

January 11, 2009

The First Temptation of Christ: The 'Good' (?) Life

Matthew 4: 1-4

Temptations are a fact of life. We cannot avoid them. We should not avoid them: the only way to do that is to withdraw from real life and lose our opportunity to shine as lights for our Lord. However, we should not seek them out, either: to deliberately put yourself in tempting situations is to play with fire, which is not wise at all! We deal with them as they come, following Jesus' example to stand up against them and not to give in!

That space between stimulus and response is critical for us to reflect upon. This space between stimulus and response is not neutral terrain - it is not unbiased and impartial - rather it is an arena of temptation and enticements. It is where we will feel all the pull and tug of tension - it is a battleground of the mind.

1. The Temptation of Desires

Remember the *Star Wars* movies - you knew that Darth Vader was the bad guy because his voice is terrible and he was dressed in black. All of us who have any moral sense at all would recognize evil when it makes a frontal attack - but it seldom comes like this. C.S. Lewis was much more accurate in Narnia - sin comes with the sweet temptation of Turkish delight. Quote from bathroom reader

The first temptation Jesus experiences is the temptation to think about Turkish Delight - well, bread, anyway! After He had been fasting in the wilderness for forty days, bread was temptation enough! In our lives, we can certainly be tempted by physical needs and wants, for everything from food, clothing, housing, games, cars, TVs, vacations, mutual funds, ski trips, etc., etc. to that beautiful girl or that handsome man. It is so easy to spend 99.9% of our time and energy worrying about, working for, and thinking about these kinds of things, and NOT remembering that all we have is a gift of God. His promise is that He will provide for us.

Jesus challenges us to remember some things are more important even than these basic physical needs or wants. The verse with which Jesus rebukes the devil is from Deuteronomy 8:1-3: "*Be careful to obey all the commands I am giving you today ... Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*"

Germany, during the height of the Great Depression was a desperate place to live. The country was reeling from reparations demanded by the Treaty of Versailles. Inflation was out of control. People were desperate for financial security - there was none. Hitler and the Nazis

were consolidating their power, encouraging hatred and a twisted nationalism. In that context, theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote these words:

"We must allow nothing to come between Christ and ourselves ... Worldly possessions tend to turn the heart of the disciples away from Jesus. What are we really devoted to? That is the question. Are our hearts set on earthly goods? Do we try to combine devotion to them with loyalty to Christ? ... Jesus does not forbid the possession of property in itself ... But earthly goods are given to be used, not to be collected ... Where our treasure is, there is our trust, our security, our consolation and our God. Hoarding is idolatry. But where do we draw the line between legitimate use and unlawful accumulation? Let us reverse the word of Jesus and our question is answered: 'Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also.'"

Read Matthew 6:24-34. Where is my heart? Where is my treasure? One of the big themes of Jesus' preaching is that true security and happiness are found in the Kingdom of God, in doing our best to live the values of His kingdom, and being God's missionary in our culture. As we struggle through a recession and difficult financial and political times (though nothing as bad as 1930's Germany!), it is good to hear Jesus and Bonhoeffer; they have credibility!

Money, in itself, is bad. Read 1 Timothy 6:6-10. Paul is saying that *putting your trust and hope* in money - the love of money - is a serious problem! If money is where your heart is, if you are never satisfied with what you have, if you think you will be happy if you just had 10% more ... life is going to be full of stress and disappointment (I recently read a study that showed that people of ALL income levels link happiness to having 10% more income - yet even if their income goes up 10%, they are not happy - another 10% would make them happy - and so on and so on ... In fact, people at higher income levels were less content than those who had lower incomes!).

The sober warning of Jesus' first temptation is that money and things cannot satisfy our souls. *"Godliness with contentment is great gain"* - contentment is what we want, but wealth cannot provide it. Whatever our financial situation, we need to *"seek first the Kingdom of God"* if we want to be content. *"Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith."* How does that challenge you?

- *If you are relatively "well off"*: be content with what you have; be careful your money does not become a temptation, a trap, an obsession that leads you away from God; don't be arrogant; don't put your hope in wealth which is so uncertain (we know that, don't we!); put your hope in God; do good; to be rich in good deeds; and to be generous and willing to share.
- *If you are less well off*: be content with what you have; be careful your desire for money does not lead you into temptation and away from God; don't think getting more money will solve all your problems; put your hope in God; do good; to be rich in good deeds; and to be generous and willing to share what you have.

"Lord, save me from thinking some 'thing' will make me happy. No possession, no experience, no event - not even another person—can ever provide the deep longing for joy I feel. Only your Spirit can fill me in a way that is meaningful. Lord, fill me."

