

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
February 21, 2010

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Clarksburg, WV

Luke 4:1-13

Jesus. . . was led by the Spirit in the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

(Luke 4:1-2 N.R.S.V.)

Resisting Temptation

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

A father told his son not to go swimming. The father later caught his son swimming.

“I didn’t mean to go swimming,” pleaded the boy.

“So why did you bring your bathing suit?” the father asked.

“Oh,” replied the boy, “I brought it along just in case I was tempted.”

Everyone is tempted to do wrong. Jesus himself is tempted in our passage from Luke. He goes into the wilderness and there he is tempted three times by Satan to sin. But each time Jesus quotes scripture and so escapes the sin.

None of us can escape being tempted to do wrong. If the Devil was willing to go after Jesus there in the wilderness, you can bet he will not be intimidated by the likes of you and me. We will be tempted, so we had better be prepared.

The first thing we have to say about temptation is that temptation itself is not sin. Many times people feel guilty because they feel the pull and the lure of sin. But the pull itself is not a sin. The pull is the efforts of Satan to turn us away from God.

Sin by definition is anything that comes between us and God. Satan tries to get us to put our focus on ourselves rather than on God. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis spins a story about an older devil named Screwtape, and his young apprentice, Wormwood. Screwtape is always telling Wormwood how best to get his particular human to sin. At one point Screwtape advises, (I’m paraphrasing from memory here) “Try to encourage him to be more spiritual. Then get him proud of how spiritual he is becoming. In a very short while you will be able to use that false pride to produce all kinds of unloving acts.”

Many people think that if they are really close to God then they won’t feel tempted anymore. But actually the opposite is true. One of the best illustrations I have heard of this comes from a story

about two men who were out duck hunting. One was a Christian, the other was an atheist. The Christian was having a bad day. He fell and hurt his ankle. He dropped his shot gun in the mud and had to go all the way back to the truck and clean up his gun. And when the ducks did finally come, his gun jammed after only one shot, and he missed with that shot.

The Atheist was having a ball, everything was going along wonderful for him. He started teasing his Christian friend. “Here now, how come if you are so close to God all of these bad things are happening to you?”

The Christian thought about that for a moment and then said, “Let me ask you a question first. You have been bragging all morning about what a good bird dog you have there in old, Mike. So tell me, suppose you shot two ducks and they both fell in the water. Now if one is dead and the other one is still flapping around, which duck is old Mike going to go after first?”

The Atheist said, “Mike would get the wounded one first, otherwise it might get away.”

“Exactly,” said the Christian. “Satan is like your bird dog. He is after me because he knows that I am still alive and flapping around. But you, well he is not worried about you, you aren’t going anywhere, you are a dead duck.”

The closer we get to God the more Satan calls out his A-team to try to pull us away. Many people don’t think Jesus was really tempted. But look at the temptations. The Devil first tried to get him to turn rocks into bread. That doesn’t sound bad at first. But if Jesus could turn rocks into bread then he could feed all of starving people in the area. In fact he could have spent all of his time turning rocks into bread and feeding the hungry. That would have made everybody happy. The religious leaders would have left him alone, the Romans would never have crucified him, . . . and we would still be stuck in sin.

The Devil tempts Jesus to jump off the top of the temple. That will gather the crowds around, think how many more people will hear what you have to say- whispers the Devil. But the problem is that the people are going to demand more and more miracles, in order to stay interested. Again, Jesus could have spent all of his time doing miracles of physical healing. That would not have offended anyone. But neither would it have revealed God to us, and we would still be stuck in our sins.

The Devil says, bow down and worship me and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world. The temptation is to believe that the ends justify the means. That if the goal is good enough then anything you have to do to get there is acceptable. Some of the most terrible atrocities in history have been committed by those who were convinced that this evil was necessary for a greater good. Perhaps the Devil was trying to get Jesus to use armed force to conquer the world, throw out the Romans, become king of the world- then they will have to listen to you.

Jesus set the example for us. Resist temptation. Stand firm do not give into it.

Now here is the thing. Most of us don’t really try all that hard to resist temptation. We make excuses. Do you think God will be impressed if we say to him, “Yes, Lord, I have sinned, but I have

several excellent excuses?” Still we keep making excuses. One of the most popular ones is, “Well, I am only human.”

I heard someone say once, and this was an eye opener for me, “Jesus was fully human, he was everything God ever intended us to be. When we fall into sin, we are not being human, we are being less than human. We are being less than what God planned us to be.”

Many people don't really take sin seriously at all. They say, I sin, and God forgives. God is in the business of forgiving, no big deal. That is a warped way of looking at things. It is true that our salvation does not depend on our being sinless. Thank God for that, or there would be no hope for any of us. Yet at the same time, sin does hurt us spiritually. We do not avoid sin just to please God. We also want to avoid sin, because God knows what is best for us, when we sin we deny ourselves the fullness of life that God wants to give us.

Yes, we know that we are going to fail from time to time. But we can't let that become an excuse for not resisting sin with all our might.

