

January 18, 2009
The Second Temptation of Christ: Pride
Matthew 4:5-7, Deuteronomy 6:13-19, Psalm 91

The devil's second temptation comes from Psalm 91. Isn't it interesting that Satan uses *Scripture* to tempt Jesus? A person can pull a verse out of context or ignore the form of literature (such as prophecy, poetry, letter, etc) to make the Bible appear to say what it doesn't actually mean. By picking and choosing verses out of context, a person can come up with bizarre interpretations of Scripture, twisted rationale for endorsing (or prohibiting) certain behaviours, support for strange doctrines, and so on. That is exactly what Satan does here!

As an aside, be careful only reading one verse out of context! When you read Scripture ...

- Always read the context (it's always good to read a whole chapter or close to it);
- Think about the historical or cultural context - what influence does that have?
- Think about the type of writing - poetry, history, letter—that affects it!
- Ask, "What did this mean to the first people who read this?"
- Then ask, "What does this mean to me today?"

Following those guidelines, we know Psalm 91 is a poem and prayer about God's protection. As a poem, it uses imagery to describe God (He is not literally a bird! [v.4]; we are not literally to walk on poisonous snakes or lions [v.13]). It does NOT promise God's presence and protection if we do stupid things like jumping off a building!

It does state, with brutal honesty, that there are a lot of evils in the world we cannot avoid! But God will be with us, He will be our refuge and strength, through these difficulties. We will be attacked - by illness, enemies, violence, accidents, etc., etc. - but God will get us through.

This psalm is wonderful encouragement to trust in God - first, foremost, and always! "*Because he loves me,*" says the LORD, "*I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him*" (91:14-15). These are wonderful promises. But notice the key phrase: "*Because he loves me ...*" This care flows out of our relationship with God. "*He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty*" (v.1) ... do I spend time with God? Do I rest in His presence? Do I spend time with Him? Peterson translates 91:14 - "*If you'll hold on to me for dear life,' says Yahweh (God), 'I'll get you out of any trouble. I'll give you the best of care if you'll only get to know and trust me.'*"

The Temptation of Pride Type 1: Knowing Better than God

This context helps us understand Jesus' words in Matthew 4:7. Satan is tempting Jesus to put God's loving care to the test - by forcing God to act according to Jesus' (or Satan's) agenda. If God is forced into the corner, surely He would rescue Jesus. So let's see ...

Jesus responds to the devil with Deuteronomy 6:13-19. The background for this passage ("*Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah*") is found in Exodus 17:1-7. God had already led the Israelites out of Egypt miraculously (the Passover, crossing the Red Sea, providing manna and quail). But the people still grumbled: "*the Israelites quarreled and tested the LORD saying, 'Is the LORD among us or not?'*" (Exodus 17:7). The Israelites had seen miracle after miracle; they should have known better! In Deuteronomy 6, Moses reminds the Israelites of how quickly they had forgotten God's loving care in past; he urges them to continued faithfulness.

Like the Israelites in the wilderness, do you ever ask a question like: "*Is God really there?*" "*Does He really care?*" "*Does He hear my prayer?*" "*Why isn't He answering?*" "*Is the Lord with me or not?*" "*Lord, give me _____!*" We have each experienced enough blessings, we should probably know better, too ...

Do you ever try to "test God"? Perhaps because we think we know better than God how He should be handling things. Perhaps, if things are not going our way, we think, "*If we put get ourselves in a really tight spot then God will have to act ...*" In essence, we begin to think we know better than God. We try to manipulate God, forcing Him to act how we think He should.

Jesus emphasizes God will ALWAYS care for His people when He - God - leads them into a trying situation (as with the Israelites in the wilderness). But that is a very different situation than when I, myself, choose to put myself in a difficult situation to try to get my way with God. This Old Testament background helps us understand what Jesus is saying: yes, God has and will care for His people when we are living for Him and doing His will (as in Psalm 91), but not when we are testing Him or trying to force him to do what we want him to do!

The psalmist writes, "*The wicked are too proud to seek God. They seem to think that God is dead*" (Psalm 10:4). Thinking we know better than god - testing Him - is not the way to relate to Him. God calls us into a personal relationship where we hold on to Him for dear life - and in so doing we are "in sync" with His Spirit and don't need to try to assert our own will upon Him.

The Temptation of Pride Type 2: Foolishness

How do I know if my spouse loves me? How do I know if my friend is really my friend? Maybe I should climb up on the High Level Bridge, and if that person gets a big net and spreads it below where I'll jump so I don't kill myself, then I'll know the relationship is genuine ... Is that smart? What nonsense! But we do other dumb things of that sort all the time ...

