

Trials and Temptations

Texts: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Romans 10:8-15; Luke 4:1-13 Date: 03/01/2020

Did you ever wonder why all that candy and gum is there at the checkout line in the supermarket? Wouldn't it have been better to put it on its own shelf somewhere else in the supermarket, like back on the shelves where they have the large format chocolate bars and the multipacks of gum?

Well, from a marketing standpoint, the answer is: no.

The chocolate and gum didn't just happen to end up at the check out line. It's there because marketers know that when people are just standing around bored, waiting, they are likely to make an impulse purchase of a candy bar to offset the pain of waiting with the pleasure of a little chocolate.

In other words, it's there as a temptation. No one goes into the supermarket just to get a candy bar, but since you are there, and the chocolate is there, and the wait is annoying, well, why not?

Behavioral economists have done a lot of research into the psychology of temptation, and we shoppers are confronted with the results of that research every day. Marketers know how to make a temptation appealing to you, to get you to do something you might not otherwise do.

One technique they use is mentioning a high price and then offering a low one. It's a sales technique called 'anchoring.' The high number sticks in your head and makes you more prone to buy at the lower number, even though the lower number would have been outrageously high if you had heard it first.

Prada does it with their handbags: they have one \$30,000.00 dollar handbag in the window, which they don't actually intend to sell. It's just there to make the \$12,000 handbag seem reasonable. Fancy restaurants often have one platter that is very expensive, and other dishes more moderately priced. After you see the price of the \$250.00 filet mignon, \$100 for a sirloin steak seems reasonable—though, of course, it isn't at all! And it works!

Rebates are another great temptation we are faced with every day. People will buy more expensive things if they think they will get a rebate back. They estimate that they are really only paying the price minus the rebate, so a \$200.00 printer with a \$30.00 rebate is really only going to cost them \$170. But, almost half the time, it actually costs them \$200.00. Wait, what?

You might ask yourself, why doesn't the retailer offer you the printer for the lower price in the first place? It's because of breakage and slippage. Breakage and slippage? Yup. That's industry talk for rebate forms that never get sent in and rebate checks that are sent out and are never cashed. Breakage and slippage.

To make sending in for the rebate less likely, the marketers make the rebate forms complicated, make you cut out the UPC code from the box making the item unreturnable, and will send the form back to you if you make the smallest error. Breakage.

If they do have to send you out a check, they put it in an envelope that looks as much like junk mail as they can make it look, so you are likely to throw it away and never cash the check. Slippage.

Each year there are about \$6 billion dollars in rebates offered to consumers to tempt them, and about 40% of those, or \$2.4 billion dollars worth, are never cashed. That's \$2.4 billion dollars more that companies can pocket than if they had offered you a lower price. And that much money is just too tempting ... for them!

So we live in a world where temptation is an everyday occurrence. We know a little bit about temptation, even though most of us are unaware that we are being tempted most of the time. Temptations are subtle.

But the temptation of Jesus was anything but subtle. When Jesus comes to be tempted, after his baptism, he knows it. Satan is right there. The name Satan comes from a Hebrew word meaning 'adversary', or 'accuser.' Our word 'devil' comes from the Greek translation of Satan, 'diabolos,' which also means 'an accuser.'

In the ancient world, they knew Satan as the tempter, but they would have been surprised by his actual presence at this temptation. Then, as now, they understood temptations to come in the daily course of life, not as a bold confrontation face to face.

Temptation is sly and slinky. Temptation usually has a pretty face to mask a nasty personality.

Satan's appearance on the scene in person marks this as a very special case of temptation.

What are the temptations? Just to remind ourselves of that, here they are: the hungry Jesus is tempted to turn stones into bread; the powerless Jesus is to receive power over the kingdoms of the world in return for worship of Satan; and the unknown and unbelieved Jesus is to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple so that God would rescue him spectacularly before all the people.

Now what was so wrong with all that? Isn't the devil just getting a bad rap on this stuff.

I mean, after all, wasn't Jesus going to feed thousands with the loaves and fishes by multiplying a small boy's lunch? What's the difference between that and turning a few stones into bread when you have been fasting in the desert for 40 days and nights? Both are miracles where bread suddenly appears to feed people. Plus, a little bread at the start would give him more strength to face the devil, since he's obviously going to be weak from fasting for 40 days.

That's the bread. How about the power?

Isn't Jesus going to rule the world in the end anyway? Isn't that what we believe and confess in our creeds? "Risen to rule the world." Just take a short cut here. The point is ruling, right, not how you get there. Bring justice now, because justice delayed is no justice at all. Why not go for it?

Why shouldn't Jesus accept the offer of power over the 'inhabited world' as Luke writes, using a synonym for the Roman Empire, "the inhabited world"? Then he wouldn't have had to be crucified by the Romans. He could have brought the whole world to faith as the Roman Emperor! Wasn't it Constantine, a Roman Emperor, who brought the Empire to Christ 300 years later? Jesus could have had a three hundred year head start!

Yep, he could have started his world rule right away and spared us all the wars from Roman times to our own day. Wouldn't that have been simpler and easier, and saved much suffering and many lives? Jesus surely messed up there.

What about throwing himself down from the Temple? What's wrong with that? Didn't God protect Jesus from being thrown off a very high cliff, which Luke reports as the very next story? Won't God lift Jesus up into the clouds following his resurrection? God's going to do it, so why not get it out of the way, and do it right at the Temple, too, so, you know, it'll be holy and all.

And wouldn't Jesus have had a lot more followers and a lot less opposition if he had just made his messianic status known from the beginning? Wouldn't a little display of power have been a good thing? Think of all the lost souls because Jesus didn't make himself known right away. What a loss! Jesus really blew it.

