can fell him.

Luther dealt with the devil with cold contempt.

Satan may be overcome by contempt, but in faith, not in presumption. However, he is certainly not to be invited; for he is a powerful enemy, seeing and hearing everything that lies before us and that we are now talking about. And God permitting, he spoils everything that is good.

When the devil comes during the night to plague me, I give him this answer: "Devil, I must sleep now; for this is God's command: Work during the day, sleep at night." If he does not stop to vex me but faces me with my sins, I reply: "Dear devil, I have heard the record. But I have committed far more sins which do not even stand in your record. Put them down too. . . . " If he still does not stop accusing me as a sinner, I say to him in contempt: "Holy Satan, pray for me! You never have done anything evil and alone are holy. Go to God and acquire grace for yourself. If you want to make me righteous, I tell you: Physician heal yourself."

We recently received a request from a pastor who was seeking information on casting a demon out of a house. The best suggestion comes from Luther.

The devil has often raised a racket in the house and has tried to scare me, but I appealed to my calling and said, "I know that God has placed me into this house to be lord here. Now if you have a call that is stronger than mine and are lord here, then stay where you are. But I well know that you are not lord here and that you belong in a different place - down in hell." And so I fell asleep again and let him be angry, for I well knew that he could do nothing to me.

Some Christians have the impression that God and the devil are locked in mortal combat and that we, as God's people, are also engaged in this "spiritual warfare." For Luther, the devil is an agent of God.

God uses the devil and the evil angels. They, of course, desire to ruin everything; but God blocks them, unless a well-earned scourging is in order. God allows pestilence, war, or some other plague to come, that we may humble ourselves before him, fear him, hold to him, and call upon him. When God has accomplished these purposes through the scourge, then the good angels come again to perform their office. They bid the devil stop the pestilence, war, and famine. So the devil must serve us with the very thing with which he plans to injure us; for God is such a great Master that he is able to turn even the wickedness of the devil into good

The purpose of the devil is to attack the Word of God and destroy our faith. We should not be surprised by the rise of false teachers and heretics.

When God's holy Word arises, it is always its lot that Satan opposes it with all his might. At first, he rages against it with force and wicked power. If that promises no success, he attacks it with false tongues and erring spirits and teachers. What he is unable to crush by force he seeks to suppress by cunning and lies. This was his strategy at the beginning. When the Gospel first came into the world, he launched a mighty attack against it through Jews and Gentiles, shed much blood, and filled Christendom with martyrs. When this did not succeed, he raised false prophets and erring spirits and filled the world with heretics... And we must be prepared for this, and by no means allow it to disturb us, for so it must be, as Paul tells the Corinthians: "There must also be heresies among you that they which are approved may be made manifest (1 Corinthians 11:19)."

We must stand firmly upon the Word of God.

All the cunning of the devil is exercised in trying to tear us away from the Word. If in the external preaching he does not succeed in making people unwilling to hear the Word, yet he succeeds in the heart by persuading them not to cling to it.