

“The Temptation of Christ”

Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11 (NRSV)

I saw an ad for a 2010 BMW 323i last year in The Globe and Mail, one of Canada’s two national newspapers. This is what it said in capital letters: **“JOY IS GIVING IN TO TEMPTATION.”** Really? I couldn’t believe such a hook, line and sinker would attract anyone reading such a respected (and respectable?) newspaper. Then I remembered that The Globe and Mail also regularly posts ads for expensive Rolex watches and Tiffany jewelry!

We are all subject to temptation, every day. It doesn’t take much to get any one of us interested in or to give in to any number of things. Especially in our materialistic, rather well off, western world and culture, many of us would love to lay our hands on whatever new gadget or toy comes along. And today’s proliferation of lotteries and casinos simply encourages and fuels us to give up on controlling our urges. Life is full of temptations, big and small. The mood today is: if you want it, why can’t you have it?!!

It may be well to consider **what temptation is**. There’s the story of a boy who was gazing longingly at a display of apples outside a fruit store. The proprietor noticed the boy’s intent observation of the apples, so he went to the door of his shop and said, sharply, “I know what you’re doing; you’re trying to steal some of my apples.” “No, sir,” said the boy. “I’m trying not to.” Often, temptation is a clear choice between **what is obviously right and what is just as definitely wrong**, and **one can choose not to give in to temptation**. Some temptations are easy to resist; others are subtle. In either case, one can assert some self-control. In fact, self-control is one of the fruits of God’s Holy Spirit working in us (Gal. 5:22-23a).

Sometimes, **we may wish there weren’t so many temptations around**. But I want you to note that **temptation isn’t all bad**. It can make us stronger. Indeed, **Martin Luther** said three things can make a person more spiritual – “prayer, meditation and temptation.” Temptation can force us to deal seriously with our own need to control the legion of urges and addictions that may bedevil us. The Bible tells us temptations are a test of our faith (Gen. 22; Dan. 12:10; Lk. 12:31, 40; Heb.11:17; 1 Pe. 1:7; 4:12) . But the Bible also tells us with every temptation there is a way out (2 Cor. 10:13). And the Gospels tell us **Jesus Christ was also tempted** (Mk. 1:12-13; Matt. 4: 1-11; Lk. 4:1-14) “even as we are”; but, he didn’t give in to the things by which he was tempted; he handled them “without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

Jesus Christ is our Saviour and Lord; therefore, **we face our own temptations in his victory and strength.**

Mark's Gospel is **the earliest Gospel record** we have of Jesus Christ's temptation. And, although the record is brief, it provides us with **the most descriptive introduction to our Lord's temptation** found in any of the Gospels.

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited upon him. (Mk. 1:12-13)

From this we understand that immediately after his baptism, when he saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend upon him, and heard the Father's pronouncement of love and acceptance of him, he felt **an inexorable compulsion from the Holy Spirit to plunge further into the desert to do battle with Satan**, the Archenemy of our souls, literally, "the Adversary" par excellence. Heaven had opened. Now hell opened. I can tell you this: whenever you get serious about committing your life to God in Christ you can expect the Adversary will do his best to sabotage and wreck your faith and life. Don't kid yourself about his existence. Be on guard!

In Jewish thought **the "wilderness"** was viewed as a place of danger; it was "waterless"; it was a place where it was impossible to find rest; it was the abode of demons (Matt. 12:43; Lk. 8:29; 11:24). Further, the mention of **"beasts" or wild animals** in Mark's account also underscores this idea – it was **a place of loneliness, lacking in safety; it was the lair of Satan and his hosts** (William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 1975, p. 61).

Here, amidst the desert's desolation, both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels tell us, **"[Jesus] fasted forty days and forty nights"** -- that is, a long time – "and afterwards he was famished" (Matt. 4:2). I guess so! It was a fast that was virtually impossible without intense spiritual absorption and attentiveness. Certainly, his soul must have been given to deep communication with God as he contemplated the immense and painful task which his baptism had introduced and which would culminate in the cross.

During this time **he also repeatedly repulsed the attacks of Satan.** **Finally**, no doubt in a weakened state, **he faced Satan's greatest attack.**

This story is recorded in detail in both **Matthew's and Luke's Gospels**. As you might expect, this encounter was supremely dramatic. The setting was a desolate, desiccated wasteland, like that portrayed in **T. S. Eliot's** poem by the same name, or like one of **Salvador Dali's** surreal paintings – it was an anti-Eden. In the foreground sat or, I more probably think, slumped the weary Christ. Before him glided the resplendent figure of Satan, radiating power and promise; he was elegantly beautiful. The “first Adam” fell to a slick and slimy Satan in the first Eden; now, the “second Adam” faced Satan's presence and deceptive powers in the trackless desert. The encounter of Jesus Christ and Satan was the greatest combat that has ever taken place on the face of the earth, and by far the most important. If Jesus Christ had failed at any point, we would've had no hope of resisting the temptations we face, or of receiving his grace and salvation. However, of course, our Lord was victorious. As we look at his victory, we look at ours.

