

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
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Sermon: “*Temptations—Too Good to Resist? Jesus can Help*”*

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 (God provided for His people in the wilderness)
Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 (Those who dwell close to the Lord will be rescued and see His salvation)
Romans 10:8b-13 (No one who confesses faith in Christ will ever be shamed)
St. Luke 4:1-13 (Jesus is tempted by the devil but resists him with the Word of God)

“Next time I’m tempted to eat one of those, *stop me!*” Rick cried, nursing a wicked case of indigestion after downing a monstrous ‘Monte Cristo’—ham, turkey, and cheese sandwiched between two-inch thick slices of Hawaiian-bread French toast. The trouble with most temptations is that we only regret them *after* we’ve given in to them.

In 1859, prankster Clementina Stirling Graham wrote: “The best way to get the better of temptation is just to yield to it.”¹ And a character devised by the 19th-century British playwright Oscar Wilde, proclaimed: “I can resist anything ... except temptation.”²

We all know that, as human beings, *every one of us* is susceptible to temptation. And when we stumble and fall, we’d rather blame someone else. Anyone remember comedian Flip Wilson’s stock comeback? “De Devil made me do it!” We prefer to blame *anyone else*—Satan, our spouses, parents, teachers, friends, bosses, etcetera—when we’re tempted to fall off the wagon, steal things from work, eat things we shouldn’t, slack off in prayer, break our marriage vows, cheat in school, avoid church, indulge in gossip, or tell little ‘white’ lies.

We may be so desperate to attribute our detours off the path of righteousness to someone other than ourselves, we may even claim that side trip was *God’s* fault. However, James 1:13–15 reminds us: “No one, when being tempted, should say, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself tempts no one. But *one is tempted by one’s own desire*, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.”

Wow. Serious stuff. *No wonder* Jesus taught us to pray: “Lead us not into temptation, and deliver us from evil”! Our Lord knew firsthand about the dangers of temptation, from His experience at the very beginning of His ministry.

St. Luke connects today’s Gospel story with Jesus’ Baptism immediately preceding, when He is filled with the Holy Spirit and declared to be the Son of God. Next, it is that same Spirit who leads Jesus into the wilderness. Possibly, Luke is drawing a parallel with the wandering Israelites, whom God also led into the wilderness, to test what was in their hearts, and whether or not they would keep God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 8:2). For them—and now for Jesus—the wilderness, the desert, becomes a place of struggle, temptation, and testing. Here, holiness is put on trial. Jesus must decide what it means for Him to be the Son of God, as the Voice from heaven had declared earlier at the River Jordan.³

And so the Tempter begins with the sarcastic taunt, “*If* you are the Son of God ...” The divine sonship of Christ has already been confirmed at His Baptism. Earlier, in Luke, Chapter 2, when the pre-teen Jesus was found in the Jerusalem Temple after missing for three days, He told his parents that He had to be in His *Heavenly Father’s* house. Since Jesus is indeed the Son of God, the Messiah who was to come, what’s at issue here?

At stake is what *kind of* Messiah Jesus will be. It’s only the beginning of His ministry. Will He be an ambitious man of power and influence? Or perhaps, a popular worker of miracles, pandering to the crowds, giving them whatever they ask for? The Holy Spirit has sent Jesus into the desert to face His demons and find out what He’s made of, before He goes forth to tend God’s sheep. (Nowadays, it’s called three years of Seminary.)

Already, the Devil is seeking to derail Jesus from God's divine plan that will ultimately lead to the Cross. It is in this larger context that we must understand the three temptations of Christ in the wilderness. How Jesus responds to each of them will define His identity as the Son of God, and teach us a great deal about our own spiritual battles.

The first temptation couldn't have been better timed. Jesus had been fasting for forty days. He was *hungry!* The ancient Israelites had been fed miraculously with manna. Why not the Son of God? "Turn this stone into a loaf of bread. Use your power to satisfy your physical need. You're entitled!" A reasonable suggestion. *Sounds* good! But then, are we *ever* tempted by anything that *sounds bad* to us? Isn't every temptation preceded by a series of rationalizations, along the lines of, "I just *have to!*" Or, "What difference does it make? I'm not hurting anyone." Or, "It's okay, no one will know."

Jesus, however, knows that the kingdom of God is not built on reasonable-sounding excuses, or the base satisfaction of our physical desires. He responds to Satan's enticement by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Jesus says: Listening to God is more important than satisfying our every need.

