

SO TEMPTING!

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March 9, 2025

Texts: Luke 4:1-15 and James 1:12-16

Do you believe there is a devil – not the horned, red, tailed figure bearing a pitchfork whose likeness haunts your neighborhood on Halloween nights – but a real, malicious presence who wreaks havoc in the world? Is it the devil at work when things go awry – in school shootings or on 9/11 or in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine? Some will point out that Devil is just evil with a big D which might make Dallas fans a little nervous, but is there such a thing, such a being, at work in the world, and if so, to what end? In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky suggests: *If the devil doesn’t exist, but man has created him, he has created him in his own image and likeness.*¹ Is there a devil or are we just the devils in disguise?

In Greek the word for “devil” used by Luke is *diabolos* from which we get diabolical. In Matthew’s gospel the word is *satan*, from which we get satanic. In effect they are one and the same; the devil, whether *diabolos* or *satan*, is an adversary of God, not divine nor human, but something else – more than human but less than divine. In the Old Testament his role is to challenge God as part of the divine court, to test God’s assumptions about the relationship with humanity. He has no independent power or authority, no necessarily evil intent, certainly no realm over which he reigns. The devil portrayed in the New Testament has more sinful intentions. He encourages disobedience or even rebellion against God and offers alternatives to the path of faithfulness.

The devil is not always at work on center stage, but often in the shadows off-stage, working to thwart something good with something evil or at least tainted. An agreement breaks down over a seemingly minor clause, and the devil is in the details we say. What sounds good in theory breaks down when we get to particulars – to the conditions or definitions or phrasing of the terms. Sometimes the ends fall short of divine expectations, and sometimes a noble end is sought by questionable means, giving rise to the oft-quoted words of T. S. Eliot:

The last temptation is the greatest treason:

*To do the right deed for the wrong reason.*²

The right deed for the wrong reason
or the wrong deed for the right reason
or the wrong deed for the wrong reason – the devil cares little.
It is enough that the deed or the reason should in some way draw us away from God. For that is the role of the devil – to separate us from God, to lead us from obedience to disobedience, from faithfulness to unfaithfulness, from temptation to sin, and in the words of Martin Luther, threaten to undo us.

Perhaps those words capture well the threat to Jesus in his temptation by the devil in the wilderness; it was the threat that he would be undone as the true Son of God. That title, Son of God, is less about biology than it is about authority. To be the Son of God is to bear the authority of God, the message of God, the hope and promise of God for the world. We claim that Jesus was fully God but also fully human; the temptations of the devil may not stir the divine heart, but they do test the human heart, and so the devil tested Jesus' very human heart as Jesus wrestled with the expectations of God and the temptations of the world.

The first temptation was to satisfy his human hunger with divine power. After forty days in the wilderness Jesus was famished, so the devil tempted him to change a stone to bread and assuage his hunger. The devil tempted Jesus to abandon his humanity when the going got tough, when hunger set in, to use divine power to satisfy his human need. It was the temptation to prove his status as the Son of God, for the devil casts it in those terms, "**If you are the Son of God**, then command this stone to become bread." In one act Jesus could satisfy his hunger **and** prove his identity as the Son of God. In rejecting the devil's challenge, Jesus refused to compromise his human identity with divine intervention. It was a test he would face again on the cross, that opportune time when the devil returns in the form of the criminal hanging beside him to offer, "*If you are the Son of God then save yourself – and us.*" But on the cross, as in the wilderness, Jesus resisted.

Some things are more important than physical needs, than even life itself, and one of those things is obedience to God. In the words of our Book of Order: *The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.* (F-1.03) Martyrs have followed that path – remaining faithful even to death. Would you be so faithful? How often have you forsaken obedience to God in order to satisfy your own needs or wants or desires that fall far short of death? I am too tired, too lonely, too busy, too hungry, too something

to be faithful. So exceptions are made and rationalizations born and faithfulness abandoned. It is tempting to say that God asks too much of us in asking us to be faithful when we have so many human itches that need to be scratched. God understands that human temptation, but in the wilderness, Jesus shows us how to respond faithfully. In rejecting the devil, he quotes Deuteronomy: *"One does not live by bread alone..."*, a passage that goes on to affirm what more we do need – every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We need the Word of God every bit as much as we need our daily bread, for it too feeds us; it feeds our souls.

