

More Fundamentals of Temptation

March 16, 2014

Luke 4:1-13

We are going to build on what we learned last week about the nature of temptation and the human response of Adam and Eve with a look at how Jesus showed us to deal with temptation. We may find ourselves so focused on the divinity of Jesus – the fact that He was the Incarnation, God in human form – that we forget that He was also fully human. How He could be both fully human and fully divine is a mystery of faith, but it is central to our faith. This has been revealed to us as truth from God, and explanation is not necessary. Jesus modeled for us a life lived in perfect relationship with God, and in this passage, He models how to deal with temptation.

READ Luke 4:1-13

The story of the temptation of Jesus is also recounted for us in Matthew's Gospel in much the same way. Mark gives it a very short and concise description; like a lot of Mark's Gospel, he seems to just give us the facts. But Luke is telling a story here. He is engaging us in a great drama, inviting us to find ourselves in it – to put ourselves into the story and imagine what we would have been doing in there and how we would have reacted.

Jesus clearly meant for us to do that with this story about His temptation in the wilderness. We know that He meant for us to hear this story and to learn something from it because only He could have told it. There were no witnesses, no reporters, no TV coverage – just Jesus and Satan. Jesus told this story so we could better understand His humanity. He didn't just exist here, He lived here. And if you are going to live here, you are going to be tempted to sin. Anybody here not been tempted to sin this week?

This story comes right after the baptism of Jesus. It is worth noting that Jesus did not go charging off to Jerusalem to take on the Pharisees or even start with a tent revival down by the Jordan. Instead, He went off into the desert or wilderness – alone. No crowds, no disciples – just Him. This was a time for Jesus to get some things straight with Satan, to take care of some things so those things would not impede His ministry.

Satan might have wondered if God was serious about this coming to earth as a human thing, so there he was to issue the challenge.

Let's look at these three temptations separately.

First, the tempter challenges Jesus to turn a stone into a loaf of bread. Could Jesus have done that? Sure He could. It wasn't long after this that He fed 5000 men, plus the women and children, with five small loaves and two little fish out of a kid's lunch box. One little loaf would be no problem. After all, Jesus had been out in the desert for a while, and He had to be hungry. What could be wrong with just snapping up a nice loaf of bread?

The nature of this temptation is for Jesus to use His power and authority to satisfy His own desires. His response demonstrates that He is never motivated by His own needs or wants, but by the Word of God. His answer is a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3: "... that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." That passage was talking about God's purposes in supplying manna to the people of Israel as they wandered about the desert. There, the need of the people was not just for bread to eat, but for understanding that God gives bread. Jesus knew that – knew that the Word of God was sufficient to meet His need. That empowered Him to resist the temptation to take matters into His own hands. It is skipping forward a few chapters, but we will see this temptation again as Jesus is challenged to come down off the cross. His response will be the same.

The second temptation is a classic "sell your soul to the devil" thing – looking for an easy way to some end, but at the ultimate cost. The issue presented to us in this temptation is not so obvious as "selling your soul", but is more often put before us as a compromise, where we are tempted to bend our principles ever so slightly to achieve some objective. The temptation is even more subtle when the objective that we are seeking is a good one, and it faces the church every day. Are we willing to compromise our beliefs to fill the sanctuary or boost the finances or gain notoriety for the church? Are we willing to water down the Gospel or turn worship into another form of entertainment to attract more people? What about personally – what would you

compromise to have a better job or a bigger house? How about for the healing of a relationship with someone or the healing of some affliction of ours or someone else's? The answer Jesus models for us here is **no compromise**. Nothing of this world is worth it.

The third temptation is for Jesus to show off. He would do a lot of miracles, and each one of them would have a purpose. But the purpose was never to just show off. This temptation also sounds like the issuance of a challenge to God to do something to prove that He loves and cares for us. God cannot be manipulated, and it is sin to even try, just as it is wrong to use the same kind of thing to manipulate other people: "If you really love me, you will...". If we are looking for some sign, even a miracle, for God to prove His relationship to us, then we are challenging the relationship itself, showing that we do not believe in God's promise of unconditional love for us. It is a failure of faith. Jesus responded with a statement of faith. He would not put God to the test, would not require God to prove His love, because Jesus already had all the assurance He needed of God's love. He needed no proof. The closer we are to really understanding the nature of God's love for us, the closer we are to Jesus' response, to having the complete assurance, through faith, of God's love.

