

When We Are Tempted

Luke 4 : 1-13

Jesus had just been baptized by John the Baptist. He was full of the Holy Spirit. And that's when the Tempter came.

That is so true to life. You go off to a church retreat. You have a spiritual mountaintop experience. You're feeling closer to God and closer to others than you have ever felt before. Beware! That is the time when you may be the most vulnerable to temptation.

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry, and vulnerable. A physical need needed to be met. And so, the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Stones were abundant in the wilderness. He could use his extraordinary gifts to meet his physical need. But Jesus knew that was not what he was sent to do. His gifts were to be used to do the work of God. So, Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

Many people today have their physical needs met but they are shriveling and dying on the inside. Physical needs have an urgency, but spiritual needs are as critical.

Having failed to tempt Jesus with his stones to bread routine, the devil takes a different tact. He leads Christ up to a high place and shows him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he says to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours."

Who could resist being handed the power and the status that would come with ruling over all the kingdoms of this world? It is every politician's dream. Jesus was offered all the kingdoms of this world and all he would have to do would be to bow down to the devil. Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve God only.'"

Having failed again, the devil leads Jesus to Jerusalem and has Jesus stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he says, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'God will command the 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.'" And Jesus answers, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Jesus is being tested. That is what temptation is. It is a test. Fail the test of temptation and you become weaker spiritually. Pass the test and you become stronger.

Jesus passed the test. Then Luke tells us, "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left Jesus until an opportune time." The devil wasn't finished with Jesus. We never get to the point where we are beyond being tempted. Even Jesus did not reach that point. Jesus struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane proved that.

There are some things about temptation we need to see. The first is that temptation is universal. We joke about temptation, because it is part of the human condition. Everyone has to deal with temptation.

“Opportunity only knocks once,” someone noted. “Temptation leans on the doorbell.”

Peter Gomes, popular author and one-time pastor at Harvard’s Memorial Church, once stated that “temptation is the single greatest source of human anxiety.” He further stated that in the thousands of people with whom he had counseled over the years of his ministry, he had found the problem of temptation to be at the heart of their personal anxiety.

Think about it and you will see that what he says is true. Think of the tests you and I face every day. We are constantly making decisions. Many of these are moral decisions. Should we speak the truth when a falsehood would serve our purposes better? Should we cut corners to maximize our profits? What is the harm in seemingly innocent flirtation? Can we stay on our diet? The list goes on and on, but many of these decisions represent one temptation or another. And should we give in to temptation, much can be lost.

The Greek philosopher Plato once told a story of a carriage drawn by a pair of young and spirited steeds. In the vehicle, the driver holds the reins and guides the horses on the straight and smooth road.

Woe to us if we never hear the voice of conscience, the voice of God, telling us to wake up before we destroy our lives. Temptation is universal and potentially deadly.

Here’s the second thing we need to see. With God’s help temptation is resistible. We do not have the strength that Christ had to resist temptation, but it can be done, although sometimes we do need help.

That is the genius of Alcoholics Anonymous. They are there for each other in times of temptation. Many times, in the middle of the night a member of this group will be called to sit with a buddy and help them fight the cravings that would destroy them. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous also know what it is to rely on God. They know that the key to turning their lives around is admitting their weakness, admitting that they were, are, and always will be powerless over alcohol. But they believe that a Power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity, and so they decide to turn their will and their lives over to the care of God.

The ultimate key to lessening temptation’s in your life is to love God with all your heart and with all your mind.

Temptation is universal, and some temptations are deadly if they are not reined in. But with God’s help, and sometimes with the help of a close friend, temptations are resistible. We need to hear over and over the words of the hymn “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face; then the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.”