

## Don't Test God

Luke 4:1-13

February 21, 2010

In a Reader's Digest article a few years back Jim Grant told about an overweight businessman who decided it was time for him to shed some excess pounds. There was no question he took his diet seriously. He even changed his driving route to avoid passing his favorite bakery.

One morning he arrived at work with a gigantic coffee cake. His fellow workers scolded him for his apparent backsliding. A smile remained on Jim's face as he explained. "This is a special coffee cake. You see, I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a host of goodies. I felt it was no accident, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot open right in front of the bakery.' And sure enough, the eighth time around the block, there it was!"<sup>1</sup>

A man went to see a psychiatrist about a personal problem. He told the counselor, "I have a real struggle here. I feel like I'm violating my conscience. I'm not being completely honest with myself. I'm living a broken life."

The counselor asked the man, "So, you'd like to strengthen your will power?"

The man reflected on the counselor's observation for a moment and then replied, "No, what I would like to talk to you about is weakening my conscience."<sup>2</sup>

Today is the first Sunday in Lent – a time for us to examine ourselves and our relationship with God a little more intently than the rest of the year. Now, there's no need to look for a reference to Lent in the Bible because it's not there. There's some evidence that the early followers fasted for 40 hours between Good Friday and Easter, but the idea of spending forty days in prayer and self-denial did not become a practice in the church until a much later time.<sup>3</sup> In fact, it was during Pope Gregory's reign around 1050 AD that the practice was initiated.

The forty days we now recognize as the season of Lent were chosen because of the forty days Jesus wandered in the wilderness following his baptism - a wandering that helped bring focus to his ministry and strengthen the bond between him and God. There came a time in church history when church leaders thought if it was good for Jesus it would probably be good for the rest of us as well.

The idea of giving up something during Lent is meant to be a way for us to keep in front of ourselves that we are about something different during these days – we are intentionally examining our walk with God – we are about rechoosing the way we are going to live our daily lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Giving up something is a form of fasting. Fasting for forty hours is a much different thing than fasting for forty days. Most of us don't have the stomach – that is neither the will nor the lifestyle that would allow us to follow a traditional fast. And so, we give something up or add something to our life – a spiritual discipline – like the tithing our consumption idea we initiated last year.

One of the things that happens to us when we intentionally give something up or add something to our lives – to spend some intentional time reflecting on our journey with God - is that we are tempted not to follow through – to build in some safeguards in case things get tough – like if the boss invites you to lunch and pays for your meal, well you don't have to tithe what he paid or it's OK if you something other than a salad because to do so would involve a sharing with him or her why you're doing so. Well, let's take a closer look at the temptations Jesus experienced out in the wilderness and see if there are some helps there about the role of temptation in our lives.

While Jesus was fasting and wandering around out in the desert he began to wrestle with some ideas about what the shape his ministry could take. The wrestling in his heart and mind was so intense it was as if he was

struggling with another person – hence the reference to the devil, a personification we often name to describe the experience of there seeming to be a conversation within us to do one thing or the other. In order to understand the significance of the struggle in Jesus' soul – the conversation between Jesus and the devil as the account describes it – it's helpful to back up a little.

Sometime fairly close to this experience in the wilderness, Jesus was baptized by his cousin, John, in the River Jordan. Jesus was praying following the baptism and the Holy Spirit descended upon him and he became aware in a new way that he had God's approval – that there was something special between him and God. Now the question for him was: "How am I to go about doing what it is God wants me to do?"

The temptation story reveals to us what Jesus considered as he struggled with the issues of his messiahship and ministry. The temptation story basically shows us Jesus rejecting the way of power and glory and accepting the way of suffering and the cross.

After his baptism, Jesus returned from the Jordan and the Holy Spirit that had descended upon him thus preparing him to hear God's approval of him, now as all through him and it was that Holy Spirit that led him into the desert where he was tempted. And one of the things Jesus did in the desert was he ate nothing. So, he was pretty hungry when he encountered the devil – when he began to ponder his options.

Knowing full well the hungry state Jesus was in, the first temptation he faced was to turn the stones all around him into bread. Of course, the idea was preceded in his head with a little sarcasm probably intended to weaken him a bit: "If you are the Son of God, tell the stone to become bread." What the devil was suggesting to Jesus was: "If you want people to follow you, then use your wonderful powers to give them material things." "Jesus, if you feed yourself and others who hunger – Jesus, if you take care of the material things people need, they're not going to be able to resist you."

The first thing I think we should note is that the fact that Jesus himself experienced temptations means that temptation is a part of life – a part of our reality as members of the human race. Temptation isn't an option for us. The issue is not "What do we need to do to avoid temptation?" But rather, "How should we deal with temptation when it comes our way?" because it surely will.

Some people think that being tempted is sin. They worry that the thought of selling out to sin might mean their faith and God's indwelling spirit aren't in good order simply because they are tempted. Temptation has been around for a long time – since the beginning of time if we believe the biblical story. Even Adam and Eve had to deal with – they didn't very well, but ... the point is temptation has always been part of the human experience. We need to put temptation in the right perspective and one of the things we need to do is quit beating ourselves up when we're tempted. It simply is another indication that we're human.<sup>4</sup>

I might as well make another comment about what I believe to be a mistaken understanding of the root of temptation and that is that it is something from God – that God is the source of temptation. God is the source of good – God doesn't want to do wrong. God is never the source of temptation in our lives. Almost all temptation that comes our way has to do with something we ourselves legitimately want or need.<sup>5</sup>

Another thing I think it's helpful to note about this temptation story from the life of Jesus is how the author of Luke places it immediately after the story of Jesus being baptized. Right after the Holy Spirit descended like a dove on Jesus and a voice said, "This is my beloved son" – right after one of the most religious experiences of Jesus' life – right when he had to be the most sure of who he was in God's eyes – while he was still reveling in this religious high – "Full of the Holy Spirit" – the author of Luke chooses to reference his being led into the wilderness by the spirit itself.

Pop Christianity makes being filled with the spirit into this momentous, peace-producing, healing, satisfying, joyous, ecstatic experience. That's not the way it was for Jesus and I would suggest to you that that's not the

way it really is in the final analysis for most of us. In fact, one of the things this story ought to say to us is that it is precisely when we are feeling the best about where we are on our journeys of faith – precisely when we feel the closest to God – precisely after we've experienced a close encounter of the religious kind – that we ought most to be on our guard and be ready to carefully scrutinize the thoughts that come into our minds because they will indeed be thoughts that will tempt us to do the wrong things on behalf of God.

When things are going our way – when we believe God has just done something wonderful to or in us – when we believe that God is especially close to us and giving us a word about the call on our life – it is then that we should especially be on our guard.

The temptations Jesus experienced out there in the wilderness are pretty familiar to us. There was the temptation to turn the stones into bread – that is, bible scholars tell us, to use his relationship with God – his power – to satisfy his needs and thus the needs of the human race, those he came to save. The temptation was to do ministry in such a way as to cause people to follow him because their physical and material needs were met.

And then, there was the temptation to rule the world by agreeing to worship the devil. Again, Bible scholars suggest the temptation here was the temptation to be politically powerful – to rule everyone simply because of who he was.

And finally, there was the trip to the highest point on the temple and the invitation to jump and let the angels do their thing. The temptation here was to convince people to become his followers by becoming a magician – by putting on a religious show – by gaining attention for himself by doing a ministry of glitz and plenty of flare.

An initial reading of this temptation story should alarm us because the things Jesus considered weren't bad things – bread, wealth, and power – they weren't things associated with the "dark" side of life. The temptation was to gain those good things with questionable intentions – "fill your belly with bread and offer to do the same for those you want as your followers and people will flock to you Jesus – use your power to bribe people into believing and following you, Jesus." "Offer people a prosperity Gospel, Jesus."