From all that, what can we learn about the nature of temptation from this story that will help us understand it and resist it?

1. We must acknowledge the existence of Satan. It really doesn't matter much how we envision Satan – whether we see the devil as ugly or seductively attractive, human or sub-human in form. The important thing is that we recognize evil at work.

In some ways belief in God incorporates a belief in the existence of evil, because part of our understanding of God is that God is superior to any force that opposes Him. Listen to this from a document about the devil by a committee of the Presbyterian church:

"It takes no faith in one way or another to believe in the power of evil; the evidence of its work is all around and among and within us. It does take faith to believe against [the power of evil] that the first and last word about [evil] is [its] powerlessness and doom."

Evil is at work all the time – and we have to recognize the enemy and be prepared to respond.

2. Temptation can attack us anytime, anywhere. Jesus was tempted here immediately after His baptism, when the Holy Spirit had come upon Him and God had spoken to Him. Temptation can come to us in our personal relationships, at home, at work, in the church, alone in the wilderness. It may strike when we are feeling low, when we think we would give anything to be out of this mess. It may strike when we are feeling full of the Holy Spirit and think that nothing can turn us from the glory of God. Satan came back to tempt Jesus, and Satan never really goes away. The passage we just read concludes with Satan going away to wait for another opportune time. If Satan did not give up on tempting Jesus, do you think Satan will ever give up on you? Our only hope is that God never gives up on us either, because we are never immune from temptation.

3. Temptation is not coercion. We are not forced by Satan to do anything. When Flip Wilson's character Geraldine said "The devil made me do it", it was just an excuse for a poor decision. Temptation always represents a choice. It is the nature of temptation that the wrong choice is made to look good. Jesus was hungry, and that bread would have tasted good. Who wouldn't want to rule the world? And would it not have been spectacular to see Jesus jump from the Temple – or come down off the cross? Temptation appeals to what human nature wants – power, sensual pleasure, praise, material things. Temptations look good, or we would not be tempted. Robert Fulghum added to Flip Wilson's line "The devil made me do it the first time, and after that I did it on my own."

The nature of temptation is that it is attractive even when we recognize the tempter. Any offer that we recognize as coming from the source of evil is immediately suspect, but the tempter is not always so obvious. Temptation can come from unexpected places and unexpected people – from people that we would not suspect as agents of evil – even from our own impulses and desires.

It is not very flattering to say this, but for the most part, we are pretty easy pickings, and it is precisely because we are tempted by what we want anyway. We are just looking for an excuse or a rationalization to do what we really wanted to do.

4. God is more powerful than evil, and He gives us the tools to overcome it. We believe in the ultimate power of God and in His final victory in the last day. But we also have faith in Him for this day. Evil is among us, and we need God now. Jesus showed us the two tools we need: the Word of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Satan recognized the truth and authority of the Word of God, even trying to misuse Scripture in the third temptation. It is critical for us to know the Word of God, to study and understand the Bible, and to be able to call on that Word for our defense against the tempter. When Paul was writing to the Ephesians about the armor of God, he called Scripture the “sword of the Spirit”. We can rely on God’s Word.

READ 1 Corinthians 10:11-14

This does not tell us that we will be somehow exempt from temptation, but that we will be strengthened and empowered to deal with it. In Christ, temptation has no power over us. The power we need will come through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus went into the wilderness “full of the Holy Spirit” and returned “in the power of the Spirit”. He was strengthened for temptation, empowered to face it, and emboldened by the experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit to begin His earthly ministry.

We have the same tools available to us. The Word of God is before us. It is up to us to read it, hear it – really hear it, study it, know what it says to us, now – and then call on it for guidance. The Bible is relevant and meaningful to us, every day.

And the Holy Spirit just waits for us to answer.

God has promised His love and His guidance and His presence – and all of that means something to us in a real and personal way when we face temptation every day and seek to turn and turn and turn to right relationship with God. Without God, we have no defense, and temptation will become sin and will then become who we are. But with Him, we are more than conquerors. With Him, we have the victory.