

UNMASKING THE DOMINION SYSTEM¹

Rudyard Kipling gets us started today with his children's adventure story, *Rikki Tiki Tavi*. Rikki Tiki is a cute little mongoose who is rescued from drowning by an English family that has just moved into a house in India. The family decides to keep Rikki Tiki as a pet. What Rikki discovers in his adventures around the house and garden is that there are a pair of large cobras—Nag and Nagainia—in the garden. They have a nest of eggs about to hatch and they prefer the house to be vacant. The cobras have a grand plan. They will simply kill the family members one by one, beginning with the father. But as Nag lies in wait for the father, he falls asleep and Rikki pounces upon him. The wild struggle awakens the family and the father shoots the snake.

The more dangerous cobra, Nagainia is infuriated and at length, corners the little boy of the family. Thinking quickly, Rikki dives down the snake hole and destroys all but one of the eggs in the nest. The remaining egg he uses as a hostage to distract Nagainia and permit the boy to escape.

The story's culmination comes as Rikki chases the huge cobra down into her own nest. After a painfully long time, Rikki finally emerges battered but triumphant.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on February 24, 2008 at the First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange, GA.

I use this story as a window which gives us a fresh look at the heroism of Jesus who himself courageously faced, exposed, and broke the power of evil in the world. He chased evil even down in its nest—Hell itself.

Now, I call this a window rather than a definitive explanation of Jesus' suffering, because what Jesus did was more amazing, more mysterious, and required him to die rather than merely to have a big fight with evil. So, in the end, Rudyard Kipling's story doesn't exhaust the full meaning of the cross. But it helps.

The way it helps is by lifting up how important simply exposing evil is. Rikki is a cute little Mongoose. He faces the danger, which works to bring it into plain view. The cobras would have preferred to work in the shadows, striking silently when the humans sleep. Thrashing around with a little mongoose on their backs greatly limits their power. That's how Nag got shot.

One of the effects of Jesus' trip to Jerusalem and death on a cross is that he flushes evil out of the shadows. There's a mystery to this and I'm doing my best to put this into words that make some sense. Basically, I'm thinking that Jesus was so good and so free from evil that it required demonic forces to call on everything they had to do him in. Jesus' courage in going to Jerusalem and facing evil directly had a way of

exposing it. You or I, who are not nearly as courageous and somewhat given to wrongdoing would not be as difficult to defeat. Jesus was the hardest imaginable man to bring down. In fact he never really succumbed to evil by sinning. He simply lost his life in the conflict.

Put differently, it gives us chills to think that when God comes to us in person, humanity works together to hang him on a cross.

What does it say about humanity when the best religion that the world has ever seen—Judaism—not only fails to recognize the God it worshipped, but hates that God. Rome was the most civilized and powerful political entity ever known to that point. And Rome was duped into killing Jesus. Even Jesus' own disciples betrayed and abandoned him. If we take all the interests that came together in the cause of defeating Jesus, we have to sit back and ask, "What kind of world is this?"

M. Scott Peck, the psychiatrist and very popular writer back in the early 1980's, wrote a book called, People of the Lie. Peck later became a Christian. But he was coming to some pretty Christian insights well before. In his work with people as a psychiatrist, Peck began to realize that sometimes there was a dark quality about some people's lives that could only be explained by calling it evil. Not sick. Not confused. Not naughty. Evil. He went on to assert that where evil exists,

there also exists some kind of deception or lie. Like the malevolent snake, evil lies in the shadows. Lucifer—one of the names for the Devil—means “light.” That which is evil doesn’t present itself to us in ugly, scary ways. What is evil comes to us like light. It’s attractive. It looks like easy money, or easy love. It looks like religion, family, love, good feelings, prosperity. It looks like material goodies. How was Adolph Hitler often photographed? With children. Just an old grandfatherly softy.

The story is told of old saint Martin who was saying his prayers. The Devil decided to deceive Martin and he dressed up to look like Jesus. You see, the devil is clever enough to look even like Jesus. As Martin prayed the disguised devil, looking exactly like Jesus came to him. Martin eyed him carefully. Then he said quietly, “Where are the nail holes?”

What difference does it make for us that Jesus and his suffering exposes the full extent of evil in this world? For one, it helps us understand why so many problems in our personal lives and in the world are so persistent. For all the effort well-meaning people have put forth to eradicate poverty, hunger, terrible drugs, and so on—isn’t it curious that there is so little real improvement?

Take a more personal look. How would you evaluate your own progress in the last 10 years toward becoming a more holy,

generous, trusting person? Truth is, we can be church attenders and want to develop as Christians, but something often blocks.

The same forces that arrayed themselves against Jesus are arrayed against you and me. Remember C. S. Lewis' Screwtape Letters? They are a senior devil's advice to a junior tempter in how to spiritually destroy a person. What's interesting and haunting about the book is that the devil's wiles are exactly the kinds of challenges we face in our lives—except we don't think of them as the face of evil determined to destroy us. In other words, you and I may be up against much more cunning than we ever imagined!

The cross of Jesus Christ saves us in this respect. It gives us a harrowing look at what's out there and how sly and ruthless it is. How does Paul put it:

We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

Walter Pater has suggested that the way to perfection is marked through a series of disgusts. In letting us see that there is an evil established in this world that actually hated, plotted against and managed to kill the Son of God in the world, Jesus' suffering is to horrify and disgust us. It's to awaken us and humble us. It is to give us to know that such forces are at work in our own lives. When we awaken to the reality of evil

in the torture and execution of Jesus we can only cry: "Help us, O Lord! Help us!" And that is the first step in hungering and thirsting for righteousness.