

Luke 4:1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

³The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” ⁴Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”

⁵The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷So if you worship me, it will all be yours.” ⁸Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

⁹The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; ¹¹they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” ¹²Jesus answered, “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Dear Friends in Christ,

IT’S TEMPTING, BUT...

Cat person or dog person? Our family is pretty evenly divided. Either way, if you’re a cat person or a dog person, you’ll know what I’m talking about—though I think it is a little more true of cats than of dogs.

Each seem to have a certain number of pre-programmed settings. To take cats, if you have had a cat a few years, you know what I mean. Cats have very predictable reactions to certain situations. Scratch the cat just right under the flea collar, and she will affectionately let you scratch all day. Open a can of tuna and she will rub up against legs, you thinking she actually likes you, but it’s really the food she is after. At a certain time of year, when the spring weather blows in and the sun is just right, she’ll go all-out crazy: wild-eyed, flooffy-tailed, climbing the curtains, chasing her tail, and what not. Even though they are very predictable, those moments are part of the fun of having cats.

I. It’s Tempting Because the Devil Knows How to Tempt Us

There is something similar, and yet very sinister, going on in our Gospel reading today. As we can guess the way our pets will act in certain situations, the devil has a very good idea of how human beings will react to the things he tosses in our way. The devil has been watching humanity a good long time now, thousands of years. He knows how we act and react. He knows the shiny objects that catch our attention. He recognizes stressful

situations of life that cut us loose from our moral moorings. He knows the too-good-to-be-true promises that fool us every time.

The devil, being as Jesus called him a liar and a murderer from the beginning (John 8), loves to throw the bait in front of people to get them to sin. So it was with Jesus. Satan threw the catnip to the cat, he threw tried and true temptations at Jesus in our reading.

Just to briefly remind you, the three temptations mentioned in the reading were a temptation to change a stone into bread, to bow down to the devil himself, and to throw himself down from the temple. Now, if we only ask ourselves *why* the temptations were wrong, if we only approach those situations in a cold academic way, “This would be wrong because it would break this commandment...” we are going to have difficulty explaining why these “temptations” were temptations. What’s the appeal? I mean, at least two of the three temptations leave us wondering, “How is that a temptation. Pretty easy to say ‘No’ to that one!” It’s one thing to coldly slap a label on something as a potential sin. It is another to put a finger on the internal warfare going on, the desires that wage war against soul and faith; the stress, anxiety and weariness of fighting against that which you want but you know is wrong. That is where the struggle comes in.

To understand why a temptation is *powerful*, we need to ask ourselves this: “What do I get out of this potential sin?” When we ask this question of ourselves, then we understand why a temptation to sin, even a very foolish sin, has such a pull. Now here I want to be clear. This doesn’t explain *why* it is wrong; it explains the *power* of the temptation. “What do I get out of this potential sin?” is the question we should ask ourselves to identify what we have to fight against.

Let’s apply this to Jesus’ temptations.

When Jesus was tempted to turn a stone into a loaf of bread, the *reason* it was wrong was because it would have been a doubt of God the Father’s care. But that doesn’t explain why that temptation was powerful. In fact, it says nothing about the power of that temptation. The *power* of that temptation lay in the fact that Jesus had been many days without food. The devil appealed to a simple desire to survive! Certainly Jesus could rationalize using his power to turn a stone into bread, couldn’t he? I mean, if you are a fugitive starving to death, why not steal a chicken, right? The *power* of Jesus’ first temptation is what he would get out of the sin: survival. The devil has been watching people for a really long time and he knows that the survival instinct is a very powerful motivator.

As we start locating the power source of temptations, then we start to understand the next two. At first, the temptation to worship the devil would seem preposterous. And yet the devil—who remember, has been watching human behavior for millenia—knows how great crowds of people over the ages have done foolish and wicked things just to get their hands on tiny little slivers of power and wealth. What is it that the word of God says in Proverbs 28? “A man will do wrong for a piece of bread” (v.21). The devil had seen it. If a little wrong for a piece of bread, why not worship the devil for all the wealth in the world? The *power* of that temptation is desire for power and wealth. Those are powerful desires. Why not get paid under the table? Why not make some back room deals? If the stakes are

high enough, why not worship the devil?

Then there is the third temptation. On the face of it, it seems sheer foolishness. Why throw yourself off a high building? Stupid! Right? And yet how many people do not take up stupid dares? “Bet you can’t!” And then they try it. The *power* of the third temptation is that human desire for respect. Who wants to be called a coward? It would have been wrong for Jesus to throw himself down from the temple because it would be tempting God, but the *power* of the temptation lay in the fact that Satan would have to shut up, and who knows? Maybe even the people standing around would flock to him?

