

3 Temptations for Jesus and Us

Luke 4:1-13

Farmville Baptist Church

March 6, 2022

As some of you know already from our conversations together, I am a fan of the work of English fantasy writer JRR Tolkien. His most popular work, *The Lord of the Rings*, is at the top of my list of favorite books outside of the Bible, and I have an extensive collection of his stories and poems on my bookshelves back home.

If you have read *The Lord of the Rings* or seen the movie trilogy adaptation released twenty years ago, you know that the story revolves around the fate of one particular ring – known in the book as the One Ring. It is the product of a demonic being, Sauron, and it contains much of his power and his will to dominate others, and after a long period of

being lost to the feigned history of the story, it has been found. The question is, what to do with it?

The Ring, you see, is dangerous, in part because it is tempting beyond all other temptation. Human beings, whether mighty warriors or humble hobbits, a diminutive species of human in the story, find that it amplifies their own desire for more: more power, more influence, more life, more control over the world. Other people in the story are tempted toward greed. Even a wizard in the story, Gandalf, who is essentially an angel sent by the gods to protect the world from Sauron, refuses to hold the ring because, he tells the hobbit Frodo, “With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain a power still greater and more deadly. [...] Do not tempt me! [...] The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength.”¹ The

¹ Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*, 60.

Ring seeks to corrupt everyone it encounters, everyone who holds it or wears it, and everyone who is exposed to it must wrestle with the temptation of the Ring. It is one of the major plotlines throughout the entire half-a-million-word novel – the experience of temptation.

As we began our season of Lent this past Wednesday, we talked about how repentance is at the heart of this time of reflection and contemplation before the great celebration of Easter. Repentance is both the process by which we recognize and acknowledge those things in our lives that come between us and God or us and other people – what the Bible calls sin – and repentance is how we take concrete, intentional steps to turn away from those things and restore trust. Sin is certainly something we can and do choose for ourselves, and we bear responsibility for acknowledging our own sin and the sin we are complicit in, but it is important to

recognize that, often, we choose the path of sin because of what the Scriptures call “temptation.”

Temptation, or testing, is the English translation of the Greek word *peirazo*, and I’d imagine most of us have a pretty good idea of what temptation is. We face temptations in life all the time – temptations to do one thing, or not do something else. To say one thing, or to withhold information that we should share. To choose one path, or refuse to choose a path of action when one is required. Temptation is that enticing or worrying element in any decision in life that invites us to choose the worse of two (or more!) possible paths, especially if we know what the best choice would be.

The witness of Scripture is that temptation is present for all of us. Indeed, the apostle Paul says so explicitly in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind.” Fortunately, as the author of

Hebrews points out, we are not left alone in our struggle against sin and temptation. In Hebrews 2 and Hebrews 4, we find that Jesus himself became like us in every way possible, including our experience of facing temptation. Of course, the Scripture points out, Jesus did not give in to temptation, did not sin, but he did experience what we do, and “is able to help those who are being tempted.”²

The quintessential and representative example of Jesus’ temptation is found in our Gospel reading today. And in the three temptations Jesus faced, we find three of the core temptations we all face in life.

It starts as Jesus goes forth into the wilderness after his baptism. Luke tells us that Jesus had been filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, and full of that Spirit, he went without food for forty days. That fullness of the Spirit is

² Hebrews 2:18 and 4:15

important, and we'll be circling back to it in just a few minutes. But as he wandered in the wilderness for forty days, we are told that he was being tempted or tested by the devil.

The temptations Jesus faced in that wilderness time boiled down to three distinct lures. The first was, unsurprisingly, the temptation of appetite. We are explicitly told that Jesus ate nothing during his forty days in the wilderness, and that at the end of that time he was hungry. Well, no wonder! The human body requires regular nourishment, and our sense of hunger is a warning system to keep that nourishment flowing. While fasting is certainly a spiritual practice that many folks throughout history and across religious backgrounds have practiced, to purposefully deprive a body of food over a long period of time is uncomfortable, difficult, and dangerous. It makes complete

sense that the first temptation Jesus faced was the temptation of food.

