

## “Temptation”

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**New Testament Lesson: Luke 4:1-13**

**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 91:14-16**

“Left to ourselves, we often desire the wrong things.” That’s according to David Brooks in his book “The Road to Character.” “Whether it’s around the dessert tray or in the late-night bar,” says Brooks, “we know we should choose one thing, but end up choosing another.”

It’s a balance between our long-term interest and our short-term pleasures, and sadly for many these days, short-term pleasures win every time, despite how that effects our lives, long-term.

Human beings have been struggling to strike the right balance since that first tempting bite of the forbidden fruit. And here comes Jesus, stepping right into the same struggle we have – tempted 40 days and 40 nights by none-other-than the devil. Whether or not you believe in the devil – or how you believe in the devil or in evil forces or in the danger of misguided choices – no matter what you believe, it is clear that wanting to have our cake and eat it, too, is a problem, a problem we all have.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, when we are invited to spend the next several weeks looking at our everyday choices. It doesn’t matter how religious you are, it doesn’t matter whether Lent means anything to you or not, everyone can benefit from stepping back once a year and looking at how things are going.

It’s good to look at the things we think we can’t live without, the things we cling to in life just to get by and then ask ourselves ***what’s really important***, what do we *really* need to get by in life, how complicated are our true needs. Really, think about it.

That’s what the next 40 days of Lent are all about. So let’s take a minute right now and think about what you cling to, just to get through the day. What is your “go-to” after a long, hard day? Pick one, and think about it. For me, it’s TV. I “need” to watch at least one good, hour-long drama at the end of the day, just to let my mind wonder.

And there’s nothing wrong with that. The problem is that one TV show can easily turn to two. (Thankfully, it never goes beyond that. I don’t have the time! No binge watching for this pastor).

But still, two TV shows when one would be just as good. What might God do if I gave him that extra hour? My guess is it would – and will – be better than any second TV show I could watch. An extra hour each night watching the “God channel.” I’m kind of look forward to that.

But that's just me. What about you, what is it that you turn to in getting through the day, in winding down, in burning off the stress, in dealing with boredom or loneliness? What is it that you "need" just to get by in life, and what might God do in your life, if you gave that over to him? I'll give you a moment to think about it.

The goal of such an exercise is to see what God would put in its place – maybe a good book (unless that's your thing, binging on books); maybe a bit of quiet time to think and reflect; or maybe it's the chance to reconnect with family. God only knows where you might be led.

The important thing to remember is that being tempted is not the most terrible thing in this world. Even giving in to temptation once in a while is not a bad thing. The only bad thing is when we let temptation run our lives.

It's like the woman who took her preschooler to the mall to buy a birthday present for his friend. Before they entered the toy store, the child dug in his heels and began to protest, "Mommy, I can't go in there. You know I'm attracted to toys, and I'll see something I want. Then I'll cry, and it's just better if I don't go in." If only that little boy had had a little more Jesus in his life! No, not really. That's silly. It's a preschooler. Preschoolers are supposed to act that way, to some extent.<sup>1</sup> But, some people think it's true that once someone accepts Jesus in his or her life, it's easy street. Not true. We know that.

We know that the world is full of struggles and temptations even for faithful Christians. We may not like it, but we know it. The real challenge is not eliminating temptation. The real challenge is learning to live with it.

Some theologians think Jesus had a thing or two to learn for himself the wilderness before starting his earthly ministry. And I guess that's possible. But I think the biggest reason Jesus faced any temptation was so that we might learn thing or two, both about God and about ourselves.

Scripture tells us, "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil." Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. God let Jesus wander around for 40 days facing all manner of temptation. Does this mean God sets us up to be tempted?

No. God sent Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, not to teach Jesus and thing or two and not even to show us that everyone is tempted, even Jesus. No, God sent Jesus into the wilderness because God knew that we would be tempted.

God knew that our lives would be full of temptation. God knows that we will struggle with temptation. God even knows that we will give into temptation. And so God shows us, in Jesus Christ, that ***temptation need not run our lives.***

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<sup>1</sup> Kari Myers, at <http://www.homileticsonline.com>.

