

## **Temptation, Sin, and Salvation**

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston  
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Lent has begun, and on the First Sunday in Lent, we read about the temptations of Jesus, whether it be from Matthew, Mark, or Luke. Jesus faced the temptation to be rebellious against the Father's will from the very start of his ministry. As we commence our Lenten journey, we are confronted by the reality of his temptations and ours.

In the text from Luke, the devil tempts Jesus three times in three different ways. In the first one, he is tempted to turn stones in bread; in the second, Jesus is tempted to worship the devil; in the third he is tempted to tell God the Father Almighty what to do. These temptations are analyzed, labeled, and described in various ways. What is the root of the temptations? Not to gloss over them lightly, it appears that Jesus is tempted to self-gratification, worship of a false god, and lastly to make a good public.

The essential challenge from the devil consists of the conditional statement, "If you are the Son of God." At Jesus' baptism the voice from heaven had just declared, "You are my Son..." (Luke 3:22). The devil wants to undermine this identity and lead Jesus astray. The devil also tells lies, such as in the second temptation when he offers Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" (Luke 4:5) as if the devil had the power and authority to do so. We confess that we believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and no where in the Bible do we read that the Father Almighty relinquished ownership of heaven and earth. All belongs to the Lord, even if the devil wants to presume illegitimate ownership.

The temptations of Jesus are the ones we face. As the writer of the book of Hebrews states, "...we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Hebrews 4:15). The three temptations described in Luke 4, the Gospel text for today, tell us that Jesus experienced what we are experiencing daily: temptations to self-comfort and gratification, the false god success, and worldly glory.

Lent commenced last Wednesday with the observance of Ash Wednesday. In his sermon last Wednesday, Pastor Pederson told us that the goal of Christianity is not moral perfection. If we could just discipline ourselves to overcome our weaknesses, then we'd be OK. Instead, Christianity proclaims that it is the Lord God who comes to us with the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption. God the Lord makes us whole, right, clean, and saved.

Several years back, a church member told me that he believed that we can stop sinning. I gave some sort of doubting response, so he illustrated his thought by saying, "If I am a

smoker and feel that smoking is wrong, and if I then quit smoking, I have stopped that sin. What do you think? Are we able to stop sinning? I think such a view reduces sin to behaviors. A hymn that I remember from my youth but not in more recent Lutheran hymn collections is, “Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin; each victory will help you some other to win.” It’s not all wet, but the words easily convey an implication that I can conquer sin, overcome temptation. Scripture teaches us that sin is something much deeper; it is alienation from God, rebellion against the Lord. Sin is self-centeredness which puts me in first place and the Lord somewhere lower. Sin is a broken relationship with God, and that relationship is healed only by the gift of the Savior. As Paul so succinctly put it, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). God saves, and all I can do is trust what God has done for me and for all.

My point: sin is estrangement from the Lord God Almighty. Sins are behaviors that result from the estrangement. So often our focus is on the behaviors, not the source of our behaviors – the source being my will in rebellion against God.

That has not stopped Christians throughout the ages from identifying sins and making lists which can help us to evaluate our own lives, to sort of take an inventory. Lent is a time for self-evaluation and examination, so it might be useful to look not only at the temptations of Jesus but also how Christians in previous ages have named temptations common to humanity.

Ever heard of the “Seven Deadly Sins”? What are they? This isn’t the only list, but these seven have made it and seem to be permanent members of that famed list:

- Lust
- Gluttony
- Greed
- Sloth (Laziness)
- Wrath (Anger)
- Envy
- Pride

We could expand our self-examination, and look at ourselves in the light of these seven. If we dared do that, what would we find? Of course, the question presumes that we would be honest with ourselves and be willing to look at ourselves without all our layers of self-protection.

Scripture itself offers us lists such as in the fifth chapter of Galatians:

- Fornication
- Impurity
- Licentiousness
- Idolatry
- Sorcery
- Enmities
- Strife
- Jealousy

Anger  
Quarrels  
Dissensions  
Factions  
Envy  
Drunkenness  
Carousing  
And things like these (Galatians 5:19-21)

Paul includes a similar list in the first chapter of Romans.

Less than a month ago, some of Gandhi's remaining ashes were scattered off the coast of South Africa, 62 years after his assassination. He was from India, but lived and worked in South Africa for 21 years before returning to India at the age of 46 to help in the struggle for independence from Britain. One of his written contributions for our consideration which seems appropriate for today is his list of The Seven Deadly Sins. He writes:

Wealth without Work  
Pleasure without Conscience  
Science without Humanity  
Knowledge without Character  
Politics without Principle  
Commerce without Morality  
Worship without Sacrifice

These are traits that Gandhi considered to be the most spiritually perilous to humanity.

These lists can be useful for our consideration and build on the experience of Jesus being tempted. Remember, the behaviors in all these lists point to a deeper problem, that of alienation from the Lord God.

How did Jesus withstand all temptations without sinning? The easiest answer is to say, "Well, he was the Son of God, after all." Yes, so true. So is it true that he was tempted in every way just like us. Greed, envy, pride, lust, anger, idolatry, strife, jealousy confronted him daily. Our Savior, Christ Jesus, maintained his reliance on the Father who sent him to earth. His trust was only and completely in the Father, in no other attraction, power, comfort, acquisition, or hope. Soren Kirkegaard, the Danish theologian and philosopher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a book entitled, Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing. Without reviewing the book, let the title remind us of the call of Christ to follow him and to place all our trust in him alone. You and I know that such clarity and single mindedness is no easy matter. Life throws us many disappointments, failures, conflicts, that deflect our focus. Life also offers us many pleasures, comforts, and achievements that also distract our concentration and commitment to Christ. The reading from Luke describing Jesus' temptations show that all are temptations to make things easy for him. Maybe those are the most difficult to resist. When life is going along smoothly, we frequently want to take the credit: look how well we've done! When life throws us

roadblocks and we cannot manage them, then we turn to the Lord to help us out. That's been called the "God of the Gaps" faith. The Lord God in whom we believe is with us in the good and the gaps, the ups and downs, in every moment calling us to trust only in God whom we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Obviously, we cannot on our own deal with life's temptations. That's why Jesus resisted so that he could be the sinless One who offered his life for the sinful ones. His obedience to the Father's will means he becomes the Lamb of God without blemish sacrificed for the sin of the world. He invites us to place our trust in him that his life, death, resurrection, and ascension covers our sin, removes our guilt, and makes us free. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son..." (John 3:16). That Son, Christ Jesus, tempted like as we are, is with us now.

Lent has begun. The Church of Christ Jesus invites us to deepen our relationship and trust in the Lord God Almighty through all of our trials and temptations, our accomplishments and achievements that we not trust in ourselves but in the Son of God who is our Light and Life. Amen.