

Temptation, God and the Devil • Luke 4:1-13

David was ahead of me in graduate school. We overlapped for only a single semester so I did not get to know him as well as I wish I had. He became a pastor in northern California. After a few years in the ministry he was diagnosed with terminal cancer that led to a protracted and painful death leaving behind a young wife and their children. It was during the final year of his struggle that he reported an encounter and conversation with Satan. He said Satan offered him a deal—health and long life in exchange for his soul. If he would pledge his allegiance to Satan he could live a long and healthy life. If not, he would soon die a miserable death. Dave said it was not an easy decision for him to make. He wanted to live, but he chose to decline the offer and die.

What you would do if you faced such a difficult test? The truth is that life is loaded with tests and temptations with more during some chapters of our biographies than others. But they never completely go away.

No one is exempt. Even Jesus was tempted. It came shortly after his public baptism, that glorious day when God broke the silence of heaven and publicly declared Jesus to be his beloved Son with whom he was greatly pleased. It was from that emotional high that Jesus went out into the wilderness and spent forty of the most difficult days of his life.

Jesus spent nearly six weeks without food in the Judean desert, an area of 425 square miles between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. Even today it is mostly uninhabited. It is a desolate place with large hills, deep ravines, dry crusty soil, minimal vegetation and dangers galore.

Luke 4:1-13 tells us what happened to Jesus there. It is a very private story that only Jesus himself could have revealed. There is no other way we could ever know what happened. Satan appeared to Jesus and repeatedly tested him with a series of temptations. We know the details of the

last three temptations of Jesus. In each of those three tests Satan was trying to get Jesus to doubt and deny that he is the actual Son of God. He kept saying to Jesus, “*If you are the Son of God . . .*” do this or that. Satan’s strategies were extremely simple and amazingly clever.

In the first temptation, Satan said, “*If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.*” It was the temptation to self-satisfaction. After all, Jesus had not eaten for forty days and nights. He was hungry. Bread sounded good. He needed bread.

Like many temptations, there is a difference between what the temptation appeared to be on the surface and what the temptation fully was underneath. On the surface it sounded like a simple suggestion for Jesus to use his supernatural powers to change a limestone rock into a similar size loaf of bread to eat. But there was more to it than that. Satan was trying to trick Jesus into using his powers for himself rather than for others. He wanted Jesus to become a materialist who used his resources to provide for himself whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. Satan tempted Jesus to say that his physical needs were greater and more important than his spiritual needs.

None of us faces the same temptation. None of us is capable of changing a rock into a loaf of

bread or into anything else. Only Jesus had that supernatural ability. But we are all tempted to use our resources for ourselves. In fact, we often convince ourselves that we will be satisfied and happy when we get what we want. Sometimes what we want is

Like many temptations, there is a difference between what the temptation appeared to be on the surface and what the temptation fully was underneath.

food; other times it is clothes, a house, a car or some other possession. And because we live in a materialistic society, many of us pursue this temptation with a passion.

Harper’s Magazine reported a survey that 82% of Americans believe that “most of us buy and

consume far more than we need.” We know we already have more than we need and yet we cannot resist the temptation to buy more.

A United Nations report says that the combined wealth of the world’s 358 billionaires equals the total income of the world’s 2.3 billion poorest people. Those 358 wealthy people have as much money as 45% of the world’s population earns in annual salary.

What a contrast to the description of Jesus in 2 Corinthians 8:9 where we are told, *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”* Satan tempted Jesus to use his power and resources for himself rather than for others. Having not eaten for forty days, it was a tempting thing to do.

Jesus refused. He answered with a quote from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy and said, *“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”* Jesus never denied that he was hungry. But he insisted that he would not use his power for his personal benefit. He refused to make materialism most important. He insisted that life’s greatest meaning and satisfaction is not in what we eat, what we own, what we wear or where we live. We are first and foremost spiritual beings—our life and meaning come from God himself, not from things.

Satan gave up on that one and moved to temptation #2, “Compromise”, in Luke 4:5-8:

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”

The second temptation, it seems, was far more tempting. It was an opportunity for Jesus to answer the greatest criticism against God. For centuries, right up until today, believers and unbelievers alike have said, “If there really is a good God, why does he allow there to be so much evil and suffering in the world?” The answer is that sin and Satan have brought untold evil and pain into our world. But that is not a very satisfactory

answer for those who are in misery.

Here was Jesus’ great opportunity to make a profound difference for good. Satan offered to Jesus the rule of the world. Jesus could skip the cross and go directly to the throne of the world. He could immediately stop all injustice, eliminate all poverty, and outlaw all sin, pain and suffering. It would be a wonderful and unselfish thing to do.

However, such great good would come with a very high price. In order to become king of the world, Jesus was first required to worship Satan. In other words, if Jesus was willing to acknowledge the absolute superiority of Satan he could accomplish the greatest good in history. It is a classic example of the end justifying the means. It was a powerful call for compromise. It must have been very tempting!

What would you do? If you could buy an end to all human suffering, secure universal cures for painful terminal diseases, eliminate all child abuse, stop all government corruption, stop all wars and halt all crime—would you do it for the price of worshipping Satan? Even though it was giving in to awful evil and you could accomplish enormous good? I think any good person would be tempted to say yes.

Jesus said no. Realizing that his decision would allow sin and suffering to continue for a very long time, Jesus answered, *“It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”*

Jesus insisted there is only one God. There is only one right way. God is God. Right is right. He must never compromise with evil. To give allegiance to Satan is a guaranteed path to worse sin and eventually eternal destruction. Jesus knew that compromise one day would bring greater disaster another day. The end does not always justify the means. In this case, the end would be worse than the beginning.

