



Sermon
9th March 2014
Lent 1

Resisting Temptation

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Matthew 4:1-11

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We are now in the season of Lent. A period when we prepare for the great festival of Easter. A period of 40 days which is inspired by the Jesus' wilderness time. No sooner had Jesus stepped onto the public stage of ministry, than he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. It was a time to establish him for ministry.

On Ash Wednesday, I listed twelve spiritual disciplines – ways people have found it helpful to get closer to God. I suggested we might listen to the list and ask Father to highlight one for us to explore this Lent – rather than giving up chocolate – again!

It is easy to see that Jesus would have exercised some of those in the forty days: fasting, solitude, simplicity, meditation, prayer! Then at the end of those forty days, he was tempted by the devil.

As we start Lent, it is appropriate for us to think about Jesus' wilderness experience and his temptation and its significance. Mark Twain said, "Man is the only being with the ability to blush and only one who needs to!"

Some people think we Christians go on too much about sin. There is a reason for giving it attention. When there is a big problem if you can do nothing about it you may decide to ignore it and hope it will go away. That is the state of most of the world. If on the other hand you have the answer to the problem, you are going to want to make sure people are given the answer.

We might think of the campaign to eradicate smallpox. The WHO announced the last case of smallpox was in 1979.

Smallpox killed around 400,000 people each year in Europe in the 18th century. I imagine you just kept quiet and hoped your family wouldn't get it. Once Dr Edward Jenner had discovered the idea that cowpox material would give immunity to smallpox – the first vaccination, there was a reason to talk about it and to persuade people to accept vaccination and thus be protected against the disease.

Of course, there was fear, ridicule and opposition – this cartoon from was part of the resistance to



vaccination suggesting that small cows would grow out of the vaccinated people's bodies. Note the golden calf picture on the back wall. Vaccination brought smallpox under control in Europe, however, in 1958, the WHO launched a campaign to eradicate smallpox worldwide and finally succeeded in 1976. Imagine the effort, expense, concentration and determination they must have devoted to achieve that aim.

While we cannot eradicate sin, the gospel carries the answer and it is important that we tell people there is forgiveness and we can be freed of the oppression of sin. If anyone tells you we are too focused on sin and forgiveness, think of the foolishness of those people resisting vaccination.

The Genesis passage tells us of the first human sin, the disobedience of Adam and Eve against God's command to them. Some Christians want to say that Adam and Eve are mythological but both Jesus and Paul speak of them as actual people with real actions which have huge consequences for us all.

I am going to focus on temptation today, looking at Genesis and Matthew. The Romans passage is important but I can't cover everything and Helen addressed it well last time this passage came up.

Temptation to Doubt God's Words

The striking thing about the temptation in the garden was that they were lured to disobey God. "Did God really say?" The tempter introduced doubt.

“Did God really say, ‘You must not eat of any tree in the garden?’”¹ He distorted the command. It was “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”²

Eve responded but misquoted God, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’” She exaggerated the command from not eating the fruit to not touching the tree.

She also changed the consequence. God had said, “You will surely die.”³ The particular way this was expressed in Hebrew was the way legal sentences were expressed. The same wording is used to Jeremiah when the people and priests condemned him for prophesying against Jerusalem.⁴ It meant the doom is fixed – the eventual outcome was sure. It did not mean you would die immediately. However, Eve changed this detail and the tempter used the loophole. He was able to contradict her wording without contradicting God. His answer could be accurately translated as, ‘Don’t think death is an immediate threat.’⁵

The tempter leads them to think about the desirable qualities of disobedience and minimizes the consequences – they won’t really happen.

Do you recognize that strategy in temptations you have experienced. The desired action or thing always appears so very desirable and the negative consequences are somehow minimised or dismissed. Afterwards, the poverty of the benefit becomes so obvious and the consequences loom so large.

When Jesus was tempted, the same technique of casting doubt on God’s words was used. He had just been baptised and as he came up out of the water, God the Father spoke to him saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”⁶

The first two temptations attack this revelation and assurance. If you are the Son of God.... If you are the Son of God...⁷

So here is a tip for us. Be alert to temptations casting doubt on what God has said, especially any promises he has made to you. The tempter would like to take away your confidence in God’s words.

