

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S ANGLICAN PRO-CATHEDRAL IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA

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Scripture: Luke 4:1-11

"Overcoming Temptation"

THE STRUGGLE OF TEMPTATION

On the first Sunday in Lent, it is customary that the Gospel reading be of Christ's temptation in the wilderness by Satan. This year we have the account from Luke. We all know that temptation is part of the human experience. It was that way in the Garden of Eden. And the prospect of temptation flows from the reality that we are moral beings and that we are given the freedom to choose the good or choose the bad; we can choose between right and wrong. God has given us this freedom. But here's the thing; we have the freedom to choose, but we can't choose the consequences. The consequences choose for us. So, for example, I can choose to drink and drive, but I can't choose what will happen if I do. I can choose to not raise my kids in the church, but I can't choose the effects of that decision on their lives. I can choose to ignore God's Word but I can't choose what that will mean for my eternal destiny.

Some may wish it were not so; but then if you did not have this freedom, you would not be human, you would be like an animal - simply governed by instinct, or a robot - simply programmed to respond the way of its maker. But we are neither; we are spiritual moral beings. And everything that God tells us to do and not to do is for our own benefit. It flows from His love. But God is also holy and just. He is totally good and pure. And so when He told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, it was not the tree or even the fruit on the tree that was the problem; it was the idea that they knew better than God. That was the heart of the temptation by the Devil – sure, the fruit was pleasing to the eyes, good for food, and would make one wise; but the ultimate temptation was that they would be like God.

THE GREAT LIE

And herein lies the lie - no one can be like God. We can be made in the image or likeness of God, but we cannot be God. Satan's problem, when he rebelled, was that he wanted to be like God. As Lucifer, the most glorious and powerful angel, he thought he could go live apart of God. Recall God did not create Lucifer as the devil. What do we read from the prophet Isaiah in **Is. 14:12-14**? The pronouncement of God's judgment on Lucifer, the one who would be called the Devil and Satan.

12"How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, (Lucifer) son of the dawn!

You have been cut down to the earth, You who have weakened the nations!

13"But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north.

14'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'

And so at the heart of temptation is thinking not only that there is a better way than God's way, but we can take God's place! And the problem with temptation is that it actually seems right because it meets a need or gratifies a desire - it gratifies our ego; it satisfies our innermost needs, it gives us what we want. Otherwise, it would not be called a temptation. So what is temptation? It is the desire to satisfy a legitimate need in an illegitimate way. Take a God-given desire and satisfy it in a God-forbidden way. The devil says, "Hey, you've got a need?" "I can satisfy it." When tempted, you are given a choice. Do you get that need satisfied by the devil or by the Lord? You see, the devil is a pervert. He has no raw material. All he can do is take what God has created and pervert it.

So if I am hurt, the temptation is to strike back. If I need money, the temptation is to make a quick buck by cheating or gambling. If I am in a relationship and have the desire for physical intimacy, I don't wait until marriage. Temptations - satisfying a legitimate need in an illegitimate way.

So we know what happened to Adam and Eve; they gave in. We know what happens to us; we give in, too. We are all guilty. The Bible calls this sin. We think our way is better than God's way because our thoughts and feelings tell us so. Some people ask, Why did God make us this way? Isn't He at fault? That's what Eve said; she said the serpent made me do it. Adam said the woman you gave me made me do it. And the serpent? Well he didn't have a leg to stand on!

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Seriously, no one is to blame except our own heart. Listen to **James 1:13-14**, "***Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.***" Again, "lust" here refers to the desire to satisfy a legitimate need in an illegitimate way.

So why then do we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "*Lead us not into temptation*"? It is actually the old English way of saying deliver us through the time of trial. In other words, the prayer actually means to help us when we are tested so that we don't fall prey to temptation to be faithless. The simple fact is we can only overcome the tests, trials, and temptations of life by following and trusting in the Lord. Remember our series on faith?

And the beautiful truth of the Lord God is that He comes to earth to go through the same trial and testing as we do. When God the Son became flesh, remember He emptied Himself of His omnipotence, His omniscience, and His omnipresence. He became like us and limited Himself to the confines of a human body and the tendencies of human nature. He didn't come to just pay the penalty for sin, He also came to give us an example of how we can live spiritually victorious in this life. How we can, in fact, overcome temptation and the tendencies we have to sin against God, other people and ourselves. And He did so by facing Satan head on.

THE KEYS TO OVERCOMING TEMPTATION

We read in **Luke 4:1**, ***Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil.*** So after Jesus is baptized, He is filled with the Holy Spirit and led into the wilderness for a time of prayer and fasting, 40 days, no less. He does this in preparation for His ministry. How many of us spend a long period of prayer and fasting before a big decision or transition in life? And after 40 days of prayer and fasting, when Jesus is at his weakest point physically, it is then that the devil comes to him. Israel failed when tested in the desert. In the former, God tested His people; now God allows the devil to tempt His Son. But Jesus will overcome the tests because He is filled with God's Spirit. The first and foremost key to overcoming temptation is to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Let's now look at God's Word and the three temptations, what they represent, and what are the other keys to overcoming temptation.

And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. 3And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." 4And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE.'"

