

The Power of Temptation

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Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’

and

‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The story is told of a man who wanders into a small antique shop in San Francisco. It's mostly cluttered with junk, but on the floor, he notices what looks to be an ancient Chinese vase. On closer inspection, it turns out to be a priceless relic from the Ming dynasty whose value is beyond calculation. It's worth everything else in the store put together. The owner clearly has no idea as to the worth of that possession because it's filled with milk, and a cat is drinking from it.

The customer sees an opportunity for the deal of a lifetime. "That's an extraordinary cat you have," he says to the shopkeeper. "How much would you sell her for?" "Oh, the cat's not really for sale," replies the owner. "She keeps the store free of mice." "I really must have her," the man continues. "Tell you what-I'll give you a hundred dollars for her." "She's not really worth it," laughs the owner, "but if you want her that badly, she's yours."

"I need something to feed her from as well," the customer continues. "Let me throw in another ten dollars for that saucer she's drinking out of." "Oh, I could never do that," says the owner. "That saucer is actually an ancient Chinese vase from the Ming dynasty. It's my prized possession, whose worth is beyond calculation. Funny thing, though; since we've had it, I've sold seventeen cats." (Ortberg, John. *Everybody's Normal Till You Get To Know Them*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2003, pp. 204-5)

While there's much which could be said about that account, I offer it as a glimpse of human nature. That store owner clearly knew more about ancient things than the customer thought, and also knew something about ancient behavior. Namely, that there are times when individuals will try to take advantage of others, and moments when persons must choose whether or not to do the right thing. Occasions that demonstrate the power of temptation.

The same truth is revealed in the passage we just heard, though it depicts the only One who ever perfectly resisted temptation. Those verses describe the moment of Jesus' testing. Luke tells us that following his baptism at the Jordan River, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness portion of Palestine. While there, Jesus is tempted by the devil for forty days.

The test takes three different forms. First, Jesus is challenged to prove his power. "If you are the Son of God," the devil says, "command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus is famished because he has not eaten in the wilderness, but still rejects the tempter's challenge by citing a verse from the Book of Deuteronomy: "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Jesus is then taken to a place where all the kingdoms of the known world can be seen and hears an offer to rule over all of them if only he will worship the devil. After his ascension, Jesus will be lord over all creation, yet still he replies to the Tempter with another Scriptural citation, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

The third test involves taking Jesus to the pinnacle of Jerusalem's Temple and being challenged to throw himself to the ground. This time the devil quotes Scripture, citing verses from the Psalm we heard moments ago that tell of how God will send angels to protect his servants. Jesus replies with a different Biblical citation: "'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" After all that, Luke says that the tempter "departed from him until an opportune time."

It's an interesting scene from Jesus' life, revealing how even God's son faced temptation in his earthly ministry. Typically, we understand that to have been a test of his human nature, but one New Testament scholar suggests that what made the challenge especially difficult was the divine

power Jesus possessed. “Temptation is an indication of strength, not weakness,” Fred Craddock wrote. “We are not tempted to do what we cannot do but what is within our power. The greater the strength, the greater the temptation. How fierce must have been Jesus’ battle!” (Craddock, Fred. *Luke*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 56)

I had never thought of temptation in that light, but his words ring true. As it isn’t tempting for us to be challenged to turn stones into bread. We can be tempted to do things that will cause persons to be drawn to us for the wrong reasons—as that is what Jesus was being urged to do in our text—but performing miracles is not an option for us.

The other two temptations Jesus faced, however, are ones that are a regular part of human life, as it is tempting to make gods of other things or bow down to beings other than God. In our day, persons will make gods of money or political identity, celebrities or power, work or technology. It’s also true that persons can often put God to the test. Hopefully, it isn’t with acts that would challenge the laws of gravity, but trying to make a deal of what we will do if God will do thus and so. We all can have times of temptation, but the real struggle is with choices within our ability; things that we can do but should not.

Let me offer an example. Some of you may have heard that at 6:30 tonight, there’s a professional football game happening in Seattle. Like many of you, I am disappointed that the Eagles are not part of it, as two other teams are playing for the right to participate in the Super Bowl. I don’t have a rooting interest in which team advances this evening and may not even watch. Both facts are quite different from when a similar event occurred 22 years ago.

Eagles historians among you might recall that for the NFC championship in 2004, the Eagles were playing the Carolina Panthers. That contest held

great interest for me as the two participants represented the franchise closest to our new home in Bucks County and the place that, until the previous June, had been my home for eleven years. We lived in the Charlotte area when the Panthers were formed and had pulled for them throughout our years there. Yet starting in June of 2003, we had resided in the land of green jerseys and a passionate fanbase I had never seen before. Given that shift in addresses, I followed the build-up for that contest very closely.

In American sports, when a game of that magnitude nears, there are some rituals that can occur off-field prior; at least that was the case in 2004. Often, the mayors of the cities represented on the field would place a wager with each other on the game's outcome; not money, but things that represent the communities. I did not hear of such a bet then between Mayors Street and McCrory, but it could have involved betting a year's supply of cheesesteaks against a comparable amount of barbeque. They might have wanted to put up the Liberty Bell against Billy Graham's birthplace, but I suspect they likely settled for food items.

There was a practice then, too, of newspaper columnists in the two cities adding fuel to the fire by disparaging the community of their opponent. I usually enjoyed such articles, but when I saw a column about Charlotte from a reporter at the Philadelphia Daily News, I felt a strong tug of defensiveness. Among his kinder statements was the moment he referred to my former hometown as an "endless and soul-less NASCAR-hypnotized expanse of strip malls." It's a clever sentence, I will grant you, but also words that begged for a rebuttal. (Bunch, Will. "In Our Mind There's Nothing in Carolina," *Philadelphia Daily News*, January 12, 2004).

After reading his column, I was sorely tempted to respond and could have written a letter to the editor seeking to correct some journalistic hyperbole.

I could have called or e-mailed the reporter and offered him my thoughts more directly. I could have used my next sermon at the Doylestown Church to respond to his comments one-by-one. All of those actions were within my power. All of them were things I could have done, but I did not—in part so that my parishioners would display restraint toward me should the home team win!

As it isn't tempting to be challenged to do something beyond our ability, nor is it realistic to think we will ever defeat once and for all the allure of things or people that tempt us. Instead, the hope of our faith is to find ways of dealing with those inevitable acts that can draw us from God; deciding to turn instead toward the kind of life for which we were made.

Soon after the scandals at Enron and Arthur Anderson at the turn of this century, James Copeland, CEO of the accounting firm Deloitte and Touche, concluded a speech on reforming the business with a story: "A few years ago, my best friend [Alan] died. My sons and I loved him for a lot of reasons, but in part because we shared a passion for scuba diving. When we took a diving trip together, one of my sons saw a tiny lock that Alan put on his diving equipment bag. My son laughed and asked what good a lock like that did. Alan said it only helps "keep an honest man honest." Copeland concluded, "That is all reforms will do—even the best of reforms—help encourage an honest profession to stay honest." (*Christian Century*, June 19-26, 2002, p. 4)

That's really all we can do, too, in our efforts to resist the power of temptation. As learning and then quoting Scripture might not appear to be much of a defense against that struggle, but it proved effective for God's son. Arranging our behavior to stay away from food or websites that are not good for us, regularly turning to God in prayer, or surrounding ourselves with people who bring out our best and not worst instincts—all of those acts and others might seem to be a tiny lock, meager attempts to stay

on the right path. Yet the struggle is worth the effort, even if it only helps us resist the power of temptation more times than not.

As each moment of personal triumph and every occasion when we successfully resist whatever tempts we move closer to the kind of life God intends. While also knowing that when we fall short of the ideal again—and we will—we have a far greater power available to set us right once more.