

“How We’re All Tempted”

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Text: Luke 4:1-13

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“Big Spender” is a television show on the A&E network. It’s hosted by Larry Winget, who has been called the “pit-bull of personal development.” “Big Spender” is basically a show highlighting an intervention, but the addiction being confronted is not alcohol or drugs, but shopping. Winget surprises an individual whose spending is out of control. As part of his treatment, Winget has the big spender sign a contract agreeing to cut up their credit cards, use only cash, and other measures that will ensure minimum spending. Most of the big spenders are thousands of dollars in debt, and have little to show for it except closets of stuff. On one recent episode, by Larry’s count, the woman had over 350 pairs of shoes. He estimated her shoes and clothes inventory was worth about \$400,000.

At the heart of these individuals over spending is not just a lack of discipline, but an orientation toward instead gratification. They see a pair of shoes and decide they have to have them now and charge them without thinking. What they see, they want, and they want it now, regardless of the consequences. On one episode, a couple decided they deserved a vacation and treated themselves to a trip with the dollars designated for the mortgage payment.

Over the past fifty years we have become an instant society – instant money, instant coffee, instant food – instant access to almost everything. We don’t want to wait for anything. We want the quickest and the easiest solutions. Most of us today have a “Staples” orientation to life – we want to push the “Easy” button.

I believe that’s what the Devil is encouraging Jesus to do in today’s passage from Luke. Now let me introduce the devil to the one or two of us who may think we haven’t met him. The devil is pictured as a person because evil is experienced as an intensely personal power. Second, the devil is given a separate existence not because evil exists outside of us, but because evil is both in us and experienced as something greater than us. Third, the devil is pictured as a fallen angel, because evil does not arise in our so-called lower nature, but in our spiritual nature, always seeking to corrupt our freedom. And finally, the devil is exceedingly subtle, rarely suggesting we do anything bad. On the contrary, the devil invariably suggests we do something eminently reasonable.

Now you’ve no doubt heard the three temptations explained and expounded upon in sermons over the years. Perhaps you’ve heard these three temptations described as an appeal to the needs of the body, the allure of political power, and the desire to avoid suffering. It’s also possible to wrap all three of the temptations into one package which seeks to allow the good to usurp the role of the best. After all, the choices offered to Jesus by the devil seem reasonable enough – they’re pretty good options – feeding people, political power, and the vindication of Jesus as the Son of God. How can you go wrong with motives like those? That’s a legitimate and appropriate interpretation of this text. But I’d like to suggest that the three temptations are really three opportunities for Jesus to hit the easy button.

Jesus can have an easy path to popularity if He turns stones into bread for everyone else. The devil may not have known about Jesus’ destiny with the cross but he knew that Jesus came to win the people, and he offers Jesus a way to accomplish that by filling the stomachs of the people. The devil then offers Jesus instant support – that he will be Jesus’ partner if Jesus worships him. And then he offers Jesus instant acceptance, for he knows Jesus would impress the temple leaders if He were to jump off and be carried safely to the ground by an angel.

Jesus overcomes the temptations to take the easy way out, but I wish this story ended differently. You see, in their temptation accounts, Matthew and Mark tell us that the angels came and ministered or waited on Jesus. In other words, God was with Jesus – God provided Jesus with the resources He needed for His spiritual battle with evil. I believe we can make that claim here, too, in Luke’s account.

The presence of God is assumed. From God’s presence comes the power Jesus needs to withstand the testing, to keep His hand off the easy button, to overcome the devilish assault. No, what disturbs me about Luke isn’t his omission of angels. It’s his statement in verse 13 that bothers me. “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” The devil wasn’t finished with Jesus – he lived to fight another day. I wish that wasn’t the case.

The temptation of Jesus didn't end in the wilderness; it continued until the end of His ministry and prevails even now, everywhere in our world. And it's the same old temptation – the easy button, the temptation to take the easy way out, to compromise, to sell out. We see it all the time, don't we? From Oprah-hyped authors who plagiarize, to politicians who are corrupted taking bribes, to parents locking their children in cages or closets because they want to attend a party or because the kids are too much to handle, to people who gamble away their paychecks hoping to hit the lottery, to companies and government officials withholding information to gain approval of a product or policy, to those who steal and kill for a handful of change. The temptation to take the quickest route to success – to hit the easy button – is so common today that most, if not all of us, consider it. We deceive ourselves to believe that the end justifies the means, no matter what the means.

And that brings it down to you and me. If Jesus confronted this, and everyone else seems to be doing it, what will we do about this temptation? We could talk about family issues or financial matters. We could focus on materialism or health and beauty. Each of these is ripe for this temptation. But let's think instead about our Christian life and character. Will we compromise that or make the devil our partner?

The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about this very thing in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He called it cheap grace. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. Cheap grace is the grace which amounts to the justification of sins without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. It's easy.

As most of you are aware, we begin our journey through Lent on Wednesday. Joyce Rupp, one of my favorite authors reflects on Lent:

The church is wise in offering us the season of Lent because it can be the very time we need to find what is missing in our lives; it can be the season to deliberately seek what has been tossed away or misplaced or ignored, so that our lives can once again reflect the gospel which Jesus Christ encouraged us to live. Lent can be a searching out and a restoration and the means for renewed direction and perspective.

I'd like to offer us an assignment as we begin Lent. I'd like us to take a spiritual inventory and look for areas where we are defeated by the temptation to take the easy way out. Draw a large circle on a sheet of paper and put a dot in the middle. The dot represents Christ, and the line you draw going out from the center represents how far you can go and still call yourself a Christian. Are we line walkers, or are we as close to the center of the circle as we can be?

Are we tempted, as Bonhoeffer said, to seek baptism without church discipline? Are we nominal followers of Jesus Christ? Do we come to the Lord's Table without modeling our life on the life of Christ? Do we simply go through the motions of worship while our hearts are in it?

And in our business or home life, or politics or social life, will we hit the easy button and make the devil our partner because we consider those areas of our lives secular and not sacred? Remember that Jesus's wilderness trial continues through us. Every time one of Jesus' disciples sells out or believes in cheap grace, the devil has found "more opportunities." The tempting opportunity is always with us. Like gravity, it's so persistent and common that we learn to live with it and rarely notice it. Like a bad smell. You get used to it.

Temptation still lives to fight another day with us. Some days that fight is a small skirmish and we escape unharmed; other days it's an all out war that leaves us battered, bruised, and bloodied. But no matter the intensity of the fight, God's presence, the same presence that fortified and strengthened Jesus for His ordeal in the wilderness, will be there to bind our wounds, mend our hearts, and cleanse our thoughts, and help us to live to fight another day.

Merciful God, we confess that we often allow easy answers to tempt us when it comes to the problems of our world. We rationalize that the end justifies the means even when Jesus shows us this is not always true. We turn away from solutions that might require sacrifice or transformation from us. Please forgive us. Grant us pardon and strengthen us for situations that test and tempt us away from your ways. Amen.

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