

Lead us not into temptation

Genesis 2:15-17; 3-1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

Have you heard this saying before, “Every temptation is a test, but not every test is a temptation?” Bible scholars tell us that the Greek word used for temptation, *peirazein*, can be read as either temptation or test. So how do we know the difference? Our Scripture readings instruct us on what a temptation really is.

In the Genesis story Adam and Eve have been given clear instructions about which trees offer fruit they may enjoy. Only the tree in the center of the Garden is forbidden to them. Along comes the wily serpent with slippery words to tempt the First Couple into sin. Right there we have our definition of temptation – something that causes us to disobey God and to disobey God is to sin. Plain and simple, to be tempted is to consider disobeying God. To give into temptation will result in unfortunate consequences. Unfortunately for Adam and Eve, they succumbed to the serpent’s words and ate the forbidden fruit, earning themselves a one-way ticket out of Eden.

We see this temptation played out again later in Genesis in the story of Babel, when the people came together to build a tower up to the heavens to “make a name for (them)selves.” God dealt with them by confusing

their language and scattering them across the face of the earth.

Temptations are a part of life and learning how to deal with them is to our benefit. To that end we have the example of Jesus in the wilderness following his baptism in the Jordan river.

The account in Matthew says that Jesus was driven into the desert by the Holy Spirit specifically to be tempted by Satan. Sounds reminiscent of the agreement God made with Satan and the testing of Job found in the Old Testament. Doesn't sound very fair, though, does it? But considering the mission Jesus had been charged with, it was probably best to ensure He was on the right track.

Jesus' time in the desert begins with a test, a 40-day fast. Fasting is seen as a way for one to get closer to God, to build one's spiritual muscle.

Satan understands that the closer Jesus gets to God the less control he will have over life on earth, so he turns a test into a temptation by urging Jesus to use his God-given power to meet his own needs, knowing full well that Jesus is here to see to the needs of others. And Satan, like that wily serpent, knows just the right words to use, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." It's almost the same line the serpent used, "you will be like God," if you turn stones into bread. Jesus is able to counter this temptation with God's own Word, "'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

We see that the tempter's technique hasn't changed much over time. Find a weakness, say something that sounds like it is a good thing, and then wait for his victim to succumb. Fortunately, for us Jesus saw through Satan's trick. So next we see the tempter up the ante, so to speak. He sets Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple and dares him to test God by jumping off and have God rescue him. He does this by citing Scripture, which he knows as well as Jesus does. The spectacle of Jesus being rescued by a legion of angels would certainly get the attention of the folks in Jerusalem, but Jesus doesn't take the bait and answers, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'

In a last-ditch effort to draw Jesus off track from his mission on earth, The Tempter offers him all of the kingdoms on earth if only he will deny God and worship Satan. Certainly, to have dominion over all the nations of the world would be a pretty heady experience, but again Jesus responds with words of Scripture, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." This last refusal to be tempted and so derail Jesus' ministry is enough to send Satan back to where he came from, at least until a more opportune time which will come later in Jesus' ministry in the form of his betrayal by a beloved disciple.

Each of us will have tests and temptations in our lives. Probably not as dramatic as those Jesus faced, but problematic none the less. Where do we find the wherewithal to withstand the tempters snare? What happens when we do fall into temptation? Experience tells us that no one is

immune from a fall from grace after giving in to temptation. What flashes through my mind are televangelists. I have no doubt that many, if not all, of these people started out with good intentions to simply share the Word of the Lord and call people to Jesus. But time and again we have seen how the bright lights and popularity have drawn these religious leaders astray. While a big house and a nice car aren't sins in and of themselves, if they have been purchased with money meant for the ministry to reach souls for Jesus, then someone has fallen prey to temptation. Sadly, it's not just high-profile people who are so tempted. What about the local sports league treasurer who siphons money from the children's club to finance a lavish vacation or pay gambling bills? Temptation isn't always about money, either. Social status can be a temptation. The upper class takes advantage of or hoards resources that should be shared with others who have less ability to access those same resources. There are so many ways that people can fall into temptation. So, what is the answer?

We have the answer already. We simply need to follow Jesus' example and know what God wants from us. He wants our hearts and minds. He wants us to practice love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He wants us to be mindful of the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, and the prisoner. We are not to be self-serving but looking out for our neighbor's good. When we practice

all these things that God requires it will be difficult for us to fall into the tempter's snare.

In our world today there is much trying to draw us away from God. Let us continue to meet together to strengthen one another in the faith and serve the God who will never lead us into temptation but will always deliver us from evil all the days of our lives.

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