The Three Desires

In John’s first epistle, he refers to three weak points in us – three forms of desire.

For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does-- comes not from the Father but from the world.

The RSV translates it more closely to the Greek saying, “the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.” What are bodies desire, our eyes desire and what appeals to our pride.

Interestingly, when we look at Genesis and Matthew, we see the same factors at work.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.⁸

¹ Gen 3:1

² Gen 2:16-17

³ Gen 2:17

⁴ Jeremiah 26:8

⁵ Dr John Walton explains this subtlety in *NIV Application Commentary on Genesis*, 2001, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p204

⁶ Matthew 3:17

⁷ Matthew 4:3,6

⁸ Genesis 3:6

- The fruit was good for food – the appetite for food was stimulated.
- It was pleasing to the eye – seeing it made her want it.
- It was desirable for gaining wisdom (“You will be like God”) – it appealed to her desire for status and personal advancement – the pride of life.

She ate and then gave some to Adam.

There was nothing wrong with the basic desires for food and for wisdom but there was something very wrong with disobedience. There is nothing wrong with driving a car, unless you are still a child. The passage can be read to understand that God would have let them eat of the fruit at a later time when they were ready but they took it early. A child driving a car is taking that responsibility too soon.

In Jesus’ case there were three temptations which seem to fall into similar categories. He was tempted to satisfy his hunger by doing a miracle for himself – a desire of his body.

He was taken up to the highest point of the temple and tempted to throw himself off so angels would rescue him and everyone would be amazed – this seems like a desire for recognition and attention appealing to the pride of life.

He was shown all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour and offered them in exchange for worshipping Satan. This is a temptation to grasp what he saw as well as to the pride of life.

Eating bread was not bad. Jesus will rule all the nations at the right time – but not at the cost of worshipping Satan; not at the cost of avoiding the cross.

The great difference is that Adam and Eve succumbed but Jesus resisted.

Resisting Temptation

We need to look at how Jesus resisted temptation. Don’t imagine that these weren’t real temptations. Hebrews tell us that he was tempted in every way as we are - but without sinning.⁹ It was vital that he should not sin – had he done so, I cannot see any outcome but disaster – the plan of salvation would have failed and the very Trinity would have been torn apart – it is unthinkable!

The Word of God

Eve misquoted God. Satan misapplied scriptures when tempting Jesus. But Jesus used the Word of God accurately to defend against temptations. It is like broad sword fight. For each blow the enemy swings at him, he parries with a better word from scripture. The analogy is apt because Paul likens our defence to armour and the Word of God to a sword. Obviously, it helps to be familiar with scripture, but the Spirit can remind you of scriptures you need to use.

What God has said is the foundation for resisting the temptations thrown at us. We need to stand on the security of his words. And we can say those words back to counter the thoughts and doubts which come to our minds. Say them out loud – it is effective.

Resist the Devil

Did you notice anything different on the third temptation? Jesus said,

“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”
Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.¹⁰

The other strategy we can learn from Jesus is that he ordered the enemy to go away. Following his example, we can command the tempting agents to go. Certainly, we need to take responsibility for our own weakness – but some of what affects us is from outside.

⁹ Hebrews 4:15

¹⁰ Mt 4:10-11

James wrote, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."¹¹ While Peter wrote, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.⁹ Resist him, standing firm in the faith"¹²

The Power of the Spirit

The other factor which is not so immediately obvious, is that Jesus was filled with the Spirit. We are not expected to do this in our own strength but depending on God. Paul writes, "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."¹³

Let's review what we have seen.

- Temptation often takes the form of doubting what God says.
- Our three great weaknesses are: the lust of the flesh; the lust of the eyes and the pride of life.
- Jesus resisted the enemy and told him to go. "Resist the devil and he will flee from you."
- He used the word of God to counter the lies and establish the truth.

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¹¹ James 4:7

¹² 1 Peter 5:8-9

¹³ Galatians 5:16