More broadly, though, it was the temptation of appetite. The very nature of life – requiring food, water, warmth, oxygen at the basic level, affection and purpose at higher levels – that biological nature is a consuming nature. The appetites we have in life are often neutral and, honestly, required for life to endure. And yet, we can easily think of times when appetite can work against human flourishing, when it can actually lead to sin and brokenness. This is true on a basic level – eating the wrong things, eating too much, or both – and can cause significant health problems. But broadening out from the appetite for food, our appetites for “more,” whether more money, more possessions, more enjoyment, more sex, or more of anything, really, can break apart marriages, families, business partnerships, friendships,

and human communities. Untempered appetites can and often do lead to sinful choices and behaviors, and I'd imagine in some form or another most of us have wrestled with the temptation of appetite at some point.

Jesus did, too – but he was able to keep the temptation from gaining purchase in his mind and lead him into sin. He responded to the devil's tempting words, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread," with the words of Scripture. Quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, Jesus responded, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

Commentator Jeremy L. Williams notes that this is "essentially stating that a human's life is more than its cravings."³ In his boyhood lessons from synagogue, and his deeper divine nature, Jesus knew the lessons taught to generations of faithful Jews: that faithful living means

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-41-13-5>

resisting a hedonistic lifestyle that lets appetites run wild. Instead, even our deepest desires are to be tempered by the Spirit of God.

The second temptation Jesus faced upped the ante, so to speak. Feeding one's appetites could be seen as personal, perhaps even merciful in the sense of a hungry man indulging his hunger. The second temptation, though, was about power and control. "The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours.'"⁴ In essence, the temptation was to have, in an instant, the power and control to do whatever Jesus wanted. What did he want to do? Fulfill his mission from God, to feed the

⁴ Luke 4:5-6

hungry, serve the oppressed, heal the sick, and open the path of salvation from sin. We may think all of that would be easier, or certainly faster, if Jesus had claimed great political or military power, if Jesus could have legislated morality or enforced piety at the point of a sword. That was the quick and easy – not to mention the less painful and personally costly – path.

We can probably understand why such a path was tempting to Jesus. It is for us, too. Do something important, something good – but do it without all the heartache and sacrifice, without all the drawn-out, difficult work of relationship-building and the disappointment of folks not living up to their good intentions and your expectations? Push our own vision for life onto others, not through persuasion, but through power? Yeah...that is tempting. All it would take would be bowing the knee to the prince of this

world, using his methods as our own. Certainly, that would be a small price to pay, wouldn't it? We would win, after all – owning our opponents and enforcing our worldview. If we face this test of power today, would we accept the lure of the temptation?

Jesus understood the danger of the temptation – a danger that would lead to the failure of his mission by his choice of methods, a danger of being completely and utterly out of step with the loving and graceful way of God. More than that, he understood choosing that path would mean abandoning his covenant faithfulness to his Father, his Lord, his God. The temptation could not be toyed with unless he was ready to walk the path of sin and destruction. He responds to the devil, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”⁵ God’s calling on his life may be

⁵ Luke 4:8

harder and more costly – but it was the only way that could lead to the success of Jesus’ kingdom mission. It was the only faithful way.

That left the devil with one last temptation to try: a strike at Jesus’ relationship with God. Quoting Psalm 91 himself, the diabolic tempter invited Jesus to test God’s promises to him. “Throw yourself down from here,” the devil said to Jesus from the pinnacle of the temple. Didn’t the psalm promise that God would keep his foot from striking a stone? Come on, Jesus, put your Father to the test. Surely, he keeps his promises...right?

That little appeal to doubt, to test God’s faithfulness, hits home for me, because that’s a temptation I feel sometimes. You may have felt it, too. We are asked to follow God’s way in life by faith – and faith, by definition, is not dependent on strictly observable facts. Indeed, it goes beyond facts. It

requires something of us: trust in what we cannot see with our own eyes or know fully with our own minds. Faith is a matter of choosing trust – because faith is a matter of relationship. Relationships are built on trust, and when we start questioning that basis, if we start doubting the foundation of our relationships, then things can go sideways really quick. We start holding the other person at arm's length, we start listening to confront them instead of listening to understand them, we start hedging our own investment in those relationships.

Sometimes, of course, that is exactly what human relationships require; every human relationship, even the best ones, are relationships between two fallible people prone to sin. We can, and do, hurt, betray, and wrong one another, and sometimes that hurt or betrayal leads to legitimate doubts and even to needed changes or breaks in

the relationship. Trust can be broken between people. But the devil is asking Jesus to test whether God is likely to break trust. “Just test him, Jesus! Surely, he’ll come through – right?”

