

Facing our Temptations

Ok, so I gained a few pounds over the holidays.

It happens every year.

Not a big deal, I know, but I'm not happy about it.

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It's all so tempting.

What with all the big homemade meals
From Thanksgiving through Christmas Day

From all the extras we get during the holidays
The pies, the cookies, the fudge

Like dad says, "I never met a cookie I didn't like!"

And with multiple family gatherings
You might eat Thanksgiving and Christmas meals
Three or four times during the holidays.

I have little control when it comes to food.

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Well, you guessed it, today's lesson is on temptation.

Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything except temptation."

We can talk about temptation . . .

Wanting to take that extra slice of pie
Maybe that desire to cheat a little on our tax returns
That urge just to charge it on the credit card

We can even talk about even the more serious temptations
Pornography, gambling,

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And the various other addictions.

We can talk about these kinds of temptations.

There're serious in nature
And can pull us into unhealthy and dysfunctional lifestyles.

Or we can talk about darker and more sinister temptations
Giving into temptations
That alter the core of our being.

These are the kind of temptations Jesus faced.

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Our lesson today is Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness.

We cannot overlook the fact that Jesus' 40 days
Coincides with Israel's 40 years in the wilderness.

It was a period of testing.

Temptations come to all human beings
Whether good people or bad
We all are tempted, including Jesus.

We find Jesus, still wet from his baptism
Venturing out into the wilderness alone
For a time to discern God's will for him.

He fasted and prayed
While he faced the harsh conditions of the desert.

After forty days and nights, close to delirium
The tempter's voice haunts him.

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Now I don't want us to get hung up
On the scene before us.

If you were a cartoonist
And asked to draw the scene

You likely would draw Jesus kneeling over a rock praying
And the devil behind him whispering in his ear.

The devil, of course, is red with horns and a tail
And carries a forked staff.

I mean, everyone knows what a devil looks like, right?

You ever been confronted and tempted by one of them?

Neither have I.

I'm not denying the reality of external forces of evil.

But I do believe most temptations come from within.

The Book of James 1:14-15 (NLT)

¹⁴ Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. ¹⁵ These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

No, Jesus is alone . . .

With his thoughts

With his prayers

And with his temptations.

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And we're not talking about taking an extra slice of pie here.

Jesus has not eaten for 40 days and nights.
He has reached the end of his strength.

He hears the tempter say,
"Why not turn this into bread?"

Actually, after what Jesus has gone through
And he being the Son of God and everything
It's not an unreasonable request . . .
No temptation initially is.

I mean, why not? It's been 40 days.

And the voice again saying within him
"Throw yourself down, God will save you."
"Prove who you are!"

Again, not unreasonable.

"Jesus, use your powers to provide for yourself."

"Jesus, show the world who you are and who sent you."

Doesn't seem unreasonable, Does it?

And yet . . .

The voice within him becomes stronger
And fills his mind until it almost possesses him.

"Jesus, you can have all of this
All the kingdoms of the world.

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“You can become the most powerful king of all!

“You can have everything you ever desired!

“You can even use it for good, bow down and worship me.”

Our story ends with Jesus fighting off the temptation

 Tried and true, as the angels comfort him.

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We’re not talking about an extra piece of pie here.

We’re talking about something more menacing

 More evil, more consequential.

We’re talking about the temptations people face

 As they take on positions of leadership.

The devil is tempting Jesus to see

 What kind of leader he would be.

Jesus faces the very temptations all leaders face.

Would he be self-serving

 As evident in turning stone to bread

 Or seeking God’s angels to save him from a fall?

Would he end up worshiping his power and position?

Would he then develop a sense of grandiosity?

 Would he end up narcissistic?

Would he become so egotistical and self-absorbed

 That everything he did

 Even in the name of goodness

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Would really be a disguise for self-glory.

The temptation here . . .

Is the temptation to become like God.

The very same temptation

The serpent tempted Eve with

In the Garden of Paradise.

To replace God with self.

This is the temptation we're talking about.

We left that extra piece of pie long ago.

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We know the rest of the story.

Jesus left his wilderness experience empowered.

He would build the kingdom of God

From the grassroots on up

Rather than from the top down.

He would prove his leadership skills

By becoming a servant/leader

Becoming an example everyone might follow.

Jesus never put himself above others

Never healed or exorcized to prove his power

Always reaching out to the poor and marginalized

The down-hearted and broken.

Jesus would build the kingdom of God

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Through a sacrificial unconditional love
For all peoples, great and small.

Jesus would not force it upon anyone
He would offer it freely.

And in the end when he was arrested and tried
When he could have called upon a host of angels

When he could have thrown lightning bolts
At Pilate and the Roman army.

He, instead, allowed himself to be scorned
Tortured, to hang on a cross unto death
Seemingly a beaten and broken spirit.

But as the Old Testament prophet Isaiah said,

Isaiah 53:4-5 (NLT)

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed.

Jesus gave every ounce of his being
To do one thing and one thing only

To live and to die to show the world the love of God.

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And so, take courage, my brothers and sisters
As we face our temptations

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That Jesus, our Lord and Savior, faced them too
Resisted and became better for it.

And may the emblems of his death
This bread and this cup become life for us

To give us strength for our journeys
Finding faith and purpose in our lives
Now and always, in Jesus name. Amen.