Each temptation was a clever ploy by Satan, based on thousands of years of experimentation and observation, to put a powerful temptation in front of the man Jesus for something that we human beings crave: survival, wealth, respect. Each had a power because it satanically promised more than Jesus could get by normal, righteous, God-pleasing living.

II. It’s Tempting, But Jesus Has Defeated Temptation

The power of each wave of temptation was broken upon Jesus.

And we laugh. No, we don’t fool ourselves about who we are; we are weak and fallen. We don’t fool ourselves about the devil; he is wily and powerful. But we laugh because Jesus is on our side, and he is powerful and victorious!

We pray “*lead us not into temptation.*” And we should pray that because Jesus told us to. But Jesus didn’t have that luxury. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert for the express purpose of being tempted. Jesus was led into temptation because he had to be our substitute. He had to fight our battles, and win. And he, the Son of God, taking on human flesh, conquered in his spiritual warfare for us.

In the second reading from Hebrews, it called Jesus “*our great high priest.*” Like a priest of the Old Testament he made the sacrifice for sin: himself. Like a priest he stands between us and the Father, bringing our requests that we are unworthy to bring on our own. But he is an infinitely better priest than any other. Jesus Christ, Son of God, is that perfect mediator because he “*has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.*” Therefore we can “*approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*”

That explains the joy we feel as we watch Jesus defeat Satan’s temptations. We believe that he does that for us, for our forgiveness, for our salvation.

And while the most important thing about Jesus’ victory over the devil is his work of salvation, there is a second important thing that we learn in Luke chapter 4. Jesus also shows us how we can defeat temptation.

III. It’s Tempting, but Jesus Showed Us How to Defeat It

Now remember is who Jesus is. Jesus could have pulled out the lightning bolts, zapped the devil and told him, “Don’t come ’round here no more.” But he didn’t. In becoming human, Jesus took on the weaknesses and limitations of humanity. Sure, he did miracles, he healed the sick and raised the dead, but he always did those things for other people, not

himself. When it came to his life, his relationship with God, he limited himself to what we have at our disposal. He prayed earnestly and often. He devoted himself to the hearing and study of the Word of God. As our substitute, Jesus fought with the same armaments we have.

And so as we watch Jesus Christ, we watch him and we aspire to be what he is. Even though we will not fully live up to his measure, our desire is to defeat temptation. Our desire to be like him is not under any delusions about how totally and completely we need him to save us. Without him we would be destined for hell. And yet it is right for us to live out the glory he has bought us for, like a child clomping around the house in daddy's shoes, unable to fill them, and yet rightly showing heart-pounding love and respect just by imagining it, living it the best we can.

When faced with temptation, we pray to do what Jesus did: defeat it. And Jesus showed us how we can do it. Jesus started all his responses to temptaiton this way, ***"It is written... It is written... It says..."*** Do you know what the "it" is in ***"It is written"***? He is doing a direct quote of the Bible. Not only did Jesus quote the Bible every time—I don't know if he was showing off or what—but he pulled all of his answers out of one book of the Bible. Like he's telling the devil, "Your temptations, I can fight them off with one hand tied behind my back. I'll quote *one* book of the Old Testament. And don't forget, I still have 38 in my back pocket." (No, I know Jesus didn't show off, but you get my point.)

Not only that, but with each of the three Bible passages Jesus answered the devil's test in an exactly parallel context. Not having the time to get into all the details, let's just look at the first temptation. Jesus answered, ***"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"*** That was from a time when the Israelites were in the desert—like Jesus here is in the desert—and it happened when it seemed there was no way to feed the Israelites but God provided manna—just like Jesus now 40 days starving in the desert didn't have a bakery down the path but still trusting the Father.

Jesus shows us that the word of God answers every test that the devil, the world and our sinful flesh can toss at us. That's why we need to know our Bible. In order to know it, we have to hear and read it. Of course, best of all is to have Bible passages memorized. Then, almost without thinking, in our time of worry we remember God telling us, ***"Cast all your anxiety on [me], because [I] care for you."*** Or, ***"Call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you, and you will honor me."*** Or even if not memorizing word-for-word, you at least know the Bible events like Jesus' word of hope to the thief on the cross next to him, or his resurrection from the dead.

One reality of living in this world, as sure as death and more certain than taxes, is temptation. Temptations will be real, and sometimes powerful. Thank God that Jesus came, won those victories, and paid for your failures. Trust him. Now, in commitment to him, learn from him to fight the battles and overcome with the word of truth. Amen.