- We do a "suicide run" on our bikes (or street race) to impress our friends
- We brag about things we've never done to look good
- We put on a "false front" to present ourselves well - and perhaps because we're uncomfortable with who we really are ...
- We get obsessed with our clothes, hair or other things ... "image is everything"
- We stretch ourselves over the limit of our financial means, then pray, "God help me ..."
- We get into relationships we know are not healthy
- We engage in "high risk" behaviour because that's what our peers are doing

Then, if God allows some of the natural consequences of our poor decisions to play out we get angry with God! Why didn't he save us from our own stupidity!

Why do we do these dumb things? There are all sorts of reasons ... but if we push back into our motives deep enough, almost inevitably pride issues come up ... we want to impress someone, be seen in a certain way, to have specific things, to project a certain image, to live a lifestyle, get the respect we think we deserve ...

God calls us into that personal relationship where we hold on to Him for dear life - and in so doing we avoid making some of those foolish choices that get us in so much trouble!

The Temptation of Pride Type 3: Attention, Please!

Pride can be defined as a high sense of my own self-worth. It doesn't have to be a bad thing; we can feel a healthy pride in good accomplishments. But it can become an overdeveloped sense of self-worth and self-love. In the Catholic tradition, pride - in this over-inflated sense - is considered the most serious of the seven deadly sins, because it is the source of so many other vices in our lives. Augustine defines pride as "*the love of our own excellence*": striving for excellence is wonderful, but if we are "in love" with our own excellence - if it is our obsession, our greatest priority, our driving force - it can be a problem!

Part of Satan's temptation of Jesus on the roof of the temple was an appeal to his pride and ego. The devil took Jesus to the highest point, in the central part of the city - everyone could see. Here was an opportunity to put on a show. Imagine the headlines: "*Jesus Flies Off Temple*"; "*Temple-Top Theatrics: Jesus Miracle Man!*" "*One Giant Leap for Jesus!*" It would have been great public relations! What a golden opportunity. Great for Jesus' image - and ego.

Do I ever try to impress people with what I've done (or what I'd like people to think I've done)? Do I want to be the centre of attention? Do I like to get special attention? Do I love it when people praise me and get annoyed when I feel overlooked? Do I try to put myself ahead and push others behind? Am I pretty sure I know better than most of the other people around me? If only people would let me be in charge ...

For Jesus, jumping might have been a public relations coup - but for all the wrong reasons. His mission was not to show off how wonderful and powerful He was. When He used His power it was always to meet some need. He used His power to be a blessing to people. Yes, the miracles He performed were also witnesses of the power and presence of God, but they also blessed, healed, comforted, provided for, released, or empowered people for the Kingdom of God.

The challenge for us is to recognize that part of us that yearns for attention. God calls us into that personal relationship where we hold on to Him for dear life - and find our true affirmation from Him, not from trying to "wow" or impress, or show off for other people ...

Anti-pride

We wrestle with a healthy balance between

- a positive self image (We are to "*love our neighbour as ourselves*" implying a healthy "*love of self*") and a healthy pride (in the sense of satisfaction when we do things well), and
- pride (in the sense of feeling superior to others) through which we love ourselves too much and have too inflated an image of ourselves ...

How do we work this tension?

A healthy, positive self-identity comes from remembering you are God's beloved child. You are a person, created by and beloved by God. When you know that you are a child of God - loved by Him no matter what - you don't have to define yourself by accomplishments, profession, or possessions: you can be content knowing that no matter what happens, your foundational self-worth is unshakable. Though other things change - your root identity - as someone whom God loves, for whom Jesus died, in whom the Holy Spirit lives - cannot change. Blaise Pascal once mused that he could lose his health, his body could become disfigured, all his worldly possessions could be taken from him, but in God's eyes he would always be a beautiful and precious child.

You are not what you do! Jesus reminds the Pharisees and teachers of the law, for instance (people who felt they really were GOOD people whom everyone should respect), that putting on a good show on the outside - when we're not right with God and other people on the inside - is not enough (Mark 7:20-22). Doing religious rituals does not make you right with God; doing good deeds does not save you. Even more practical: you are not your grades at school, or your position on the basketball team. You are not the ____ (whatever profession you are).

You are not what you have! You are certainly not your car, home, or wardrobe. You are not even your looks or your body. If we do depend on these things for our identity, some of us know how devastating it can be when we fall. "*Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall*" (Proverbs 16:18). There is a beautiful, liberating humility that comes from knowing that who we are - at the foundation of our lives - is God's beloved child. We don't need to impress anyone. We simply need to hold on to Him for dear life!

In front of a mirror look at yourself. Who is that? Do you like her/him? There are no marks for hating yourself, only for loving. Then see Jesus at your side, also looking at you in the mirror. How does he see you? His eyes are tender, happy in your company. Not because of your looks or poverty or power or friends, but because you are his sister, brother, child of God. Thank God for that love, which is not earned by anything we do, but because God is our Father and faithful and we are His children; as a loving parent, God has more joy at what we are than vexation at what we are not. "*All who believe in Him are children of God ...*" - rejoice! (John 1:12)