

Halloween

Ephesians 6: 10-12

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Next Thursday we will celebrate Halloween. Hundreds, probably thousands, of children and parents will descend upon Bedford for the evening's festivities. They will arrive, some from as far away as Lynchburg and Roanoke, in all manner of costumes. They will be dressed in both funny and scary outfits that disguise their identities and bring delight to those who greet them at the front doors of their homes. They will parade up and down the brightly lit streets of downtown Bedford boldly declaring, "Trick or treat." Even now the residents of our town are preparing for this annual event, spending considerable sums of money on candy and other treats. Homes are festooned in all manner of Halloween decorations from imaginary graveyards to giant inflated dragons and scary skeletons. Aside from a few stomach aches from eating too much candy, it will be a mostly safe and fun filled evening, with lots of adults making sure that things don't get out of hand. There is, however, another side to Halloween that we need to take into account as we prepare for this occasion, which is ranked as one of the fifteen most popular holidays in America.

First of all, Halloween is a holiday with a pagan origin. It dates all the way back to pre-Christian celebrations in Europe, especially England and Ireland. It grew out of the Celtic culture in which Druids were the religious leaders. It was their belief that October 31st marked the end of the year, a time when the harvest had been gathered and the days were growing shorter and darker. On that night the souls of those who had died during the past year were released from their graves to wander about in the land of the living along with a whole host of evil spirits. Departed family members could even revisit their earthly homes for one last time before being judged by the Lord of the Dead. This divinity would assign them a new future existence either as an animal or as a human being depending on whether they had been good or bad.

As you can easily imagine, for people of that pre-Christian era, Halloween was a scary night. Huge bonfires were lit to keep the evil spirits away. Various sacrifices were performed, and gifts of food would be prepared to placate the spirits of the dead so that they would be spared of any harmful tricks like a spoiled harvest or sickness and death. Goblins and ghosties were abroad and no one wanted to encounter one of these unearthly denizens. Although the fear of such frightening encounters began to gradually subside over time, many of the practices remained. People dressed

up to look like evil spirits and roamed from house to house, demanding food in exchange for leaving the home unharmed. They also carved demonic faces on hollowed-out turnips and put lighted candles inside of them.

To counteract this persistent paganism, the Christian Church decided to transform this holiday into something that was more Christ like. During the Middle Ages, they discouraged this heathen celebration and replaced it with a Christian holiday. Instead of honoring an ancient practice that was now deemed to be evil, they instead called God's people to a special remembrance of the saints, the hallowed ones, those who had lived godly lives. It was like the church was saying, "All right, if you must have a day to celebrate the dead, then celebrate those who died and are now with the Lord."* This new holy day was to be held on November 1st and was known as "All Saints' Day" or "All Hallows Day." The evening before thus became known as "All Hallows Evening" from which the name Halloween is derived. Unfortunately, All Saints' Day is not observed with the same zeal as Halloween, which brings me to this second observation.

Halloween has become a celebration of that which is evil. It has taken us back to the days of the Druids. Yes, I know that for most of us it is a time for children to dress up and go trick or treating. I have handed out my share of candy over the years and have even participated in church events known as "Trunk or Treat" parties. The kids come to a church and get their treats from adults handing out candy from the trunks of their cars. However, let's be honest. There is a darker side to Halloween than we sometimes want to admit. The decorations that are sold in the big box stores are not friendly, warm-hearted caricatures. They have a sinister appearance—ghosts, witches, vampires, skeletons and a conglomeration of hideous monsters. These are not the kind of things that any of us would like to meet on a moonless night. They are meant to be frightening. Additionally, many times parents accompany their children when they go trick or treating, because it might not be safe otherwise and all candies have to be scrutinized before consuming. On more than one occasion children have been poisoned by the Halloween candy they ate.

Furthermore, Halloween is a special occasion for those who consider themselves to be witches and Satanists. They consider it to be a particularly potent time to cast spells and to participate in rituals such as "drawing down the moon," basically honoring the moon as a female goddess. To make matters worse film makers exploit this holiday with an endless assortment of horror movies, venerating and delighting in that which is evil. What kind of an impact do these movies have on those who watch them, especially young people? Is it good or not so good. To be perfectly honest, Halloween is a lot more than a harmless holiday.

However, there is one good thing that Halloween accomplishes. It reminds us that we are facing a powerful adversary. He goes by many names such as Satan, the devil and Beelzebub. He was present in the Garden of Eden, tempting Adam and Eve to sin against God. His presence is also noted throughout the pages of the Old Testament, leading the Lord's people astray. The prophet Daniel, for example, was informed of the devil's influence in the governments of his day and time. The angel Gabriel told him that he was hindered in delivering a message to the prophet because the demonic prince of Persia stood in his way. We all know that Satan tempted Jesus during His sojourn in the wilderness following the baptism by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Later Jesus said of him, "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is not truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). As such, Satan has led and is continuing to lead a rebellion against God, evidenced throughout the book of Revelation in the New Testament. Peter warned fellow believers in his first letter, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). In his letter to Jewish Christians, James says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Finally, with great earnestness and conviction Paul tells us, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:10-12).

So in response, what should we do with regard to all these warnings. For one thing, we should take them seriously. Those who wrote the Bible considered Satan to be a truly worthy and dangerous adversary. So should we. Even though some people consider him to be nothing more than a figment of our imagination, we should never let him hide behind that false assumption. He is real and deeply involved in the affairs of mankind. When he offered Jesus in the wilderness all the kingdoms of the earth, Satan was not making an idle promise. He had influential power then and he still does today. Secondly, we need to follow the Scriptural advice to stay away from those things which introduce us to the dark side of life. Handing out candy on Halloween will not necessarily lead us astray, but there are some aspects of this holiday that could very well lead us to places and practices which are spiritually dangerous, like Ouija boards and seances. Finally, we have a duty and a responsibility to lead those who are dabbling with the forces of evil to forsake the darkness and embrace the light. Years ago, I met a lady who lived near the church. She was a Spiritualist. She believed that the spirits of the dead as well as other spiritual entities could communicate with the living. I invited her to attend our church and after attending for a while she realized that she no longer needed those spiritual guides from her past to be

a part of her life. She accepted Christ as her Lord and Savior and became a Christian.

As we all know pumpkins are part of Halloween. So in closing let me share this story with you about a special Halloween pumpkin. A ten year old little girl was asked by another classmate, "What is it like to be a Christian." The girl replied, "It's like being a pumpkin. God picks you from the patch, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off of you. Then He cuts open the top and scoops out all of the yucky stuff. He removes the seeds of doubt, hate, greed, etc. and then He carves you a new smiling face and puts His light inside of you to shine for all the world to see."

THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE A HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

*The Christian Perspective on Halloween,