In the second temptation, Satan shows Jesus a vision of the kingdoms of the world, promising to give Him all their power and glory if Jesus will worship only him. Notice: first, Jesus does not dispute Satan's claim that the kingdoms of the world belong to the Devil. But the Adversary wants Jesus to jump at this chance for political power. After all, doesn't Jesus want God's kingdom to come? Why not do it the way it's done by emperors and governors? Again, a practical offer, inasmuch as political ambition could be easily rationalized as a good cause—God's cause! If Jesus were to grab the helm of world government, not Caesar, but God, would be King! So why not strike a deal with the Devil? But Jesus rejects the offer. He won't play the Devil's game of power brokering, jockeying for position, climbing to the top by hook or crook. Instead, He will obey God, and take the hard road of the Suffering Servant.

Jesus decides right then and there, He will let God be God. And, He responds to the Devil by quoting Deuteronomy 6:13: "The Lord your God you shall fear; Him alone you shall serve, and by His name alone you shall swear." Going God's way may be costly, but for Jesus there will be no compromise, no matter what the price.

How many times are we tempted away from God's laws, God's will, and God's way, only to get badly burned? Think about some things you wish you hadn't done, and what the consequences were. Yet, how merciful Our Lord is, not to say, "I told you so," and dump us. How incredible, that God forgives us and sets us back on our feet, with Christ's words, "Neither do I condemn you. Now go and sin no more" (John 8:11). Moreover, we read in Hebrews 2:18, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." Jesus knows what we're going through, and He can help us to resist.

In the third temptation, the Devil leads Jesus to Jerusalem—the place where, eventually, Jesus will meet death. So this temptation is actually prophetic, because Jerusalem will be the scene of Jesus' final temptation at the end of His ministry, when He begs the Father, "take this cup from me." In other words, Jesus was being tempted—*both times*—to change God's plan so that He would not have to die on the Cross.

Ironically, in the last temptation, Satan places Jesus at the pinnacle of the Jerusalem Temple—which, earlier, Jesus had said was His Father's House—and tells Christ to throw Himself down, quoting a promise from today's Psalm (91:11–12), that God will command His angels to protect Him. Fascinating, isn't it, that the Enemy of our souls *can quote Scripture* when it suits his purposes? Second Corinthians 11:14 says "Satan disguises himself as angel of light." That's because the Devil will rarely tempt us with things that *appear to be* bad for us, wrong, or immoral. Humorist Tucker Max writes: "The Devil doesn't come dressed in a red cape and pointy horns. He comes as everything you've ever wished for."⁴

How many of the things that tempt *us* carry a little instruction tag that reads, "Oh, this won't hurt you." If we truly thought a temptation would harm us, would we be as likely to give in? By definition, temptation is something that *appeals to us*—even if we *know* it will be bad for us.

Why was the Devil's third lure such a temptation for Jesus? Satan is suggesting that on the basis of Scripture, Jesus must believe in and insist on Divine protection. After all, He is the Son of God! The least He can expect is protection from His Heavenly Father. He could prove it by jumping from this great height with the confidence that God would save Him. But Jesus has known God's love and protection all of His life. He doesn't need to invoke His ego or His pride. And so, He responds to the Devil's third temptation by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

How was it that the Spirit-filled Son of God could be tempted to defy God? He shows us that even spiritually mature Christians are subject to temptation. Jesus was hungry. There's nothing wrong with craving bread after a forty-day fast. All of us have desires, wants, and needs, both physical and emotional. These are legitimate needs. And even our wants are not *necessarily* sinful.

How do they become sinful? They become sinful when we misuse what God has given us in ways that deny Him, damage ourselves, or exploit others. Only God can help us to know the difference. And the weapons God gives us to fight our temptations are the same ammunition at Jesus' disposal: Being filled with the Holy Spirit, and having an intimate knowledge of the Scriptures.

Temptations can, and will, look *really good* to us. But what the Lord offers us is so much better. Doing things God's way may not be easy. It may never make us rich or popular—or even, necessarily, happy. It may not heal our diseases or fix our problems. It won't give us all the answers or relieve all our anxiety. But, as Jesus did in the wilderness, we, too can experience God's presence with us, and His love. And because of what Jesus has done for us, we, too, can receive God's help before we encounter a temptation—and His forgiveness after falling for one.

May the Lord guide us in discerning what is right—in our thoughts, words, and deeds—and keep us ever mindful of His saving help. *Amen.*

* Adapted from sermons by Nina George-Hacker, 4 March 2001, 21 February 2010, and 14 February 2016.

¹ Clementina Stirling Graham, John Brown (ed.), *Mystifications*, "Soiree at Mrs. Russell's" (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1859), pp. 20-21.

² Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Act 1 (1891).

³ Adapt. Jirair Tashjian, *CRI/Voice, Institute*, 2009 <<http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/ClientInt.html>> 20 February 2010. Used with permission.

⁴ Tucker Max, *A**holes Finish First* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010).