What were Christ's temptations? How did he resist them? Both Matthew and Luke record **three onslaughts** of the Tempter. For the sake of convenience I will briefly consider Matthew's account.

1. **The first temptation** (Matt. 4:3-4).

The initial temptation invited Jesus to “**command stones to become loaves of bread**” (Matt. 4:3). **This temptation was real.** Jesus Christ was truly hungry! During his forty-day fast he'd reduced his concern about physical needs. He'd cut his appetite back, way back. However, after some time, the physical realities naturally and necessarily reasserted themselves with a vengeance. Jesus would die if he didn't soon eat. In a case like that wouldn't you do whatever you could to assuage the pangs of hunger? Certainly, it's no sin to eat. Further, it would've been wise to do so.

This temptation is seemingly innocent, having no connection with right and wrong. **It is necessary, wise and fitting.** Jesus' hunger was the hunger of starvation! This temptation is solicitous of the well-being of the one to whom it comes. **It seemed so harmless.** But it was, nevertheless, a temptation to sin because, in the Incarnation, Christ had come to do the will of the Father, and nothing else. He'd followed God, the Holy Spirit's impulse to fast in the wilderness, and, unlike in the case of Elijah (1 Kgs. 17:5; 19:5), God had seen fit not to provide him with food.

The temptation was for **Christ to provide for his own needs, apart from the will of God**. Satan wanted him to presume on his relationship with the God. His carefully chosen, devious words preceding this temptation were, “If you are the Son of God.” He was calling Christ’s previously announced baptismal relationship with God the Father as “my Son, the Beloved” into question. If Christ “proved” that he was the Son of God by turning the stones into bread, he’d betray his trust in his Father and create a breach in the Holy Trinity!

This was **a temptation to which we might give in**. History has proved we naturally love God’s “bread” more than him. After feeding 5,000 and then being relentlessly pursued by the multitudes, Jesus in bitter disappointment, remarked that the people followed him not for spiritual reasons, but “because [they] ate [their] fill of the loaves (Jn. 6:26).

But **Jesus Christ was different**. In that dreary wasteland, starving, he faced his tempter and replied, quoting a passage from Scripture, “It is written, **‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’**” (Matt. 4:4). He said, in effect, “It is better to starve than to be fed apart from the will of the Father. As God’s Son I must live by my Father’s Word!” The will of God meant more to Christ than food, even than life.

Likewise, **doing God’s will should mean more to us than our immediate, physical well-being, important as that is**. I hope we see this truth, that God’s will is more important than the next hamburger and fries, or getting a promotion, or being married, or any other kind of “success.” To the first temptation Jesus Christ gave a tremendous “No!” But the Tempter wasn’t finished; he came back to Christ with another carefully constructed enticement.

2. **The second temptation** (Matt. 4:5-7).

Whether Satan took him in a vision or in reality to the pinnacle of the Temple we do not know (Matt. 4:5). If he transported Christ physically, he probably took him to the “royal portico” of Herod’s Temple, on the south side, from which one can plunge down into the Kedron Valley. From here it’s difficult to see the depth of the abyss. From this dizzying height, Satan urged Christ to jump, slightly misquoting (an old devil’s trick) Psalm 91:11-12, leaving out the phrase that God would “guard [him] in all [his] ways,”

that is, “[his] righteous ways” (Matt. 4:6)! So **Satan suggests God would protect Christ, no matter what he did** (William Hendricksen, Matthew, 1973, p. 222).

Again, Jesus faced a **real temptation: to display his miraculous power apart from the Father’s will**. The second temptation, like the first, was calculated to be psychologically beguiling. It was as though Satan said, “You’ve shown your trust in the Father in response to my first temptation. So now show the world how much you trust him by diving from the pinnacle of the Temple. It’s OK, the Scriptures promise that you won’t get hurt.” **Good things would surely come from this**. It would be such a **great act of faith** on Christ’s part!

But would it? Jesus thought otherwise. He knew he had **no command to engage in any death-defying exploits to merely impress others**. He again recognized that, as the Son of God, he was never to do anything on his own steam and power – somehow bringing “a moment of ineffable tension” (Helmut Thielicke, Between God and Satan, 1973, p. 21-22) between himself and his heavenly Father. So he responded by quoting Scripture: “Again, it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matt. 4:7).

Years before, **the Israelites had tempted God** at Massah by requiring him to provide water to prove his promise he’d take care of them. On that occasion God told Moses to speak to the rock and it would gush forth water for all. But when he was confronted by the pleading people, Moses’ anger rose and, instead of speaking to the rock, he struck it twice. God graciously provided water for the people despite Moses’ disobedience (Nu. 20:8-11). But Moses was forbidden from entering the Promised Land. **We may be tested, but God doesn’t appreciate being tested**.

