

"The Word for Temptation"
Luke 4:1-13

March 10, 2019

1st Sunday in Lent

A popular, although not very effective, way of dealing with a problem is to come up with a slogan. A good slogan rallies people to the cause, gives the impression that the problem is being dealt with, and sounds really good. However, rarely does the situation with the problem improve. A good example of this was back in the 1980s when First Lady, Nancy Reagan, took on the war on drugs as her personal crusade. One of the things she relied upon to hopefully combat this serious problem was the slogan, "Just Say No." Now, many people love this slogan. Many people probably thought the slogan was actually solving the problem. However even though the slogan raised a lot of public awareness to this problem of illegal drugs, there is no evidence that it actually did anything to solve the problem.

As we begin our observation of Lent for another year, we begin by considering the biggest problem that humanity has ever faced, namely, sin. It is the biggest problem because it is the only human affliction which leads to death for 100% of the human population 100% of the time. On the 1st Sunday in Lent, we consider the problem that leads to the problem of sin, namely temptation.

Many today take the problem of temptation lightly. When they hear the word, they think of such applications as being tempted to eat a piece of chocolate cake while on a diet or being tempted to watch one more episode as you binge watch a television show on Netflix when you have better things to do. However, temptation, as used in the Bible, is a much more serious problem than people believe. Temptation leads to more than simply a few extra calories or some wasted time. Temptation leads to sin. Sin leads to death. And death needs to hell.

Yet, even if people understand and believe this use of temptation in the Bible, they may still think it is no big deal. Indeed, they may engage in the "slogan strategy." They may adapt the slogan, "just say no" to temptation and sin, and think that following such a slogan is sufficient to keep them from falling into sin. While such sloganizing may sound good to some Christians and they may think it is doing some good by trying hard to follow it, "just say no" to sin and the temptations which cause it may be as effective as telling a lifelong smoker "just say no to cigarettes" or an alcoholic to "just say no to booze." People may try and try very hard to resist temptation and not to sin, but they will fail again and again.

What people fail to see or admit is that, due to our sinful nature, sin is more difficult to refrain from than for smokers and alcoholics to refrain from the drugs to which they are addicted. Even if we could refrain from doing some of the bad things which the 10 Commandments forbid, there are all the good things which the 10 Commandments require that we don't get done. And, even if we could refrain from all sinful actions and do all good things, there is the matter of our thoughts and our words which God judges by His Law.

And then there is the matter of the devil who tempts us constantly to sin. Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They had just one law from God to observe – one – which they had received from Him face-to-face. Surely, they could ignore temptation and refrain from sin in this situation. However, despite the fact that the devil begins with Eve being very steadfast in refusing to eat the fruit from the tree or even touch it, after a brief interaction with her (and remember he was new at this job of tempting at that time), he had her ignoring the clear law of God, willingly eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and

even sharing her sin with her husband whom she got to eat as well. The devil has had thousands of years of experience since then to hone his skills. Do you really think that you can “just say no” his temptations by trying really hard? You and I don’t stand a chance.

The theme for the 1st Sunday in Lent, especially the Gospel for today, focuses in on Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert. Jesus is weak and very vulnerable after going without food for 40 days. He is true man in addition to being true God so, for Him, temptations are very real. Yet, he is able to resist temptation and do no sin. We study the story and see that Jesus is able to do that by quoting Scripture against the devil. This leads us to alter our slogan a bit to, “Just Copy Jesus.” This leads people to think that, if they just know their Bible well enough and can memorize enough passages to quote when they are being tempted, they, too, can overcome the devil, resist temptation, and not sin.

If any of you have been troubled enough to try resisting temptation, either by your own efforts or by following Jesus’ example in quoting the Scripture against the devil, you likely have found it to be very frustrating and even impossible. The sinful nature with which we were born is too powerful. Not only can we not resist sin, but we cannot resist the temptations to sin. This means we have more trouble than we bargained for. We not only do the sin which condemns us, but we are not able to resist the temptation that leads us to that sin. You and I have no chance.

But there is One human being who can and did resist the devil’s temptation for He happens to be God as well, and that is Jesus Christ whose confrontation with the devil we read about in our Gospel reading today. The devil’s goal was to get Jesus to avoid the cross and fail to keep the Father’s plan to save humanity. The devil went about this in three different ways.

First, the devil tempted Jesus to trust something other than the will of the true God. The devil said to Jesus, who had been fasting for 40 days and was hungry, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” In other words, the devil is urging Jesus to trust His own power and strength, as well as His own will and desire, instead of trusting God’s care and following God’s way.

Secondly, the devil tempted Jesus to worship something other than true God. The devil showed Jesus all the wealth and power of this world and offered to give it to Him if Jesus would bow down and worship him. In other words, look to the world, the wealth of the world, the success of the world and worship them by doing anything possible to possess them.

Thirdly, the devil tempted Jesus to test God’s love and care. The devil took Jesus to the top of the Temple and told Jesus to throw himself down and see if God would send His angels to protect them. In other words, try to force God to do your will instead of you following His will.

