

Which sounds worse – evil or wicked? Our Sunday morning Bible Class usually concludes with Luther’s morning prayer which ends with these words: “that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.” Every now and then you hear someone in the group saying “wicked foe” instead of “evil foe,” because wicked, to them, sounds worse than evil.

Maybe we should actually start using the word malicious in our prayer. That’s the word we see here in our text. Jesus, it says, is aware of “*their malice*.” Jesus’ foes are malicious. They cozy up to Him using flattering words, but their sole intent is to destroy Him.

Now the Greek New Testament has a few different words for evil or wickedness. One of these is a more latent form of evil. It’s like cancer cells that are dormant in the body, inactive. But the one here in our text – malice – is active wickedness, like aggressive cancer cells in the body. This is what we see, who we see, plotting against Jesus.

It’s a very clever plan. The Pharisees send both their students, or disciples, to Jesus along with the Herodians. They will ask Him this question: “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*” which will destroy Him no matter how He answers. If He says, “Yes, we should pay taxes to Caesar,” He will anger the people and turn them against Him, for they detest the Roman Caesar and Roman rule over them. If He says, “No, we should not pay taxes to Caesar,” the Herodians, who are loyal supporters of Rome, will report Him to the governor, and Jesus will be in a heap of trouble.

They have Him, finally. These malicious foes have put their heads together and figured out a way, it says, to *entangle* Jesus. That word means to trap, to set a snare as when a hunter wants to catch his prey.

Our first parents were caught this way. The hunter was the wicked foe who maliciously, with evil intent, cozied up to Adam and Eve to lay his trap. And it worked to perfection. They took the bait, eating of it, and they, with all their children, fell into sin under the power of the malicious foe, Satan.

It worked well in the Garden. Why not here with Jesus? The Serpent is poised to strike. But Jesus cannot be trapped. He refuses to answer their ridiculous question. “*Show Me a coin*,” He says, and they do. “*Whose likeness is this?*” “*Caesars’s*,” they reply. “*Therefore*,” says Jesus, “*render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s*.” He does not take the bait. With brilliant wisdom He avoids their devious trap.

And they are in awe of Him. They marvel it says. Their mouths drop open so amazed are they. And then, it says, they leave Him and go away. Does this mean that the evil is defeated? No, it finds a new target. Those who come with evil against Jesus now become the victims of that evil. They marvel at Jesus it says. Is not this an eye-opening moment for them? Rather than seeking to trap Jesus, isn’t it becoming clear to them now that they actually should be seeking to learn from Him? Even to follow Him? For they are in awe of Him.

But evil will have none of that. Like a vicious, aggressive cancer it quickly moves to close their hearts to Him, and it turns their feet around to walk away from Him.

This same thing happened after Jesus fed the five thousand. Except for the Twelve, we're told that many of His disciples left Him and no longer walked with Him. Really? Yes, really. They hear Jesus' wisdom as He teaches them. They witness His miracles. They are fed with a few loaves of bread for so many. But even after all this they leave Jesus and go their separate ways.

This happens in every generation you know. The very ones who receive Jesus' miracle of baptism, who hear His teaching from the pulpit, and who are fed the Bread of Life at His altar, for whatever reason part ways with Him, and like those in our text, they leave Jesus and go away, many never to be seen again.

Evil is malicious. Even dormant cancer cells can become active in the body. And far worse is when this happens in the soul.

Now I wonder if those who walk away from Jesus would still do so if they were to pray each and every morning: "Let not the evil foe have any power over me." We can pray that prayer for them, as well as for ourselves. It's very easy to spot evil in others, especially when it's active and aggressive. It's not so easy to recognize evil in ourselves. Oh, but it is there. Dormant most likely, and not aggressive. But only because we are constant in prayer and in hearing the words of Jesus.

Look at Jesus' words in our text with me. "*Render to Caesar...*" He says. We all know what that means. Pay your taxes. But also pay respect and obedience to Caesar, to the government. But then Jesus goes on. "*Render to God...*" And we think, what? Render what to God? Not taxes to God. But offerings, yes. And also respect and obedience to Him.

What about the evil within us? Caesar doesn't want it. He will punish us if we render evil to Caesar. But not God. He wants us to render to Him our evil hearts because, in our baptism, He washes them clean. God wants us to render to Him our sins, all of them, because He loves to render to us the forgiveness of our sins.

Whatever evil is in you, whether it is dormant or aggressive, render it to God. Confess it to Him. He forgives you, my friend, of all the evil in your life, of all the sins you have done.

And render something else to God. Those who have walked away from Him, those you know and love. He loves them. Jesus died on the cross for them as well as for you. Give them to Jesus. Give them to Him in prayer. He is the One, and the only One, who can confront evil, even malicious, aggressive evil, and turn hearts back to Him. He is the medicine that stops the cancer of sin in its tracks.

Evil had its way with Jesus. But in rising from the dead, He broke its power forever. And so, no, the evil foe has no power over you. Not when you remain constant in prayer, constant in hearing the words of Jesus, constant at His Table of Grace. Satan cannot trap you when you abide in Jesus in these ways. Instead of you leaving Jesus and going away from Him, the evil foe will be forced to leave you because you are one who remains in Christ. Amen.