Jesus is going to do these things later. Why not just do the same things in miniature now? Why is Jesus so reluctant to prove the devil wrong by doing now what he's going to do later? He can do it, so why doesn't he?

Why is Jesus so stubborn about this? Think of the difference he could have made if only he hadn't felt so compelled to stand on theological niceties and picayune little details of Scriptural interpretation.

Are you starting to think that maybe Jesus was being a little too gung-ho here? Are you tempted to think he should have accepted at least some of the offers?

"Uh, no," I hear most of you saying, "it's, um, you know, the *devil* saying all this. Shouldn't we be a little suspicious?"

Yes, we should, but I hope I have shown a little bit about how temptation works by talking like this! It's subtle, it's fast talking, and it shows only the upside of the decision. There's no balance of costs and benefits. Just big talk about the benefits.

Maybe you weren't fooled at all. Those of you who know your Old Testament will have recognized right away that the scriptural quotes Jesus uses as responses all come from Deuteronomy, that they are commands given to Israel when Israel was tested in the wilderness, just as Jesus is being tested in the wilderness.

You might also recognize the temptations themselves as being the very temptations that Israel *succumbed* to in the wilderness: demanding bread from God when they were hungry, worshipping a false idol at the very foot of Mt. Sinai, and putting God to the test at Massah and Meribah by refusing to accept that God was among them until God did a great sign for them.

Jesus overcomes these temptations where Israel succumbed, and shows himself as the true Israelite, the servant and Son of God.

So what's wrong with the temptations? Well, the first one, turning stone into bread, comes with a preamble that says, "*if you are the Son of God*, then turn these stones into bread." Satan seeks to define what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God.

If he can convince Jesus to follow his definition of Sonship, he wins. If he can convince Jesus to put his own needs first, he wins. Jesus later produces bread for hungry people, but he does it for others, not for himself, and he does it in obedience to God as God's Son, not to *prove* that he is God's Son.

As for the second temptation, the offer of power over the inhabited world, first, it's based on a lie. Satan doesn't have the world in his power to give. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," as the Psalmist puts it.

Satan may roam it, but he doesn't own it.

Second, it breaks the second commandment, about not having any idols or false gods, nor bowing down and worshipping them. God alone is worthy of worship and praise. God alone deserves worship.

If Satan can get Jesus to worship him, he wins. Jesus will be fatally compromised.

For Jesus, the right way to rule over the world is the hard way. Jesus will obtain power to rule the world through obedience to God, an obedience that goes through the cross and a gruesome death, not through an easy obedience to Satan.

Satan offers what he does not have to obtain worship he does not deserve.

Finally, for the third temptation, where Satan himself quotes Scripture, Jesus knows that the text refers to God protecting God's faithful ones from whatever will befall them, not whatever *dumb thing* they decide to do next. Satan takes the Scripture out of context to mislead. Satan is proof-texting, that is, taking an isolated verse and acting as if that's the teaching of the entire Scriptures. Not good.

Jesus sees that the cost of giving in to these temptations is the cost of his whole mission and purpose in life. He might have saved lives, but he couldn't have saved souls if he had given in.

He might have had glory like the Roman Emperor, but he would never have had eternal glory.

He might have made a good show, but if even rising from the dead doesn't do it, then throwing yourself off the temple isn't going to convince people either. By succeeding where Israel failed, Jesus becomes the true Israelite who can be the Savior of the world.

God will define what it means to be God's Son, and what that means is to suffer and die for the redemption of the world, not do parlor tricks with bread and stones.

God will give Jesus eternal power because of his obedience to truth, justice, and to the God he calls Father.

God will raise Jesus from the dead to validate his Sonship in response to Jesus' utter and complete trust in God.

So what has that to do with us? Well, we face temptations that are more than just marketing ploys. We face temptations that are real and are soul corrupting, temptations that cost us more than just a few extra dollars.

Our society tempts us to be selfish by stressing that what's important is what we get out of something. There's a whole economic theory from the '80's that says that if everyone just acts selfishly, things will work out for the best, that greed is good. Usually it's claimed that economist Adam Smith said this, but that is a distortion of his thought.

Our society tempts us to put ourselves first, to do what feels good, to 'express ourselves' even if that means betraying people who love us and trust us.

Our society tempts us with s-e-x as the ultimate fulfillment and available on the third date.

And there are so many other temptations, from manipulative anger to gluttony, laziness, wrong priorities, pride that puts ourselves above others or other nations, envy, and so on. But they are hidden temptations, subtle, sly and cunning. They are easy to miss, easy to succumb to as we go along with our mass culture.

One of the reasons that we give something up for Lent is so that we can confront our temptations head on in one area of our lives, so that we can, as it were, come face to face with the tempter.

Give up eating chocolate, and suddenly you will feel what it is to be tempted in that checkout line at the supermarket.

Give up driving above the speed limit, and you will confront temptation face to face when you are late for an appointment.

Give up watching your favorite tv show (you could just record it to watch after Lent), and you will feel the temptation to give up your convictions in order to be entertained.

Our model in facing every temptation is, of course, Jesus, who shows us the way, and who has gone that way before us, for as the book of Hebrews says, "Jesus has been tempted in every way, *just as we are*, but was without sin." That verse both tells us that Jesus has been tempted just like us, and also reminds us that we *are* being tempted all the time, even when it's too subtle for us to notice it.

Let us use Lent to come face to face with the tempter, to get a handle on the subtle temptations in our lives, and then let us call on the power of Christ to help us overcome them in the end.

Amen