2. The temptation of personal gain

This temptation is about food and physical comfort, but it also about personal gain. Jesus had not eaten for forty days; He had real human needs. But Jesus chose not to use His power just on Himself. He certainly had the power to create bread: He did so on at least two occasions (Matthew 14:15-21, 15:32-38). When He did create bread from nothing, Jesus used His gift to bless others, not simply to feed Himself.

In the Gospels Jesus' compassion was more than a warm feeling; He did something about it. In feeding the multitudes, He did not fetch goodies from the sky like a magician. He started with what the apostles already had to hand, seven loaves and a few small fish.

God gives us all sorts of blessings - abilities, time, talents, material resources, education, skills, interests, relationships, etc - the temptation we face is to use these gifts all on ourselves. We can push our lives ahead, indifferent to those around us. Or we can choose to use our blessings for others, as Jesus did, when he fed the people in the wilderness. How often do I think about how I can use my time, energy, money, talents, etc. to encourage and bless others? Or, do I focus just on MY (very real) needs, as well as my wants, and desires?

Of course we need to be responsible and provide for ourselves so we are not a burden on others. But we are also challenged to see our blessings as gifts from God, which we can pass on ...

The paradox of life is that we really do experience tremendous blessing when we bless others. The most joyful and content people I know are typically the most generous people - generous with their time, their wisdom, their help, their money, their talents, etc. The least joyful and content people I know are those who are least generous. What has God given you as a blessing that you can use to bless others? *"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If you speak, you should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If you serve, you should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 4:10-11).

"Teach me, Lord, to use everything I am given. Save me from warm feelings that are a substitute for effective action. Lord, you never let me forget that love is shown in deeds, not words or feelings. I could fill notebooks with resolutions, and in the end be further from you. As William James put it, 'A resolution that is a fine flame of feeling allowed to burn itself out without appropriate action, is not merely a lost opportunity, but a bar to future action.'"

3. The temptation of worry

Jesus' instruction *"do not to worry about tomorrow"* does not mean be stupid! We should still be thrifty, thoughtful, and carefully provide for our loved ones and ourselves. In fact, good financial stewardship requires us to provide for our own needs so we are not a burden on our families, friends, or the government. Jesus is not urging us to be irresponsible! We are called to work hard - with calm confidence in God to provide for our needs. The birds of the air work

hard to care for their young, *but* they are not consumed by worry and stress.

Jesus is talking about the sort of worry about clothes, food, and the future that saps the joy, enthusiasm, and love of God from our lives. Do you know what that is like? We get tied up in knots about things we want ... but do not need? This sort of worry can steal the joy of wealthier people - who fret about their possessions. But it can also rob the joy from poorer people - who complain or obsess about what they don't have.

"Question: What happens if you gather the world's top ten worriers in a room for five days? Answer: Absolutely nothing." Worry saps our energy. Worry paralyzes us; it makes us feel we're doing something when we're actually doing nothing!

- *"Worry is like a rocking chair; you have something to you don't go anywhere."*
- *"Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow, it only saps today of its joy."* (Leo Buscaglia)
- *"Every evening I turn my worries over to God. He's going to be up all night anyway."* (Mary Crowley)

The antidote to worry - the antidote to all temptation - is to focus our hearts, minds, strength, and souls on God and His Kingdom. Turning our worries over to God is an important starting point. But reorienting our priorities, so that the most important things in our lives are God, His Kingdom, and others, is equally important. When *me* - any *my* problems - are not the most important things in my life, my own worries disappear as I live for *Jesus*.

Here are some interesting prayer thoughts, given the current economic situation:

"Lord, all this financial turmoil seems to touch my prayer in two ways. Sometimes I feel moral indignation at the greed of the fat cats whose desire for ever-greater profits has exploited the weak. I hope that they may move from blindness to a sense of the real world of people, and realize the futility of their greed that wants more and more money. "What does it profit to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of your soul?" (Mark 8:36) But I know that such indignation is not always from the good spirit; it may be mixed with a delight in others' suffering in which there is little charity. I need to watch it. At other times I feel fear and insecurity for myself and my loved ones. This pushes me to look at myself. Does insecurity make me more self-seeking and less caring about the needs of others, lessening my humanity, clouding my sense that people matter more than money? Or does this worldwide turmoil strengthen my compassion? Poverty is not good in itself, but where it leads to a deeper dependence on God and coexists with generosity it can be a rare grace - remember Jesus marveling at the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-43). 'Trop est avare à qui Dieu ne suffit.' 'You're too greedy if God is not enough for you.'"

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