"Compromise a little, Jesus – play ball with me, Jesus – and you'll have all the success you want. Why whole countries – the governments that rule them even – will be like putty in your hand, Jesus." "You could really be popular if you tone down your rhetoric a bit about being for the poor and powerless. Let me hand over to you the really powerful and no one will stand in your way, Jesus."

"OK, Jesus, you don't like either of those ways of going about doing your ministry – well, how about some showboating? You know, a little razzle-dazzle here, some magic shows there. Sensationalism will cause many people to see you as someone who can get things done. What do you say, Jesus, a little hocus pocus – a little putting God to the test – offering God the opportunity to show people the really tight bond between the two of you. There's no way God will allow you to get hurt, Jesus. People will really be impressed with that. Forget that suffering servant image, Jesus, and show people what God can do for them if they follow you."

To each of the temptations Jesus responded with a resounding no. There was no pausing to consider what might happen to his Gallup Poll ratings – no considering some catchy gimmick to make his ministry more appealing. No, Jesus responded by calling forth from deep inside him a passage of scripture he had cut his teeth on and stored in his memory bank of faith. He used the language of the faith and pushed the evil thoughts, the temptations, away.

"We don't live on bread alone," he said. "We don't put God to the test," he said. "We worship God and serve only God," he said. What made it possible for Jesus to resist the temptations that came to him out in the wilderness was the preparation he had made the years prior to that challenging time. The decision about who

and whose he was – the emphasis of his ministry – had been ingrained into his soul, become the basic fabric of his being through years of study and prayer and conversation and practice. He knew what his message was going to be because God had nurtured it – strengthened it – prior to the day when he faced the temptation to go about things a different way.

Louis Pasteur put it this way: “When the time to perform arrives, the time to prepare is past. Chance favors only the mind that is prepared.” The best way to be ready to deal with temptation is to prepare before that encounter happens. “If we can identify the things that tempt us, we can avoid the places where we may find them. And in the case when temptation surprises us, we can have an exit plan in place.”<sup>6</sup>

A helpful guide for being prepared to deal with temptations you know you tend to succumb to goes like this: “What settings are you in when you give in to temptation? Avoid them. What props do you have that support your sin? Eliminate them. What people are you usually with when you give in? Avoid them. There are two damning lies the temptation to do wrong wants us to believe: 1) Just once won’t hurt; and 2) Now that you have ruined your life, you are beyond God’s use, and might as well enjoy sinning.”

Lent is an appropriate time for us to ponder more intentionally the temptations struggling for attention inside us. It’s an appropriate time for us to experience the wilderness that is a part of spiritual introspection. Lent is an appropriate time for us to reclaim our faith by reclaiming our language. We dare not turn our faith over to those who claim the Christian position is to side with war instead of peace. We dare not turn our faith over to those who want to make policies that ignore or forget about the poor and marginalized in our world. Lent is an appropriate time for us to resist the temptation to let the pop faith of our day determine the agenda for the future – it’s an appropriate time to reclaim our language and our voice and our faith.

God bless you all as you embark on the 2010 Lenten journey. Let us pray.

1. Lee Griess, “Overcoming Temptation,” Taking the Risk Out of Dying (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1997), 0-7880-1030-1.
2. Maxie Dunnam, “Meeting and Mastering Temptation,” 2006, 0-000-000-400.
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Settling for Less,” The Christian Century, February 18, 1998, p. 169.
4. Leonard Sweet, “Thou Shalt Not Live By Street Food Alone,” Homiletics, January – February, 2010, p. 64.
5. Carla Thompson Powell, The Devil Made Me Do It as included in Illustrations for February 21, 2010 by the staff of [www.esermons.com](http://www.esermons.com).
6. “Thou Shalt Not Live By Street Food Alone,” p. 66.