

Jesus' Temptation

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Luke 4:1-13

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

Some people, preachers especially, portray the Christian life as easy. All you have to do is believe in Jesus and—voila!—your problems will be solved. Good things attend those who believe. Eternal life is included in the deal.

But if one is really serious about following Jesus, the path of discipleship proves challenging. It's harder than living a self-centered life. Things bother me now that I used to let slide. This faith I profess makes a claim upon my time and money. Maybe that's why so many people become disillusioned and drop out.

Don't get me wrong, following Christ is a better, more fulfilling way to live. It may not be easier, but it's far better!

Take temptation. The trouble with temptation is its so tempting. It's easier to give in to temptation than resist it. Oscar Wilde said he could resist anything but temptation. Mark Twain said, "I deal with temptation by yielding to it."

We'll never know how hard it is to resist temptation if we're always giving in to it. C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*: "Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of a German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of the wind by trying to

walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives into temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of an evil impulse inside us until we try to fight against it."

Temptation looms large in God's Big Story. God creates Adam and Eve to bear His image and live in paradise. A crafty serpent tempts them to eat forbidden fruit. We call this act of treason, "the fall." Adam and Eve fall out of relationship with God. God, however, takes the initiative through Jesus Christ to redeem the relationship.

I talked about Jesus' baptism last Sunday. God commissions Jesus to his Messianic task with the words, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:22). The devil wastes no time in trying to bring Jesus down. He immediately attempts to foil Jesus from accomplishing God's purposes.

Some people will undoubtedly scoff at the devil as an antiquated way of portraying evil. I wouldn't be so sure. In my role as pastor, I see not only people's glossy side but their shadow side as well. Evil is menacing and real. There are diabolical, spiritual forces at work to bring us down.

C. S. Lewis writes in the preface to his whimsical yet altogether serious book *Screwtape Letters*, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which we can fall about devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them.”

Satan first attacks Jesus at the point of his physical need. We read in verse 2 that Jesus has just emerged from a 40-day fast. Luke tells us Jesus is hungry. I should say so. “If you are the Son of God [If you are the Beloved, in whom God is pleased] why don’t you turn these stones into bread?” (4:3).

Satan’s temptation has nothing to do with food. Hunger isn’t the cause of Jesus’ temptation. Jesus is tempted to use his God-given power to serve his own ends. He rejects Satan’s offer to expend power on his own appetites. Jesus’ mission is doing God’s will, not providing for his own needs. In the words of Deuteronomy: “Man does not live by bread alone” (8:3). It’s more important for Jesus in this moment to obey the Word of God than to satisfy his hunger.

Henri Nouwen has written an insightful book on Jesus’ temptations entitled *In the Name of Jesus*. He regards Jesus’ first temptation as the enticement to do something relevant. Nouwen left his teaching post at Harvard to work among the mentally handicapped near Toronto. He writes, “The first thing that struck me when I came to live in a house with mentally-handicapped people was that their liking or

disliking me had absolutely nothing to do with any of the useful things I had done until then. Since nobody could read my books, they could not impress anyone, and since most of them never went to school, my 20 years at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard did not provide a significant introduction.

“This experience was, in many ways, the most important experience of my new life because it forced me to rediscover my true identity. These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments.”

The devil does not give up easily. Like a pushy salesman, he leads Jesus to a high place and invites him to survey all the kingdoms of the world. “All this I will give you,” the devil says, “if you will fall down and worship me” (3:7).

What a delicious offer. In this God-forsaken place where Jesus has nothing, he is offered everything. Satan offers Jesus a short cut to an earthly throne, the promise of gain without pain. Jesus must have already had a premonition that the road ahead would entail struggle and sacrifice. It must have been incredibly tempting to be offered a way to circumvent the pain.

Any offer of power must be weighed with careful consideration of its terms. Thomas Jefferson said, “Do not bite at the bait of pleasure

till you know there is no hook beneath it.” Sure, power is tempting, but at what price. Nothing is worth the price of abandoning God. “Worship the Lord your God,” Jesus said to the devil, “and serve him only” (Deuteronomy 6:13).

Henri Nouwen identifies this second temptation as the temptation of power. Power is particularly seductive in a city like Washington. Jesus’ understated manner in his baptism and temptation impress me. What a marked contrast to the fanfare and extravagance of our presidential inaugurations.

The Christian church has always been tempted to use political, economic and even military power to achieve its ends. Church history is replete with examples of Christians bending the knee to worldly power. With this rationalization, Nouwen writes, “Crusades took place, inquisitions were organized, Indians were enslaved, positions of great influence were desired, splendid cathedrals and opulent seminaries were built.”

What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, “Do you love me?” We ask, “Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your kingdom” (Matthew 20:21).

Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says,

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written (the devil can quote Scripture too!) ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone’” (3:9).

Jesus confounds Satan for a third and final time with the Scripture, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Deuteronomy 6:16). At this point their dialogue ceases. Our story ends with the chilling words, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time” (4:13).

Nouwen says this third temptation is doing something spectacular to win applause. Yet, Jesus sees this temptation for what it really is, as an act of individual heroism to gain popularity. In Nouwen’s words, “Jesus refused to be a stunt man... He did not come to walk on hot coals, swallow fire or put his hand to the lion’s mouth to demonstrate that he has something worthwhile to say.”

Jesus steadfastly refuses to order his life around relevance, power and popularity. Nouwen admits near the end of his book, “Too often I have looked upon relevance, power and popularity as ingredients of effective ministry.” Add me to the list. I want to be seen as relevant. I want to leverage popularity to gain advantage over people. I’m not immune from the grab for power.

Temptation disguises evil as something good. Would evil look all that attractive to us if we saw evil for how monstrous it truly is?

Some years ago, a garden center in British Columbia desperately tried to track down customers who bought incorrectly labeled perennials. The label should have read, “All parts of this plant are toxic,” but an employee, as a practical joke, changed the label to “All parts of this plant are tasty in soup” thinking it would have been caught by a horticulturalist. Fortunately for this nursery, no one made soup with ingredients from these toxic plants.

God has put a toxic warning label on sin. But the devil has switched the labels— Looks good, tastes great. This fruit is desirable to make one wise”

In God’s Big Story of creation, fall and redemption, Jesus Christ serves as God’s antidote to sin. The author of Hebrews writes, “Because he himself was tempted by what he suffered, he is able to help those are being tempted” (2:18).

Jesus does not live a detached life, free from human adversity and trouble. He enters our world of temptation. Jesus Christ understands our plight. That’s why He offers us help and strength in defeating temptation.

The temptations in our world are legion—anger, envy, greed, hatred, jealousy, lust, lying, pride—you name it. There is no sin in being tempted. The danger is when we allow temptation to pull up a chair and keep us company. Martin Luther said, “Don’t sit near the fire if your head is made of butter.” The closer we sit to temptation, the more we’re going

to get burned. James counsels us, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (4:17). In the words of a Danish proverb, “No one can be caught in a place he does not visit.”

God’s remedy for temptation is the full and complete pardon offered in Jesus Christ. The risen Christ gives us the power to defeat deeply entrenched sins. Living as a disciple is, admittedly, not an easy way to live. You will become aware of sins you would rather ignore. It’s not an easy way to life, but it’s better—way better!