I was watching the Olympics the other night. Women's downhill skiing was on. And several of the racers fell as they were going down the hill. Falling at 70 miles per hour on frozen rough ground has got to hurt a lot. Some of those falls made me look away from the T.V. The other racers who know first hand how much those falls hurt, were making faces and looking away too.

My point here is that all of those racers know that sooner or later they are going to fall and it is going to hurt-a lot. But that doesn't mean that they become careless in the way they take the turns and jumps- because they are going to fall anyway. No! Instead it makes them all the more careful, all the more focused, because they want to stay on their feet and in the race.

The Devil wants us to be careless about falling into sin. He will always whisper into our ears, “you are going to fall anyway”. We have to resist him all the more strongly in those moments.

Listen to these words from Holy Scripture, “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (James 4:7-8)

Look again at the way that Jesus resisted temptation. Jesus resisted the lies of the Devil with the truth of scripture. In every case Jesus answers the temptation with a quote from the Bible. Even when the Devil tries quoting, or maybe I should say misquoting scripture, Jesus still answers with the truth of God's word.

When temptation shades our eyes and clouds our minds, we remember these words from Psalm 119:105, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

This is another good reason to read and study scripture. We need to have our tools in place when the Devil comes against us. We need to be prepared. I think again of those skiers. They spend years in preparation for those few minutes in the spotlight. They spend hours the day of the race going over in their minds all the turns and pitfalls of the hill, and what techniques they will use to stay

upright and on track. They are ready, and though they do sometimes fall, they fight it with everything they have.

Our calling as Christians is to learn how to resist the lies of the Devil. To give the Devil his due, no pun intended, he is an incredibly good salesman. He will always make sin sound so attractive and so natural, and so “of course that is the thing to do.”

In our culture we have to learn sales resistance in order to survive. If only we were as smart in moral choices.

Some years ago I received a telephone call informing me that I had won a Caribbean cruise, “Wasn’t that wonderful?” She was just so excited for me. But my first thought was “what’s the catch?” We are trained to do that in our society. When something sounds too good to be true it almost always is. I also noticed that my new friend carefully avoided saying that I had won a **Free** cruise. After some careful questioning I discovered that what I had won was more along the lines of a discount on a cruise. But it was still going to cost me lots of money.

In our society we are trained to spot the lies and inconsistencies in those who are trying to sell us something. We have to in order to survive. And as a result the advertisers keep getting more and more clever. I noticed an advertisement for GEICO Insurance on T.V. the other day. In it a man asks, “Can GEICO really save you 15% or more on car insurance?” Then he says, “Can Charlie Daniels play a mean fiddle?” The scene then switches to Charlie Daniels at a restaurant playing a very fast, catchy tune on a fiddle. Now there is no doubt in my mind that Charlie Daniels plays a mean fiddle. But exactly what has that got to do with car insurance?

Now the announcer never actually said that GEICO can save you 15% on your car insurance. He didn’t answer that question at all. Instead he distracts us with Charlie Daniels playing a mean fiddle and we are supposed to go away thinking that he just proved that GEICO can save us money. It isn’t an outright lie, but it is misleading.

Let me quickly say that I am not bashing GEICO or the insurance industry, that just happened to be the commercial that caught my eye. But everybody seems to be doing this. The advertising industry has become very skilled at implying things that are not necessarily true.

Satan is an old hand at the game. In fact, Satan will not hesitate to outright lie to us. When he told Jesus that all of the kingdoms of the world belong to him and that he would give them to Jesus, if he would but bow down and worship him- that was a lie. The kingdoms of the world are not his to give.

It is time that we Christians developed our sales resistance to Satan and his temptations. He is always going to tell us his favorite lies and misdirections. “You are going to fall into sin anyway. It is inevitable.” Yes, but that doesn’t mean that it is inevitable that we will fall into this particular sin. Remember the skiers. They fall occasionally, but they fight falling for all their worth.

Satan will tell us, “You can’t resist this temptation, you are too weak. You are only human.” It is true that we are weak on our own. But we have the help of the Holy Spirit. “Submit yourselves

therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” (James 4:7-8)

And Satan’s biggest lie, “God is trying to deprive you of real life. God is trying to take away all the fun.” God knows what is best for us. His commandments are there to help us, to protect us, to give us life. Think about the skier again, straining muscles to make a turn. What if the skier were to say, “Oh, this is taking all the fun out of it. I think I’ll just quit working so hard and let the skies run straight.” That would be easier, and perhaps more fun for a moment, until that is. . . the skier runs headlong into the barrier at the edge of the course.

If you remember nothing else about this sermon, I hope that you will remember this quote from John 10:10. Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Who is the thief in this passage? Satan and sin are the thief. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. Jesus came that you might have life and have it abundantly.

Part of our sales resistance in this culture comes from the fact that we are pretty sure that the stranger who calls us on the phone trying to sell us something, does not have our best interest as his number one priority. We can be even more sure of that with Satan and his trying to pull us away from God and into sin. Resist temptation as if your life depended on it, because your best life does.

Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.”

Let us go to silent prayer, and as the music plays, listen for what God is telling you today.

Amen.