

# THE NATURE OF TEMPTATION

## Luke 4:1-13 Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

<sup>4</sup> Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, <sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”

<sup>5</sup> The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup> And he said 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. <sup>7</sup> If you worship me, it will all be yours.”

<sup>8</sup> Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you carefully;

<sup>11</sup> they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup> Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

<sup>13</sup> When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

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One of the greatest challenges a Christian faces during his life in this world is how to deal with temptation. Temptation comes in many different forms: the temptation to embrace some habitual sin, the temptation to stop coming to church every Sunday, the temptation to give up on a troubled marriage—even the temptation to abandon one’s faith. At one time or another, we’re all tempted to throw off God’s authority, and in the words of the famous American theologian, Frank Sinatra, to “do it my way.” There are plenty of times in our lives when “my way” seems superior to God’s way.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness can teach us a lot about the nature of temptation—and how to deal with it. Once again, this will be an expository sermon and I invite you to follow along the in the Gospel lesson in your bulletins.

*“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, 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.” (Luke 4:1-2)*

Jesus’ forty-day sojourn in the desert was intended to remind us of the Israelites’ forty-year sojourn in the desert during the Exodus. Three times during their forty years in the desert the Israelites were tempted to rebel against God, and three times they gave in to temptation. They rebelled against God at Mount Sinai by making and worshiping a golden calf; they rebelled against Him at Kadesh by seeking to replace Moses as their leader; and they rebelled against Him at Hormah under the leadership of Korah. During His forty days in the desert Jesus was also tempted three times by the devil to rebel against God. But where the Israelites had succumbed to temptation, Jesus overcame temptation and remained obedient to God. By succeeding where they had failed, Jesus gave us a sign that he had come to do what we could never do for ourselves: overcome the power of the devil.

Jesus' obedience to God in the face of powerful temptation furnishes us with a model for how we can do the same. Satan attacks Jesus with three different kinds of temptation—and they are the same three kinds he uses on us. So let's take a look at them and see what we can learn.

*"The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.'" (Luke 4:3)*

Our physical needs are usually much more apparent to us than our spiritual needs and it is very tempting to us to put them first. The ancient Greeks had built an entire philosophy around this idea, which came to be called "hedonism." Hedonists sought to live by the pleasure principle: anything that increased their pleasure was good; anything that decreased their pleasure or caused them pain was bad. The point of life was to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Going by this philosophy, since Jesus was hungry after forty days of fasting, it only made sense for him to eat. And since he had been weakened by lack of nourishment he would have been all the more tempted by this proposal. Now if it had been me—and, I suspect, many of you—my thought would have been something like: *"So what's wrong with this? I've completed the forty days of fasting and I'm hungry. What's wrong with changing a few rocks into loaves of bread, maybe a smaller stone into some butter, and chowing down?"*

What's wrong with it is that Jesus had come to teach us that spiritual nourishment is more important than physical nourishment. In the Sermon on the Mount, he put it this way: *"Do not worry saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* So when Jesus replied to the devil, *"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone,'"* he was teaching us not only that spiritual food is more important than physical food, but that if we focus our attention on seeking spiritual food, God will provide for our physical needs.

The devil attacks us every day with the same proposal he made to Jesus, tempting us to put our physical desires ahead of our need for spiritual nourishment. The temptation to sleep in and have a leisurely breakfast instead of going to church. The temptation to let the kids watch TV rather than have a family devotion with them. The temptation to put off spending time each day in Word and prayer. The hedonistic values of self-gratification are continually drawing us like moths to a flame and we can allow ourselves to be consumed by them. But they are not the most important things in our lives: God is.

*"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.'" (Luke 4:5-8)*

The second temptation is to acquire authority and power. Power is very attractive to us and we can come to crave it. I think it was Elizabeth Taylor who said that power was the ultimate aphrodisiac. It doesn't have to be military or political power—it can simply take the form of striving to be the dominant party in our relationships. Managers who supervise by intimidation. Abusive husbands or fathers who rule their families through fear. Teachers who use the classroom to force their political opinions on their students. Controlling relationships by exerting power is the precise opposite of love, because love places the value of the beloved first and the wielder of power places himself first.

There are few things that have as much potential to corrupt our judgment as power has. Lord Acton famously said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. One place where I saw this firsthand was in my career as a human resources manager. Part of my job was to be a wailing post for disgruntled employees who preferred to yell at me rather than their boss. What I learned over time was that it is tempting for those who exercise authority over others to become convinced of their own superiority. Since employees don't want to offend the person who has the power of

professional homicide over them, they are reluctant to point out their bosses' mistakes and faults. As a result, the boss can easily come to think he's doing a better job of managing than he is, because his subordinates affirm all his decisions and laugh at his jokes. So the first thing that power corrupts is the ego. The boss comes to think, *"I must be pretty good at what I do because no one is telling me otherwise!"* The second thing power corrupts is the judgment, because if the boss gets only affirmation he thinks things are in better shape than they really are and he doesn't have good information with which to make good decisions. The last thing to go, of course, is the moral judgment of the corruptee. People who fancy that they are living a charmed life start feeling entitled to moral lapses they would not necessarily tolerate in other people. Power corrupts.

Knowing this, Jesus said simply to the devil: *"You shall worship the Lord your God and you shall serve Him only."* (Luke 4:8) And that ended that. Keeping in mind our humble station in regard to God is good medicine for our egos, our judgment and our moral character.

Finally, the devil tempts Jesus to put God to the test: *"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 do not strike your foot against a stone.'"* (Lk 4:9-11)

Man's deepest and greatest need is his need for an ongoing relationship with God. When we draw away from God, we become spiritual zombies—walking corpses who have biological life but who are spiritually dead and who face an eternity of separation from God, who is the source of all life. The Bible calls this hell. Yet we are tempted to do this whenever we put God to the test by saying—or thinking—things like, *"What kind of a god would allow that to happen? Where was God when THIS was going on? Where is God now that I need Him?"* In our lifelong love affair with this world, what we chiefly want is for things in this world to go our way, and when they don't go our way we are tempted to blame God. Luther once said that your god is whoever or whatever you trust the most to make you happy and keep you safe. And that that will be either God himself or it will be an idol—there is no third alternative. The problem is that God's knowledge of what is good for us and our opinion of what is good for us can be very different. His major concern is for our spiritual welfare—not our comfort. C. S. Lewis once said that God doesn't necessarily want to make us happy; he wants to help us grow up. Sometimes he sends pleasant things into our lives, sometimes he sends unpleasant things into our lives—whatever has the power to help us grow in our faith and draw nearer to Him. And so Jesus simply replies: *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."*

When we deal with temptation it helps to try to maintain a divine perspective on whatever is tempting you. One of the best ways of doing this is to spend some time each day in God's Word. When Jesus was tempted he went directly to God's Word and let God's Word fight for him. And after the devil had taken his best shot at Jesus, he left Him. One little word can fell him, if it is God's word.

Our enemy has one goal and only one goal, and that is to draw you away from your faith in Jesus Christ. He is perfectly happy to have you believe anything you like, as long as it is not in Jesus Christ as your crucified and risen Savior. And so if you do believe in Jesus Christ, you are in the devil's sights and you can expect to be tempted. Keeping a divine perspective by immersing yourself in God's Word and spending some time in prayer every day will help a lot. And however many times you lose the war with temptation, always remember that it is Jesus who overcame Satan in the wilderness, and as long as you remain connected with Him, His victory is your victory.

Amen.