

Facing and Resisting Temptation

Matthew 4: 1-11

Preached by Dr. Cahill
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Jesus spoke from personal experience when he included the in the Lord's prayer, "... lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil..."

If anyone was ever tempted to the nth degree, it was Jesus.

We may wonder how the Son of God could be tempted since Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Being fully human, Jesus enjoyed the same childlike innocence as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But being innocent doesn't mean you can't be tempted.

Like Adam and Eve, Jesus was prone to the full range of temptations. Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus never gave into any compulsions or appetites cutting him loose from God's will.

You also have to wonder what motivated Jesus to resist. His first and most obvious motive: The strong bond between the God the Father and God the Son was so strong that Jesus didn't want to let God the Father down.

His second motivation: Jesus didn't want to let us down. Giving into temptation just once would ruin everything by automatically disqualifying him from being the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Remember, only one innocent and unblemished could satisfy God's demand for justice. Someone had to pay the price for our disobedience and it had to be Jesus.

On the other hand, you don't have to wonder at all about Satan's motivation. He wanted to neutralize Jesus even before his ministry started. So Satan threw at Jesus everything he had, with the same temptations he snares us with, aiming at our security needs, our ego needs and our need to control people.

Jesus resisted these assaults, but the more he did, the more Satan pressed on to weaken Jesus's resolve.

Now contrast this story with Adam's and Eve's (who are actually stand ins for us) and see the difference between us caving in when it suits us and Jesus' resisting when it didn't suit him. By that I mean Jesus resisted taking the easy way out.

Think about it, whenever we really want to do something we shouldn't do or avoid something we should do, a ferocious battle begins waging in our hearts and minds.

Remember the old Donald Duck cartoon when he was being tempted? He had an angel on one shoulder, encouraging him to be good and a devil on the other tempting him to be bad.

The angel could only appeal to Donald's better nature and warn him about the consequences.

The devil's task was easier. Promised the joys of instant gratification, Donald's will slowly weakens and bends until it breaks with hilarious results.

But in real life it's not so funny.

What ultimately undermined Adam and Eve's resistance was the serpent's claim that eating the forbidden fruit would make them godlike. That was a lie. Not only did they not become like God, when their eyes were opened they saw that they were naked and hid because they knew they lost their innocence. Like Humpty Dumpty who had a great fall, they couldn't put themselves back together again.

Contrast and compare Adam and Eve's hubris with Jesus' humility. Then consider this, Adam's and Eve's willful disobedience started the creation's downward spiral towards self destruction that could only be reversed by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. By dying for our sakes, Jesus guaranteed his promise of God's emerging kingdom finally coming to earth in all its glory for ever and ever.

Let's review the story. Immediately after his baptism and hearing God's affirmation, "You are my beloved son," the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Once there Jesus wrestled with the question, "What does it mean to be God beloved son?"

Notice Satan's laser like assault on Jesus' identity.

That explains the taunts before each temptation, "If you are the son of God..." If you are God's beloved son, why not use your powers to provide security, self gratification and power for yourself and all the people in the world?

You see what's happening here. Satan was trying to give Jesus an identity crisis. Being clever, he didn't deny Jesus' was God's son, but he did try to make Jesus question their relationship. The temptation to change stones into bread was getting Jesus to question his trust in God's provision.

"Jesus, you can't always count on God, so take matters into your own hands. You have the power to make your own security."

This was the same temptation that snared Adam and Eve? They were told that if they ate the forbidden fruit, they wouldn't need God anymore. They would become their own gods.

Whenever our security needs are threatened, we faced the same temptation. We start praying for what we want, what we think we need and if God doesn't deliver, we take matters into our own hands.

We've all faced financial shortfalls. Where is the money to come from to pay the mortgage, the car payments, the credit card debts? We start to worry, fret and get desperate.

The mounting costs of Babcock Church's aging heating system is a case in point. After pouring thousands of dollars fixing it, something else breaks down.

The theme of our prayer service last Sunday evening was seeking God's provision, praying for God to intervene and provide us with bread, and I mean money.

We started out by reading the scripture from the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore, do not worry say what will we eat or what will we drink or what will we wear..." And I added, "what we need to pay to keep heat in the building."

The answer came to me several verses later, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well."

Whenever our security is threatened, our first response is panic. Hopefully, we soon calm down and remember Jesus' facing the same temptation and strive to follow his example to seek first the kingdom of God.

As I've been saying these past weeks, for Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection to make any sense, put it in the context of God's promised kingdom.

The same is true for our own lives and needs. As citizens of God's kingdom, we needn't worry about tomorrow. Concentrate on today because it's only in the present tense that God's kingdom comes near.

More important than financial security is our security found in God's provision. Seeking first the God's kingdom first gives no guarantee everything will turn out the way we want but we are guaranteed something better. Everything will turn out according to God's will, which is always for our good.

Jesus declined the temptation saying, "Man doesn't live by bread alone."

The next temptation was just as insidious. "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down from the top of the temple."

This temptation was aimed at Jesus' ego, implying, "Jesus, if God really loves you, God won't let you get hurt when you fall. If God really loves you as his son, you will never suffer and die."

Satan suspected at some point God would put Jesus in harm's way so he wanted to mess with Jesus' head before it happened. He implied that when Jesus survived the fall, the crowd standing in front of the temple would be in awe of, maybe even afraid of Jesus. Any serious opposition to his ministry would crumble. Then Jesus could effortlessly seize the throne of Israel and rule like an earthly king.

Later, Jesus would tell Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Jesus already knew God's kingdom was more important than all the kingdoms of the world put together. He also knew God sent him to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, not the other way around.

In effect, Jesus was being tempted not to trust in God before testing God because God might let him down.

Again Jesus resisted by quoting scripture, "Do not put your Lord your God to the test."

Still determined, Satan pulled out all the stops with his final temptation. Taking Jesus to a mountaintop, he revealed all the power and wealth of the world and promised it was Jesus' for the taking, if only he would bow down and worship him.

The temptation? By selling his soul Jesus could achieve his goal of the world coming to him without the cross. If Jesus agree to these terms, we would all continue on that downward spiral towards self-destruction.

Not buying it, Jesus commanded, "Get away from me Satan," making it plain he wasn't for sale.

Just as God sent Jesus into those forty days in the wilderness, we are being sent into the forty days of Lent. It's helpful to begin with remembering Jesus' refusal to short-circuit God's plan of salvation because by his example, we can be encouraged to cooperate with God's plan of salvation.

"Seek first the kingdom of God and all his righteousness..."

Maybe that should be our mantra for the next 40 days and beyond. Whenever you make a life changing decision, seek first the kingdom of God. Whenever you're worried about something, seek first the kingdom of God. If God is calling you to do something important that outside of your comfort zone, seek first the kingdom of God. When you're in the hole financially before you start to worry, seek first the kingdom of God.

When you seek the kingdom of God in any situation your options become clear, your worries are overwhelmed with assurance, you take another step to becoming fully human. You become righteous, right with God, right with your neighbor and right with yourself. Then you can sense God's kingdom emerging all around us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

May Jesus' determination to resist temptation become our motivation to recommit our lives to serving Christ and his kingdom, no matter what situation we find ourselves in. Maybe our problems don't go away. Perhaps our responsibilities and the challenges will increase. Its probable things will get messy before they get straightened out.

No matter how it plays out, God is present to help you accomplish God's purpose for your life and just as important, the lives of those you touch.

Let the journey to the cross begin. Amen.