

THE FIRST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST (Audience of One) LUKE 4:1-13

A minister parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was running late and couldn't find a space with a meter. So he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: "I have circled the block ten times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES." When he returned, he found a citation from a police officer along with this note. "I've circled this block for ten years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION."

Temptations – we have all known them and experienced them first hand. Some temptations are obvious to us. Oh, sure, I can spot shoplifting and lying to get out of trouble and even that temptation to park illegally. But certain evils fly in under my spiritual radar because they don't look bad; they look like something good – or at least reasonably acceptable. Temptations become even more difficult to resist when I don't recognize them. It takes spiritual discernment to realize that something I eagerly want may actually compromise me and my relationship with God. These are the kind of temptations that Jesus dealt with in this passage of Scripture – the hidden temptations of life that catch us off-guard.

Jesus knew his purpose in life. This time in the desert was his time of reflection before he entered the world to do what he was called to do. While the mission was clear, there would be temptations along his way – detours that threatened to take him away from the purpose for which he had been placed on this earth. This story illustrates the first set of temptations that Jesus faced to take him away from his goals.

Let's be honest. It's really no temptation for us to turn stones into bread or to safely leap from a Temple, for the simple reason it is impossible for us to do those things. So what does this story have to show us? What do Jesus' temptations and his response tell us about the human struggle with temptation and in pursuing a life with God?

Let's look at the **First temptation: If you want something, go for it. And Jesus response: There is more to life than "stuff".**

The first temptation sounds tame enough, doesn't it? You could almost sense the innocence in the Accuser's presentation of this temptation – "just make these stones into bread – what's the big deal? You're the Son of God – just do it! There is no law against turning some rocks into lunch. It won't hurt anything." Have you ever noticed that temptations are the hardest to resist when you are hungry or tired or alone? Jesus had been fasting for six weeks by choice. This temptation was very real. Jesus could have given in and his hunger was probably screaming, "Do it."

But, in his answer, Jesus was saying, "There is more to life than material things. I won't complain. Neither will I take matters into my own hands. I will trust that I will have what I need. Our temptation is not to turn stones into bread because the impossible does not tempt us. But the very subtle enticement is still strong. The temptation here is to go after the things that are good in the short term, but not best in the long term.

That reminds me of the little boy who, while saying his prayers, begged God for a new BMX bicycle. His mother tried to correct him and explained that prayer should not be an attempt to get our selfish needs met. It was the Christmas season, and when the boy's mother came down the steps the next morning, she noticed something was missing from the manger scene under the Christmas tree. She was surprised to see that the little figurine of Mary was gone. In its place was a note that read, "Dear Jesus, if you ever want to see your mother again, you had better get me that BMX bicycle."

We figure out ways to get what we want because we do not trust God to take care of us in the ways we desire. Sometimes we want what we want, no matter the ultimate cost.

Second temptation: If you can get there an easier way, why not?
Jesus response: The means are just as important as the end.

The second temptation is to take ethical shortcuts – to compromise our values to achieve our goals. Now that one hits a little closer to home, doesn't it? Who among us hasn't been tempted to compromise just a little of our honesty or integrity to get what we want? Jesus was led up to a high place and was shown in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the tempter 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."

But the temptation for Jesus was to take the easy way to power – to take his destiny along the path of least resistance, avoiding the cross. We can rationalize our decisions to get where we want to be the easy way.

Some years back, Coach Cleveland Stroud and the Bulldogs of Rockdale County High School had a great season on the way to the Georgia boy's basketball tournament. They managed a dramatic come-from-behind victory in the state finals. But the trophy case outside the gym is now bare. The Georgia High School Association deprived Rockdale County of that championship after school officials reported that a player who was scholastically ineligible had played 45 seconds in the first of the school's five post-season games.

Coach said, "We didn't know he was ineligible at the time. We didn't know it until just before we reported it. Some people have said that we should have just kept quiet about it, that it was just 45 seconds and the player wasn't an impact player. But you've got to do what's honest and right and what the rules say. I told my team that people forget the scores of basketball games. They don't ever forget what you're made of." I am certain that championship was that Coach's career dream – but he knew there are some things even more important in life than a championship season. The means matter.

Third temptation: You only live once. Go for the glory.

Jesus response: Know who you are.

The third temptation Jesus confronted was the temptation to go for the world's concept of success in order to be popular and to receive the accolades of the crowd. In this temptation, Jesus was challenged to prove his authenticity by

jumping from the temple and impressing the audience with something spectacular. "Throw yourself off the highest place in the temple, down four hundred feet or more into the Kidron Valley. When you land unscathed, people will be dazzled and you will be famous – and then you'll have no trouble getting followers."

I think this is an area in our lives where many of us are susceptible, even though we may not acknowledge it. Many of us love the spotlight – as a board member, volunteer extraordinaire, chairperson, supervisor, keynote speaker – even preacher. And we don't realize how much we seek our significance by trying to impress others. We are often tempted to perform in such a way as to please other people instead of pleasing God. There's a little phrase that I ponder often to remind myself of those hidden temptations: **"There is no limit to the amount of good you can do if you don't care who gets the credit."**

Now maybe being spectacular or feeling significant is not your biggest temptation, but it has become the temptation of choice for many people in our culture. Just look at the success of "American Idol", or "America's Got Talent". Parker Palmer observed that the temptation to seek the sort of admiration that inflates the ego but does not oblige us to any real responsibility is especially insidious in the media age – you know, the proverbial fifteen minutes of fame. But Parker continued: "the media only amplify the anguish of people who already feel utterly insignificant and who long to be noticed. Every day we witness the pain of people who need to cry out, 'I'm here! I count! The temptation to be spectacular seems absurd, but some of its manifestations are the stuff of modern American tragedy."

When I spent more time with this Scripture reflecting on my life, I saw some very real temptations that strike at the core of who I am. Why are we so susceptible to these 'hidden temptations'? If I can peer through the murky silt and see the bottom of my soul, the answer is – that I want to be liked, noticed, and significant. I want my life to make a difference in this world. For many years, I thought my drives were all about ministry for God, but it turns out they're often a little about God and a lot about me. Jesus reminds me that I need to remember who I am, who we are – God's beloved children.

I want to ask you to ponder a few things in the week ahead. The questions are

not: How successful are you? Or how many people take you seriously? Or even, how much are you going to accomplish with your life? But: Do you want to honor God with your life? If the answer is yes, then no matter how uncertain and frustrated we are, no matter how insignificant and unremarkable our accomplishments seem to be, God will one day whisper these words to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

So then, let me leave you with the words of one of the men I admire the most – who understood the meaning of a life well lived –

"Keep a clear eye toward life's end. Do not forget your purpose and destiny as God's creature. What you are in God's sight is what you are and nothing more. Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received – fading symbols of honor, trappings of power – but only what you have given: a full heart enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice, and courage."

Those words, my friends, are the wisdom of a man who lived almost a millennium ago – and we are still quoting – St. Francis of Assisi. Amen.