These were, indeed, difficult temptations. They summed up the substance of humanity’s rebellion against God. Jesus was weak and vulnerable after not eating for 40 days. The devil himself was the one doing the tempting and he zeroed in on places where Jesus might be weak. How would Jesus, who was true Man in addition to being true God, defeat such a formidable foe, resist appealing temptations, and not sin? One thing Jesus did not do is come up with the slogan: “Just say no to the devil!” Jesus had a different word, the Word of God. And He used it effectively.

All of the quotations from the Old Testament which Jesus used against the devil were taken from the book of Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy tells the story of the Israelites who were in the desert for 40 years and gave in the devil’s temptation and sinned. Jesus was coming as their substitute and so He stayed in the desert for 40 days. He

experienced the same temptations from the devil which the Israelites had given in to. But He would resist them and not sin.

Where the Israelites had been tempted to mistrust God and His will and seek only the material goods they wanted and thought they needed, Jesus refused that temptation by not using His divine power to make bread for Himself and said instead, "Man shall not live by bread alone."

Where the Israelites had been tempted to worship a false God and gave into that temptation by worshiping the golden calf, Jesus refused that temptation by not worshiping the devil and said, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."

When the Israelites had been tempted to test the Lord their God with their rebellious and sinful behavior and had done it, Jesus refused that temptation by not jumping off the temple and saying instead, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

What were the results? Jesus succeeds where Adam and Eve had failed; where ancient Israel had failed; and where we have failed as well. How often don't we rebel against God's will and try to force our will upon Him? How often don't we worship and serve the idols of this age – the wealth, the honor, and the pleasure of this world – instead of worshiping Him alone? How often don't we test the Lord our God by doing things to provoke Him to anger instead of simply trusting His love, care, and provision?

In the desert, Jesus defeated temptation and did not sin. He defeated the Tempter and drove him away. But the battle was not yet complete. This confrontation in the desert foreshadowed an even greater battle which would come. The text says that devil "departed from him until an opportune time." Three years later, that opportunity presented itself.

Satan would confront Jesus with all the same temptations during the last week of His life. Only this time, Satan would tempt Him through other people. But they all sound of the same. If you are the Son of God, then use your powers to save yourself. If you are the Son of God and want the power, prestige, and wealth of the world instead of this poor, humble, cross thing, then give into the devil. If you are the Son of God and you want to prove to these people that God does love and care for you, then jump down off the cross.

These temptations were powerful. The stakes were higher Jesus was weaker and even more vulnerable. How much easier it would've been for Jesus to have given into the devil's temptations this time.

But Jesus succeeds AGAIN. He refuses to use His divine power to serve Himself. He refuses to give into the devil who had influenced Judas, the Sanhedrin, and many others during Jesus passion and take the easy way out. He refuses to come down from the cross in order to make a statement to the crowd standing there. Instead, He remained on the cross to sacrifice His life as the payment for your sin and mine.

Now all of that sounds very good. It's a story of faithfulness, perseverance, and hard work. We look from the vantage point of our miserable attempts to overcome temptation and are frequent sins of thought word and deed and say, half-heartedly, "Well, way to go Jesus. You certainly did accomplish a lot. How does that help me with my battle against the devil? How does that help me with the many temptations that I have to face?"

It helps a lot. Jesus was doing this for you. He was not battling the devil just to see if he could win. This was not some huge power trip for Jesus. Jesus was doing this for you and in your place. As Jesus was standing in the place of Israel in the desert and overcoming the devil's temptation where they had failed, so was Jesus standing in the place of Adam and Eve, in the place of all sinners who've ever lived, and in the place of us by overcoming the devil's temptation where we have failed.

Jesus gains the victory over the devil, over sin, and over death by His battle in the desert and his battle on the cross. As for us who have given in to the devil, sinned frequently, and deserved death and hell, the Bible says, “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:57) Jesus has overcome the Tempter for you. Jesus has died to gain forgiveness for you. Jesus rose from the dead victoriously to give you eternal life.

Does that mean that we are free to sin and give into temptation or that the devil now stops tempting us? No! It does mean that we are free to be unafraid and resist the devil. We do this by means of the Word. I don't mean just memorizing Bible passages and trying to throw them Satan in order to not sin. That can be helpful.

Rather, we rely upon the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ, who has fought and won the victory for us and who remains by our side until the final victory is won. We get this Word in the written Word, water and the Word, and bread and wine and the Word. By getting more of this, we are stronger to face temptation with Jesus. We neither despair nor do we give up because the victory is already ours and Satan can do nothing to harm us.

You may have thought we were celebrating the wrong holiday when we sang A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. Martin Luther got it right about our struggle with the devil and temptation in this hymn. Luther says

Though hordes of devils filled the land All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, unmoved we stand; They cannot overpower us.

Let this world's tyrant rage; In battle we'll engage.

His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!

One little word subdues him.

God's Word forever shall abide, No thanks to foes who fear it;
For God Himself fights by our side With weapons of the Spirit.

Were they to take our house, Goods, Honor, Child, or spouse,

Though life be wrenched away, They cannot win the day.

The Kingdom's ours forever!

Amen