Perhaps some of you’ve seen **Aaron Radatz**, a wild, long-haired magician, on TV, as he escapes from his handcuffs and chains, with his feet embedded in cement, after he’d been lowered into deep water. He had just over three minutes to do it. And he made it! Everybody cheered. I guess that sort of thing gets our attention. But mere **stunt “jumping from the pinnacle” is never justified**, even though it promises great fame, if God doesn’t order it. We need to remember this in a day when the Church has also enthroned pragmatics, when the Church says, “If it gets people in the door it must be OK. If it’ll get people saved, it must be God’s will.”

Outward prosperity doesn't mean God approves of all that we do. God only approves obedience to his Word. Again, Jesus Christ remained under and within God's Word.

3. **The third temptation** (Matt. 4:8-11).

Satan then came with his third and final temptation. "The devil took [Christ] to a high mountain [-- was it Mount Everest, I wonder, high up in the Himalayas? --] and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour" (Matt. 4:8). It was as if he took Christ deep into outer space, where our astronauts have gone, so that he could see the entire planet earth. **He suggested that the all nations would dip their flags to him in homage if only he submitted to the devil's authority** (Matt. 4:9). I'm sure Christ could see and hear the rustling of all the flags as he tasted peace and power. He could win the world, as he had come into the world to do, without suffering and pain – there would have to be no weeping over Jerusalem, no so-called trials, no suffering, no crucifixion. The "Holy Land," the nations of the mighty Roman Empire, young Britain, and other worlds then unknown would suddenly, without effort, instantly open their gates, and hosts upon hosts would sing, "The King comes!" (Thielicke, p. 63).

All Jesus Christ would have to do would be to acknowledge in worship the limited authority that Satan has been allowed to exercise on Planet Earth. The temptation would be to **take the easy way** to kingship, apart from God's will, to be a "**short-cut Saviour.**" The choice was infinitely delicate: the long agony of his Passion and the Cross, or instant exaltation, following a mere fleeting bow.

Many have taken this route to an easier way. A little wink and nod here, and a little bow and curtsy there. That's all it takes. I think of the great German legend of **Faust** who once bartered his soul for greater and greater knowledge, yet who found out he'd lost his beloved Gretchen in the bargain.

But the way of the Cross was, and remains, the Father's will. So Christ rose high above the wasteland and his Adversary and cried, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him'" (Deut. 6:13; Matt. 4:9-10). **At Christ's words, the devil fled, leaving Christ alone in the darkness.**

Then in the air above the desert and all around Jesus, angels glimmered and soon the sky was filled with God’s messengers ministering to him (Matt. 4:11). Satan and Christ would meet again, but the first great battle was over, and Christ was Victor!

It is a terrible revelation when we see the truth about ourselves. Just consider what those young people must think, who abused that young girl at a rave on a desolate farm property in **Pitt Meadows**, just east of Vancouver, last week and who posted their terrible photos of the event on Facebook, and who are now appropriately shamed and arrested. And what about those who gawked at those photos and passed them on? **Our lives prove what we are.**

Many years ago, **C. S. Lewis** reminded us of just how busy the devil and his underlings are in seeking to get into every crevice of our brain and activity in his searching portrayal of an avuncular “uncle” of a devil named Screwtape who writes to his “nephew” Wormwood, in a book called, The Screwtape Letters (1942). There is no end of ways that the Enemy tries to get us into his clutches.

But we must take heart, for Christ has taken on our condition. “He was tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin” (Heb. 4:15). This is an unfathomable mystery – that he could be sinless, though truly tempted. But the fact is he endured real temptation and came out utterly victorious. Because of that, he not only delivers us but also “sympathizes with our weakness” (Heb. 4:15).

Jesus’ experience provides us with mighty wisdom. The most important factor in fighting temptation is to **be filled with the Spirit of Christ**, the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9). Jesus Christ is the victor over temptation and sin.

When **Martin Luther** was asked how he overcame the Devil, he replied, “Well, when he comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks, ‘Who lives here?’ the dear Lord Jesus opens the door and says, Martin Luther used to live here, but he has moved out. Now I live here. You will have to deal with me.” Luther also said, wisely, “I cannot stop the birds from flying overhead, but I can stop them from building a nest in my hair.” When Christ fills our lives, Satan has no entrance.

The other factor in fighting temptation is to **be armed with God’s Word**. In response to each of his temptations, Christ answered with Scripture (Deut.

8:3; 6:16; 6:13). He knew the truth of the psalmist, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Ps. 119:11). Why is this so? God’s Word reveals God’s mind, and God’s mind cannot be subject to sin. Therefore if we fill our hearts and minds and souls with God’s Word, temptation and sin cannot overcome us.

May it be so.

Amen

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