

Recognizing Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11

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If I were to show you a drawing of a person with a tiny angel perched on one shoulder and a tiny devil perched on the other, I'm sure would recognize immediately what the picture was trying to convey. Temptation is a universal phenomenon, isn't it? *All* of us know what it is to be tempted. There isn't a single one of us who hasn't had the experience of being torn between the desire to do good and the desire to do evil, between the impulse to help and the impulse to harm, between the wish to speak and act kindly, and the urge to be hurtful and cruel. We know what it is to have the devil whispering in one ear and an angel whispering in the other. We're familiar with temptation. And so was Jesus, as our gospel lesson testifies.

I have to admit I haven't always found this gospel story of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness to be helpful or reassuring.

First, there are the temptations themselves. I may be alone in this, but I'm afraid I've never been tempted to turn stones into bread. And in spite of the fact that I occasionally have a bad day, I've not yet been tempted to throw myself off a high building in the hope that angels will catch me. Nor have I ever been offered all the riches in the world – not even close. On the surface, these temptations are a little hard to relate to.

And second, Jesus seems to flick these temptations away without even breaking a sweat! They don't seem to trouble him at all. He simply quotes a Bible verse and the devil gives up! He's like a one-punch knock-out artist. This is not my experience of temptation. The temptations I struggle with are as sticky as chewing gum on the bottom of a shoe; it's a battle to get free of them.

So the first challenge in approaching a story like this might be to ask ourselves whether we can imagine that Jesus was *actually tempted*! Did he experience *real temptations*, the kind that have to be wrestled with to be overcome, the kind that seem to penetrate our defenses and attack us where we're most vulnerable?

If his experience of temptation was nothing like ours, then how can he understand what we experience, and how can he save us from it? But the Bible assures us that "*he was tempted in every way as we are, yet did not sin*" (Hebrews

4:15). He was fully human, just as we are, and knew first-hand the limitations and the challenges of the human condition.

Unless we can grasp this truth, he will remain for us a stained glass hero and we will find it difficult to believe that he knew and understands our human experience.

If we agree with the teaching of Scripture and of the Christian tradition, that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine, and that “*he was tempted in every way as we are,*” then what could these temptations mean? What might they represent?

Could the temptation to turn stones into bread represent a desire to use his God-given power to satisfy his own needs, to get what he wanted instead of waiting to see what *God* wanted? Have you ever been tempted to use *your* powers, your God-given gifts, to influence a person or situation in order to get what you wanted? Have you ever used your appearance, your clever way with words, your wit and or your personality, to achieve a selfish end? Perhaps Jesus was tempted in this way.

And while the temptation to throw himself off the temple towers and have the angels save him from harm, as seems to be promised in Psalm 91, may be an unusual temptation, could it represent the desire to be special, to be admired by others, to be popular and successful? Might the devil have been suggesting to Jesus that if he were to do something *spectacular* that people would notice and follow him? Was Jesus tempted to exercise his close relationship with God to win the favor and approval of others?

Was he tempted by power? Would he have liked to have had wealth and power at his disposal? Might he have imagined that possessing these things would have made his life and ministry easier? How easy it is to envy the rich, to harbor the desire to live an easy and comfortable life, with ample resources to meet every need.

To each of these temptations, Jesus says ‘no.’ The way that God has set before him does not allow him to indulge himself with power, privilege, possessions and popularity. He has come “not to be served, but to serve.” He is to be one who has “nowhere to lay his head” -- a preacher, teacher and healer who relies on the generosity of others to carry out his mission. He has been called to “empty

himself, taking the form of a servant.” He will not live in palaces or dine on sumptuous food or wear fine clothing. To these things he must say ‘no’ if he is to be true to the calling he has been given by God.

Still, it’s tempting. It’s tempting to find an easier way, to compromise our values in order to achieve our desired ends, to set aside our principles if it makes us a “winner” in the eyes of others. The devil knows this about us, and so he whispers in our ears subtle suggestions that are meant to nudge us off the path God has set for us. He encourages us to take matters into our own hands, to pursue our own agendas in our own ways, to take shortcuts along the way, to compromise to get what we think we want. And this is the path that leads to destruction. We have to imagine that Jesus felt the strong attraction of temptation, just as we do.

What does temptation look like? How will we know when it’s the little devil on our shoulder speaking to us instead of the little angel? St Ignatius of Loyola, a 16th century Spanish saint, offers us practical advice in discerning the voice of the Enemy.

First, Ignatius says, the Enemy is like a **tyrant** or like a **weakling**, depending on how we respond to his temptations. The Enemy whispers a suggestion in our ear, hoping we’ll take the bait and believe it. “It’s okay to take that fruit. If you eat it, you’ll become like God! That’s why God doesn’t want you to have it!” The suggestions of the Enemy sound plausible; there is just enough truth in them to throw us off. If you believe what you’re being told, says Ignatius, if you buy into the devil’s line, you will find that he is like a tyrant. He will come at you again and again until his message completely dominates your thinking.

Here’s an example. Suppose you ‘hear’ these words, spoken to you by the little devil who sits on your shoulder: “You know, you’re not very pretty (or smart, or popular, or accomplished, or whatever it is). In fact, you haven’t got a lot going for you. You’re not nearly as good as that person. You’re not worthy of love or respect.” If we buy into that line, if we believe it, it will only gain strength. It will become stronger and bolder, until we are *convinced* that we are worthless and unlovable.

But if you can resist... if you can talk back to that evil suggestion... if you can say, “What difference if I’m not as pretty or clever or popular as this person or that. I am still a child of God, unconditionally and forever loved by God. My value, my

worth, rests on what God says about me, not on anything I have or anything I can do.” If you can resist, says Ignatius, the devil becomes a weakling and flees, like a schoolyard bully who has finally been resisted will look for another, weaker person to pick on.

Second, Ignatius says, the Enemy is like a **seducer**. When a person wants to seduce another into joining them in some evil plan, they prefer to act in secret. “I’ll meet you for a drink after work. No one needs to know. It’ll just be between the two of us.” Be on guard for secrecy, Ignatius warns. The enemy likes to entice us into wrong or dishonest behavior by convincing us it will be alright, that no one will notice or care. Be aware that when you’re tempted to hide your purpose or your deeds from other people, you’re treading on dangerous ground.

Third, Ignatius says, the Enemy is like a **military commander** who surveys the enemy’s lines to see where the defenses are weakest, and then attacks at that same point. The Enemy of your souls, Ignatius tells us, knows you well and recognizes where you will be most susceptible to his enticements. He knows how to hook you, how to get to you in that place where you are most vulnerable, how to take advantage of your weaknesses. So, like a military leader preparing to defend his territory against an attack, you have to shore up the weak spots in your line of defense, recognize how temptation finds its way through, and guard yourself against it. “Be wise as serpents,” Jesus once said. And know your Enemy, and yourself.

Temptation is common to us all. We all know what it is to be torn between doing what is good and right, and what is dishonest or evil.

Thank God we have a Savior in Jesus Christ, who has promised to strengthen us in temptation. He knows our weakness and offers to be our strength. He is a ‘very present help in trouble,’ a ‘strong fortress against the enemy.’ Trust in him to carry you through the temptations that belong to this world, and ask him to give you “that victory of life and peace that will enable you to serve him all your days.” Do not be afraid. He has overcome all evil, and stands ready to help you. His strength is made perfect in your weakness.