

HOW TO FACE TEMPTATION

Scriptures: Luke 4:1-13; Deuteronomy 8:1-6

For my birthday this year my wife gave me a three volume collection called *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*. When I am not reading it, I use it for weight training. One of my favorite Calvin and Hobbes strips appeared in June, 1993. Calvin and his pet tiger Hobbes are walking along, and Calvin says, “Mom and Dad say I should make my life an example of the principles I believe in. But every time I do, they tell me to stop it.” Hobbes says, “I’m not sure that total self-indulgence is really a principle” (June 28, 1993).

Last week Calvin reminded me of John the Baptist. This week he reminds me of the devil. In the temptation story the devil gives Jesus three chances to live by the principle of self-indulgence. Be rich—have all the bread you want, or anything else. Be powerful—rule the world, be in control of every situation. Be famous—impress people with your daring. Rich, powerful, and famous—Jesus could have had it all. Donald Trump without the bad hair.

Actually there is even more to the story than that. These temptations are not just an enticement to self-indulgence. They are really an opportunity to do good in the world. Think about it. If Jesus could turn stones into bread, how many hungry people could he feed? Later in the gospel Jesus feeds 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. Why doesn’t God allow him to do that here?

Or think about the second temptation. The devil offers Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of the world. Think how much good Jesus could do with that kind of power. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict—Jesus would rule them both. Nuclear weapons in Iran, genocide in Sudan, drug trafficking in Columbia, influence peddling by lobbyists in the United States—Jesus could launch reforms in all of those countries simultaneously. If Jesus wants to bring peace on earth and good will to all people, the devil is giving him the best chance anyone will ever have. Why doesn’t he take it?

And as for the last temptation: I know it sounds like a circus act to jump off the roof of the temple. But wouldn’t it be a good thing if Jesus could give people a personal demonstration of faith? I preach all the time about trusting God in difficult situations. Wouldn’t my sermons be more convincing if I showed you unmistakable proof of my own trust in God? Jesus could make believers out of a lot of skeptical people if he gave them bread, gave them power, and gave them proof. Why not?

I don’t think Jesus is tempted here by self-indulgence. He is tempted to short-circuit God’s slower, more painful way of doing things. Each one of these temptations here in Luke 4 is a test to see if Jesus will go through with the cross. Will he give people bread, or will he let his body be the bread of life broken for us? Will he wear a crown of power or a crown of thorns? Will he throw himself off the temple expecting God to save him, or will he allow himself to be nailed to a cross while God stands by and does nothing?

At the Wednesday Bible study this week I explained that the Greek word translated “temptation” here in Luke 4 also means a “test” or “trial.” You can see this at the end of our scripture reading in verse 13. Verse 13 says, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” The word “test” in that verse is the Greek word *peirasmos*, the same Greek word used earlier in the story when it says that Jesus was “tempted” by the devil. Jesus was not just “tempted” by the devil, he was “tested.” He was tested to see if he would trust his life into God’s hands rather than taking matters into his own hands.

We are often tested in the same way. The word *peirasmos* occurs 20 times in the New Testament. About ¾ of the time it is not talking about a temptation in the way we usually think of a temptation: an enticement to do something bad. Most of the time the word *peirasmos* refers not to a temptation to do something bad but a test or trial to see if you will hold on to your faith. Later in Luke, chapter 8, Jesus tells a parable about some seeds. Some of the seeds fall on rocks. Jesus says, “The ones on rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing (*peirasmos*) fall away.”

Sometimes I think people give up on God not because they are enticed to do something bad, but because they are tired of trying to do what is good. They are tired of the struggle, of the energy it takes, to keep following God.

I do not mean to minimize the other kinds of temptations people face: addictions—the temptation to numb our inner pain with chemicals, lust—the barrage of sexual images that entice us to view people as objects for our gratification, materialism—the strange notion that with enough stuff we can fill our empty hearts. I am not playing down any of those temptations. They are huge struggles for anyone living in our culture. But those temptations may not be the biggest struggles you have in your life. The biggest struggle may be how worn down you get trying to be faithful. It is exhausting trying to help a child or student that seems bent on self-destruction. It is frustrating trying to share your faith with a family member or friend that does not seem to care. It is infuriating to try to improve the lives of disadvantaged people in our community or world only to be thwarted by those who profit from keeping things as they are. Those are the tests of faith that can make you want to give up on God and try to take matters into your own hands.

But that isn’t what Jesus did. Hebrews 2:18 says, “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered (there is that word *peirasmos* again), he is able to help those who are being tested.” Because Jesus did not give up on God and take matters into his own hands, he can help us do the same.

There is an odd kind of illustration of the story of Jesus’ temptation in the old movie *The Poseidon Adventure*. I’m not talking about the recent television version; I’m talking about the classic version starring Gene Hackman. On a cruise from New York to Athens the S. S. Poseidon is struck by a tsunami generated by an undersea earthquake. The giant wave rolls the ship completely upside down, killing most of the passengers and crew. But Gene Hackman, who plays the Rev. Scott (I love movies where the hero is a preacher), leads a small group of survivors up to the bottom of the ship through the engine room to the propeller shaft, which is the thinnest part of the hull and the last part of the ship still out of the water.

In one scene, however, they must swim 35 feet underwater to get to the engine room where they can climb to safety. Preacher Scott ties a rope around his waist and swims underwater through a short corridor to the stairway where he can climb up to the engine room. Everyone else is told to hold their breath, jump in, and pull themselves along the rope to get to the engine room. If you allow a little imagination you can say that the rope is like the scriptures, our guide to life. But one of the passengers, a singer named Nonnie, is afraid of the water. She can't swim. She clings to the railing of a stairwell, afraid to let go, afraid to move.

Now here is the similarity to Jesus' temptation. If Nonnie tries to save herself, if Nonnie tries to take matters into her own hands by clinging to the railing, or by looking for her own way out of the ship without going into the water, she will end up going down with the ship. If Jesus tries to save himself, to take matters into his own hands by making his own bread, acquiring his own power, or putting on his own display of daring levitation, he will go down with the rest of the world. That is what the devil is hoping.

In order to be saved Nonnie has to let go of her own security, jump in the water, and hang on to one of the other passengers as he pulls her along the rope. In the temptations Jesus must let go of his own power, his own control, his own acclaim, and hang on to God and let God pull him through to the place where God wants him to be.

Like Jesus, the biggest test you may ever face is whether you are willing to let go of your own security, let go of your own desire to control everything, and plunge into the waters of God's grace where God will lead you to the place God wants you to be.

That is what Jesus did. He answered each temptation by turning back to God. "People do not live by bread alone, but by every word from the mouth of God." "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." In each of these replies Jesus quotes the Bible, but he does not quote just any part of the Bible. He quotes those parts of the Bible that remind us to put our trust in God rather than ourselves.

In I Corinthians 10:13 the apostle Paul says, "No testing (there is that Greek word *peirasmos* again) has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it." Jesus met the test, and because he did, he can help us meet it, too.

- Ken Onstot