Even when temptation comes at the worst possible moment – which it always does – it need not run our lives. We do not have to give into it. There is a way to overcome the strongest temptation even at our weakest moment. You know how we know that? Because Jesus did it, not to learn that he could, but to show us that we can, that we can stand up to the strongest temptation at our weakest moments.

I mean, look what Jesus faced. “He ate nothing at all during those (40) days, and when they were over, he was famished. (Then), the devil (says) to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” Wow! That’s cold. Forty days without food and someone comes up and says turn this stone to bread, you know you can do it.

Just think if you were 40 days without food and someone came up, handed you a stone, and pointed to the pane-glass widow of a bakery just full of fresh-baked bread. You can almost smell it. You look around, and it’s just the two of you, quite as the desert.

Forty days without food. Fresh-baked bread right on the other side of the glass window. Do you throw the stone!?! Jesus didn’t. Fully God, fully human, Jesus sat with his hunger, setting aside the temptation to play God, so to speak, to take matters into his own hands. Jesus knew that it was God who brought him that far, and as long as he stayed true to God, God would see him through.

Now this doesn’t mean he wasn’t hunger; he was, he was famished! This doesn’t mean at the end of the day you might not be tired and cranky; we all get that way sometimes.

What this means is we don’t turn our discomfort, or our greed, or our gluttony, or our laziness, or our envy, or whatever it is that drives us to give into temptation – we don’t turn that part of ourselves into an excuse to act badly, to give into something we know God would not approve, something we know, in the long run, is not good for us. Instead, we are called to stand up to temptation. And to do this all we need is a stronger place to stand.

In our weakness, we need a home base where it’s safe to be uncomfortable, to be tired, to be lost or lonely, to be hungry; just to be, without having to do anything. For Jesus, that place is scripture. The devil hands a starving Jesus the proverbial stone of temptation, points to a window display full fresh-baked bread, and says, go ahead, give it toss, and all your pain and suffering will be over. And the trickiest part about it is, he’s right, or at least it seems so. Giving in to temptation often takes the pressure off and allows us to breath, for the time being.

But, giving in to temptation always leads to a slippery slope. We risk a dangerous fall, a fall that is hard to come back from, if not impossible. So Jesus – instead of giving into temptation, instead of “playing God” – Jesus waits it out. And while he’s waiting it out, he turns to scripture. Jesus says to the devil, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone...,’ ... ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him...,’ ... ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

“When the devil had finished every test,” says Luke, “he departed from (Jesus) until an opportune time.” We are never without temptation. We are never safe from the devil, or from the forces of evil, or from the perils of our own misguided choices. We will always have to deal with temptation. And in Christ, we always can, when we ***take a stand alongside Jesus.***

Jesus proved that to us – that we can overcome the power of temptation – he proved that for us. Jesus didn’t go through 40 days of temptation for his sake. He did it for us, so that we might learn something about ourselves and our God.

So the question is are we willing to give something up – or to take on something new – as a Lenten commitment in order to learn something about ourselves and our God. God help us if we’re not.

For me, that something is guarding against excess TV and giving God that extra hour each night. Well, God, what are you going to do with it? Blessings (no doubt, blessings.) Amen.

### **Pastoral Prayer**

Holy God, we, your people, need you. We need your love, your grace and your unending mercy.

We need to know your truth, to experience your peace. God, we need your guidance and your wisdom. We need your strength.

We need all of these things, O God, and we know that you can give us all that we need.

But, God, let us never go after only the things that you can give. For the most precious thing that you give to us is yourself. Draw us only to you.

We need you. We love you. Our greatest desire is you. Help us to live as if you are the only thing that matters in our lives – because you are.

### **Prayer requests:**

It is you, O God, who gives without any other motive than our joy and peace and love. Let us lift up the prayer that you gave to us in that same spirit of joy and peace and love, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we  
forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.  
Amen.**