How brilliant and insightful! How deep was Jesus’ understanding. How marvelous that he did right even when it may have appeared to be the wrong thing to do. That took courage.

What about us? What is our price for doing wrong? For what would we compromise with evil? For some, it is money; for others it is recognition. Some would sell their souls for sex or for

health. It is far better that we learn from Jesus. Evil is evil. Wrong is wrong. Right is right. God must be first and Satan is never to be given an inch, much less our worship. Say no to every temptation to compromise, even if it seems good at the time.

Jesus resisted the temptation to compromise. So Satan moved on to a third temptation. In Luke 4:9-12 he tempted Jesus with popularity:

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' "

This was a brilliant temptation, going right to the heart of many human instincts. We all have a deep desire to be acknowledged and accepted by others. Popularity is a powerful temptation. Playing on this, Satan took Jesus to the highest point in the city of Jerusalem. It was the portico of the temple, extending above the Kidron Valley. Between the height of the temple and the depth of the valley it was about 450 feet from the portico to the valley floor.

Satan invited Jesus to stand on the edge of the portico until a crowd gathered to see what he would do. At the right moment, Jesus could jump from the portico and free fall 45 stories toward the crowd below. As the people gasped with expectation of his crushing death, angels would come and catch him at the last second. Then Jesus would stand on his feet for everyone to see and the crowd would be mesmerized by the spectacular sensationalism of the display of supernatural power.

The people would be dazzled, delighted, enthralled. Jesus would instantly become the most

popular man in Jerusalem. Everyone would want to meet him, touch him—and follow him! The whole population would declare him to be the Messiah from heaven. He would have no hassles from his religious critics. There would be no threats from Roman authorities. The members of his family would no longer be cranky and critical. Jesus would be the "Man of the Year". Everyone would admire and love him.

What would you do for popularity? If you could have a guaranteed stunt that would make you the most popular and sought after person in America, would you do it? Wouldn't it be great to be more famous than any politician, musician or professional athlete? Wouldn't it be fun to have the entire population trying to make you happy?

Jesus was tempted. After all, it had been a long time since he experienced popularity. More than thirty years had passed since, as the eternal

Son of God, he had sat on the throne of heaven as every angel worshiped him and sing his praises. Here on earth he was nobody. Also, Jesus had just spent forty lonely days out in a desert. Satan provided his first conversation in a long time. He was lonely. Popularity would feel very good.

Jesus was tempted, but he said no. He knew it was

his decision to make. That is always the case with temptation. Satan had said, "*Throw yourself down from here.*" Apparently Satan couldn't make him do it. It was simply a suggestion.

Quoting a third time from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, Jesus answered, "*It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*" What a strange answer for Jesus to give. Personally, I find it difficult to understand. It seems that, in essence, what he was saying was that the usual reason for a test is because there is doubt. No one does a DNA paternity test on a child unless there is doubt as to who the parent is. No one runs soil tests unless they are unsure of the makeup of the soil. There is no purpose in checking the purity of gold or silver if there is absolute certainty that

...sin and Satan have brought untold evil and pain into our world. But that is not a very satisfactory answer for those who are in misery.

it is pure. So the only reason to test God is if there is doubt that he can be trusted. Jesus refused to put God to the test to determine if he was capable or willing to save him when he jumped. In other words, Jesus refused to set-up God.

This same temptation still works on many of us today. Personally, I want people to like me. Criticism hurts and I don't want enemies. Popularity is very appealing—but, at what price?

Today, the temptation Satan whispers in our ears may sound different:

- * If God loves you, he will give you the man or the woman you really want.
- * If God really cares about you, he will get you that promotion at work.
- * If you are important to God, he will make you popular with all the right people.
- * If God loves you, he will get you the votes to win the office.

But those who believe in God and totally trust him respond with Jesus and say, "I refuse to put God to the test! I know God loves me. I know God cares for me. I know God counts me as important. I don't need a girlfriend, boyfriend, wife or husband, promotion, popularity or public office to prove God cares. I am not going to put God to the test."

There is so much for us to learn from Jesus' desert temptations. We learn that the best answers to temptation come from the Bible. Every time Jesus faced a different temptation he quoted from the Bible. Most of us could not easily do that. What we should learn is that reading the Bible until we are familiar with it is probably the best preventative to sin that is available. We may not be able to quote every line, but we should be familiar enough that we can easily find in the Bible the answer we need.

We learn from Jesus that it is important to be full of the Holy Spirit. That is the first description of Jesus in Luke 4:1. To be full of the Holy Spirit means to be wide open and completely controlled by the Spirit of God. If you are unsure, ask God to fill you with his Spirit.

We learn to take the long-term view. Jesus was willing to suffer in the short-term in order to get the best in the long-term. He refused to sacrifice ultimate good on the altar of immediate satisfaction.

And, finally, we learn from Jesus that it is not always over when it seems to be over. In Luke 4:13 the story ends by saying, "*When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.*"

Jesus resisted evil. He won big time! But Satan would be back to try again. And it is like that with us. Resisting sin and doing good is a wonderful victory. But don't let your guard down. Temptation always returns at an opportune time!

So, what is your temptation? Money? Greed? Sex? Pride? Popularity? Self-pity? If Satan wanted to do you in, how would he tempt you to destroy you?

And, what are you going to do when that temptation comes? Don't do it! Don't give in! Quote the Bible. Let the Holy Spirit control you. Do good. Resist evil. Be like Jesus!

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
©Leith Anderson