But Jesus knows God is trustworthy – utterly trustworthy. There is no need to test him. The trust is ironclad, airtight, firmly unshakeable. That trust, then, requires no testing for Jesus. The temptation would only harm the relationship he has with his Father, not help. So he answers the devil with another word of instruction from Deuteronomy, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”⁶ And we are told the devil left him, hoping for a more opportune time.

How did Jesus do it? How did he hear these three temptations, the ones we often hear – temptations to satisfy

⁶ Luke 4:12

his own desires, choose the easy path of control, and test the trustworthiness of God – how did Jesus bear up under these tests? He was Jesus, of course, the Son of God, but the witness of Scripture is that the temptations were real – they really did tempt him. So how did he endure them?

The answer, I think, is right up at the front of the passage. “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit...”⁷ Here, as he goes into the wilderness and faces test after diabolic test designed to appeal to the longings, cravings, and desires of his human heart, Jesus is able to parry the temptations because his heart was already full. He was filled up with the Spirit of God. There was simply no room for the temptations to latch on, at least not enough to overwhelm his will and commitment to God’s calling in his life. He knew that there was something that mattered more than whatever appetites,

⁷ Luke 4:1

legitimate or otherwise, he had. He knew that there was a better way to accomplish his mission than the path of power, force, and control. He knew that God was utterly trustworthy – there was no need to test that out and damage that trust. Being filled with the Spirit, letting the love of God fill his life, choosing the things that allowed that Spirit to seep into every corner of his soul – this is what strengthened Jesus in the face of the devil’s temptations. And, while we certainly are not as effective at it as Jesus was, it can strengthen us in the face of temptation as well. The love of our Master is what we can choose to fill our lives with – and when we do, temptation loses a good deal of its appeal.

I mentioned earlier that my favorite novel is about a powerful Ring that corrupts everyone it touches...or almost everyone. The guardians of the Ring on the quest to destroy it fall to its temptation one by one, and the wise who help

them along the way are leery of allowing the Ring to have power over them. But one⁸ person in the story is able to hold the Ring, bear it for a while, and then reject its power and freely let it go. Sam, the servant of Frodo on the quest to destroy the Ring, is forced to bear it for a time. The Ring, as it does with others around it, fills his head with visions, with temptations. Sam sees himself as a mighty warrior, driving back the forces of evil. He sees himself as Hero of the Age, commanding an army of thousands. A gardener before adventure found him, he even sees himself ruling over a massive Eden of trees, flowers, and fruit. The story sums up the temptation, “He had only to put on the Ring and claim it for his own, and all this could be.”⁹

⁸ There is actually one other character who is utterly unaffected by the Ring, Tom Bombadil. This is a famously enigmatic character, and one both absent from every adaptation of the story (he isn't in the movies, for example) and one that really seems alien to the internal consistency of the story. As a wholly “other” being in the story, I am not including his immunity to the Ring in this illustration.

⁹ Tolkien, 901.

But it couldn't be. Sam knew this – he knew that he, a rustic gardener, could not overthrow the diabolical Sauron. The Ring was lying to him, tempting him. And he rejects it. How? The story says, “In that hour of trial it was the love of his master that helped most to hold him firm.”¹⁰ Sam was utterly devoted to his master, Frodo. And like Jesus' bedrock commitment to his Father and his Father's mission, the commitment of Sam to Frodo and Frodo's mission held him true. He knew the enticements of the Ring were a trick, and he knew what he had to do. He had to reject the temptations, and he could do it because he was filled with the love of his master.

Are we? Are we, like Sam, filled with the love of our Master? Like Jesus, are we filled with the Holy Spirit? We all face temptations in life – especially the three temptations

¹⁰ Tolkien, 901.

Jesus himself faced. We will be confronted with temptations of appetite, temptations of control and power, temptations to doubt our God. When these temptations arise, how will we respond? Will we indulge them, toy with them, even embrace them? That way leads only to brokenness, sin, and a lack of the flourishing life God calls us to live. Or will we reject the temptations? That's the call of God on our lives – and we are much better able to follow that call when we fill our lives with something else, when we fill our lives with the love of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit. So this Lent, my prayer is that we will nurture within our hearts our connection with our Lord, and enlarge the space in our lives we give to him. That is the best way to overcome temptation. That is the best way to live the life of a true disciple of Jesus.