The first temptation involves the body, specifically satisfying physical hunger. But it was more than that; it was the temptation that we can do things outside of God's will that will satisfy the human heart. So this temptation is about doing - what we do in the human body. Man is a spiritual being and *what we do* must be grounded in what He says. It must be grounded in God's Word. That is why Jesus said, ***"Man shall not live on bread alone, but (as recorded in Matthew,) by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."*** (quoting **Dt. 8:3**) Our work should not be simply for our own needs but for the work of God's Kingdom. People don't simply need food; they need the spiritual sustenance of God's truth, of His Word. And too often people are well fed physically, but they are starving spiritually. The only way we are going to be able to overcome temptation and be victorious in the tests of life is to know what God's Word says, to understand what it means, and to put it into practice. And so for Jesus the temptation was to act apart from faithful dependence upon God.

Next, we read...***5And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. 6And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. 7"Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours." 8Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD AND SERVE HIM ONLY.'"***

The second temptation concerns possessions. It deals with having. The devil tells Jesus that He *can have all the kingdoms of the world, all their worldly glory and domain, if he just bows down and worships before him.* Of course, Jesus doesn't affirm or deny that Satan has such power. In fact, the only reason why Satan can say the world rulers are his is because they give him that authority.

And so, this temptation is not simply the desire of having something that is not yours to have; it is doing so in a way that ignores God's authority. Hence, when the devil tells Jesus to worship and bow down, it highlights the sin of idolatry, putting anything that is created above God Himself. Our life should not consist of our possessions. It's why Jesus said, **"Don't build up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth consume and rust destroys, but build up for yourselves treasures in heaven,"** And so, what is the key to overcoming temptation? We must build up for ourselves treasures in heaven. And that means we must replace the seeking of the things of this world and all they have to offer with the seeking of God's kingdom and His righteousness. There must be a change in focus from the creation to the Creator. Until that happens, we can never overcome the temptations of this world. If Jesus had bowed down to the devil, our salvation would be impossible, for Jesus would no longer be perfect; and if He immediately accepted the kingdoms of this world, He would have avoided the cross. And sin would not be atoned for. Hence, Jesus responded with the Word of God (Dt. 6:13), **"You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only."**

Now we come to the final temptation that gets to the very heart and nature of the soul of man. We read **9And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here;10for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,' 11and, 'ON THEIR HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'"** **12And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'"** **13When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.**

The third temptation was to make Jesus throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple. Notice Satan quotes God's Word - this time **Ps. 91:11-12**. But as always he quotes it out of context! That is a favorite tactic of Satan, to twist God's Word so it says something that it doesn't mean! In this case, he omits **"in all your ways."** So what was the temptation? For Jesus to make a grand entrance; to come down from the highest point of the Temple and to come down in glory with all the angels to show His people that He is the King of kings and Lord of lords! To show the world, Look and see who I am! In fact, rabbinic tradition taught that the Messiah would appear on top of the Temple. And so this temptation involves one's state of being. Satan says, Be somebody. Don't let anyone keep you down; show off how great you really are. And Jesus says, **"Don't put my Father to the test."** He was quoting **Dt. 6:16**, exactly what Israel did to God while they were in the desert. In other words, don't take advantage of my Father's love. Don't demand from God a grand sign to get you to believe!

So what was the overall temptation for Jesus in all of these? Take the short cut. Don't suffer for the world, don't go to the cross, don't help humanity. Break your fast and commitment to your Father and your mission - turn the rocks into bread, have all the kingdoms of the world, just bow down and worship Me, make a grand entrance into the Temple courts. In other words, the temptation was for Jesus to take the easy convenient way out rather than to take the hard road. Which is better? The easy street or the road to Golgotha? Which would do more good? Which would truly

demonstrated selfless love? What the devil meant for evil, God the Father meant it for the good of His Son - to strengthen Him for the greater tests of rejection and the cross. And to show us how to overcome our own sin and the attacks of the evil one and his minions.

And what do tests and temptations show on an individual basis? What is really in your heart. Do you remember when we talked about why faith pleases God? It shows what is in our heart because we are saying Yes, Lord, we trust you. Jesus didn't want us to simply believe because of what He could do for us - Do not put the Lord God to the test. He wanted us to believe because of who He is - the very Son of God. The One who made you, loves you, and died for you.

The truth is we will be tempted in all three areas of human life - what we do, what we seek after - ie have, and who we are - being. We cannot be somebody unless we first understand who we are as sinners and who we become in Christ. We can only overcome temptation when we rely on the Spirit and remember that it is not about us. It is about the Lord, His Kingdom and others. When we realize that life is not about the stuff of the world, but about the inner qualities of the heart, and that whatever we do in the body should reflect the light and love of Christ.

It shouldn't surprise us then that these three temptations involving doing, having, and being were the same three Adam and Eve experienced when they looked at the fruit and saw that it was pleasing to the flesh - doing, pleasing to the eyes - having, and finally to make one wise - being. And then the Apostle John highlighted the same three areas of temptation when he wrote in **1 John 2:16-17**, "***For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.***"

And yet, God loves us so much that He is willing to give us the means to overcome temptation. There are three key ways we overcome temptation - 1) Be filled with the Spirit, 2) know God's written Word, 3) Fix your eyes on God's Living Word, Jesus Christ; for Jesus said, worship the Lord God and serve Him only; and 4) Don't put God to the test by asking Him to prove Himself but by faith allow the Spirit to direct and fill you to accomplish His will. And through it all, remember that even when we fail, God's mercy is there so that we can pick ourselves up and seek to do better.

So do you want to overcome temptation? Find out the legitimate way to satisfy your desires; and then you will not need the illegitimate way. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN!