



Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 4:1-13

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The Back and Forth of Temptation

Famous writers have given us many famous quotations about temptation. Oscar Wilde: I can resist anything except temptation. Mark Twain: There are several good protections against temptation, but the surest one is cowardice. Famous preachers have long treated temptation as one of their favorite subjects. Billy Sunday (early 20th century evangelist) used to say: Temptation is the devil looking through the keyhole. Yielding to temptation is opening the door and inviting him in.

As we begin the season of Lent, we just heard a bible passage about the beginning of Jesus' ministry – a time when he was fasting and praying in the desert and tempted by the devil three times. It comes across as a one-on-one skirmish between the Tempter and the Tempted One. Given that, our inclination is to consider temptation in much the same way, as an individual battle with a good angel on one shoulder and a bad demon on the other, both whispering advice into our ears. Temptation is seen as simply listening to the wrong voice when we drink too much, eat too much, or buy too much. Temptation is following bad advice when we tell lies, misuse petty cash from work, pass on gossip we shouldn't have, or do something in the shadows we wouldn't consider in the light of day. This leads preachers to treat temptation in the same way, wagging our fingers at congregations and saying, "If you do that, you're bad. But if you withstand the temptation, you're good." And church members nod their heads in agreement while saying to themselves, "Now that bad thing I did was just a little sin and no one found out, so the preacher's not really talking about me."

This approach to temptation treats sinful behavior like a math quiz: How many questions did I get wrong vs. how many did I get right? And is my final score high enough to get a passing grade? I once saw a t-shirt that said, "Please God, don't let me be in line behind Mother Teresa on Judgment Day." Treating God like a heavenly accountant keeping track of your individual credits and debits is just not accurate, not scriptural, and not helpful.

Ideally the topic of temptation should be a "big picture" subject, focused more on the whole mural of your life, not just on individual brush strokes – focused on the entire garden of your time on earth, not just on counting flowers vs. dandelions. There has to be something bigger involved in the process of resisting temptation and choosing to do what is just, merciful, and faithful before our God.

Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion says that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. In a similar way, every temptation also involves two movements – a

movement toward something and a movement away from something. It is the first movement that we usually focus upon – being tempted toward things. We tell ourselves we're unhappy and dissatisfied with our life, so we go on binges; we buy too much online and get into debt; we change our job, change where we live, or change who we're in relationship with. But stepping toward something also means stepping away from something else – it's a back and forth motion, equal and opposite reactions for every act of temptation.

Stanley Hauerwas is a Christian ethicist who wrote about a friend of his who traveled a lot for work. Anyone who travels knows that there is something inherently tempting about getting on airplanes and going places where you are not particularly known. This type of travel conveys a freedom that might allow people to fall for casual sexual encounters and hook-ups where supposedly no strings are attached. Hauerwas' friend told how he was on an almost empty plane returning home when the flight attendant proposed that they might enjoy one another's company for a while. The friend candidly admitted that the first thing that occurred to him was not the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" but "How could I explain to my spouse why I was late?" That question was enough for him to refuse the offer, because it meant he would have to lie, and lie convincingly, and then literally live a kind of life in which convincing lies are a daily reality. And he couldn't do that. To go forward with that temptation would have pulled him away from a life of integrity and fidelity to his family, and ultimately would have pulled him away from being the type of person God had called him to be.

The forward tug of temptations is that they promise to ease whatever nagging desire lingers within us, like a persistent hunger in the pit of our stomachs as if we'd been fasting in the wilderness for forty days and suddenly the opportunity arises to turn hard stones into fresh-baked loaves of bread. Such was the first temptation placed before Jesus. It seemed like an attractive and easy solution to his problem. But it would have pulled him in a direction he shouldn't go. And so Christ's response is still an important guide for us today: *We do not live by quick fixes and easy answers for our deep hungers. We don't live by bread alone.*

The second temptation came when the devil took Jesus to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. All the power and glory imaginable was there before him. The forward movement of temptation would be to accept the adoration of the masses – to be surrounded by those who smile at your every remark, who nod to your every command, who offer words of praise and gratitude at every opportunity. Yet we shouldn't forget that the kingdoms parading by in the Tempter's vision were real people and places, real nations with past histories and future hopes all existing as part of God's global creation. A step toward the Tempter's offered temptation is, like a narcissist, to believe that the parade of history is only about us. But to do that is to step away from a place able to compassionately see the faces in the crowd. This is not to worry about being behind Mother Teresa in the line at the Pearly Gates. It's to push her

out of the line altogether - to step away from Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Rabbi Abraham Heschel, away from Luther, Calvin, and John Wesley, away from Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis, and Dorothy Day. This temptation is not worth it for us as individuals or for us as a nation. Jesus' response remains the best: "We are to worship the Lord your God and serve only Him."

Eventually the devil appeared a third time, taking Jesus to the highest tower of the Jerusalem temple. Below was the temple courtyard full of people - pilgrims from distant cities, lost sheep in desperate need of a good shepherd. The Tempter tells Jesus to jump, knowing that God's angels would bear him up and prevent any harm from coming to him. More importantly, all who witnessed this miracle would worship Jesus, saying, "Surely this miraculous man is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah who will save all people."

The devil's final temptation was the hardest of all. He was basically tempting Jesus to do the right thing for the wrong reason. If Jesus truly cared for the mass of humanity below him, then jump, said the devil. Deny your humanity and your oneness with them by openly showing your divine nature. You can win their allegiance literally in one fell swoop. The angels will protect you. The people will worship you. Go ahead - step forward and jump.

But to take that step forward would be to take a step away from what was true. A Messiah who leaps from temple towers to impress a crowd isn't a real Messiah. Which was why Jesus' reply was simple: Do not put the Lord your God to the test. What was needed from Jesus wasn't an overwhelming display, but rather a quiet ministry of overwhelming love - one that wouldn't involve high towers but rather humbly walking here on earth, healing those in pain, blessing children close at hand, teaching with words of hope, accepting a death on a cross, all so that on Easter the fullness of life could be revealed for all to see.

The season of Lent has begun. Now is the time to look around you and within you. Look at what you are walking toward and what you are walking away from. Focus on what feeds your soul that isn't just bread - on what strengthens your spirit and is worthy of worship - on what is true and just, not simply for us but for all people. Step away from what is unworthy; step toward what is life-giving and true. And know that in this back and forth movement, there is grace and joy in abundance waiting for you. Thanks be to God!