An old Cherokee woman was teaching her grandchild about life. *"A fight is going on inside me,"* she said to the child. *"It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, sorrow, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, lies, false pride, and ego. The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you and inside every other person too."* The grandchild thought for a moment and then asked, *"Which wolf will win?"* The old Cherokee replied, *"The one you feed."*

In that struggle within us the good wolf is fed, not only by bread, but by the Bread of Life and the Word of God. If you starve that wolf, he is weakened. If you feed him, he is strengthened. In his book, *After You Believe*, Biblical scholar N.T. Wright suggests: *"In the last analysis, what matters after you believe is neither rules nor spontaneous self-discovery, but character."*³ And character reflects virtue. He goes on: *"Paul's vision of Christian virtue, centered...on faith, hope, and love, is all about developing the habits of the daytime heart in a world still full of darkness."*⁴ What he is suggesting is that character is developed by habits, by repeatedly resisting temptation and choosing the good, by feeding the good wolf day by day so that choosing the good becomes a habit of the heart, rather than a struggle in the moment. In rejecting the devil Jesus refused to allow the bad wolf within him to win. His obedience did not feed his hungry body, but it fed his soul with a faithful choice worthy of the Son of God. It was not his last test.

The devil then offered him political power, the temptation to be king. *"To you I will give glory and authority over all nations, if you will just worship me,"* said the devil. All Jesus had to do was worship a lesser god who was no god at all, and the power would be his. There are many in this nation and in other nations

who have willingly made that sacrifice, who have sold their souls for political or personal gain, who have disobeyed God's commands in order to reap the benefits offered by lesser gods – wealth, power, or status. That was the road followed by Zacchaeus before Jesus found him. But as Zacchaeus discovered, such benefits were illusory, for it is written, *“Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”*

What sacrifices do you make at the feet of lesser gods to gain for yourself a few more things, a little more prestige, a little more favor in the worlds' eyes? Do you compromise your faith and faithfulness to support a political party or candidate whose values are inconsistent with what Jesus teaches – love for neighbors, welcome of strangers, concern for the poor, humility and selflessness? Do you rationalize your behavior rather than resist the temptation and stand firm in your faith? Whatever you hope to gain, it is less than was offered Jesus who rejected the devil's offer of earthly fame and fortune. Jesus' worship was not for sale at any price. He worshiped only God, and so he refused the crown offered by the devil and by the crowds who sought to make him king – and accepted only a crown of thorns. Is your worship, your service, your faithfulness for sale? If so, at what price? If not, what are you willing to lose in order to remain faithful? But that was not the last temptation.

The third test for Jesus was the temptation to prove himself to the world. *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple and let the angels rescue you.”* Give them a show and prove to the world that you are the Son of God! Prove the claim of the psalmist that guardian angels will bear you up lest you dash your foot against a stone. Prove yourself with a miracle, with divine action for human consumption here in the temple. If there were any doubts about angels or messiahs or the God of Israel, surely they would be answered by this death-defying leap! The angels would rescue him and the crowds embrace him, and God would be glorified. What could be wrong with that? But Jesus did not come to impress the crowds or to claim personal glory. He came bearing a message of salvation for all people, a message of grace, love, and forgiveness that demanded repentance from sin. He came to show us the way, to **be** the way, and from that mission he would not be deterred. *“You shall not put the Lord to the test,”* said Jesus. So the devil departed from him – until an opportune time, writes Luke – which means that he would return. And strengthened by that testing, Jesus returned from the wilderness to begin his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing, for the Kingdom of God was at hand!

Do you believe that devil is still at work in the world, looking for opportune times to tempt us one and all, to encourage us to disobey and scratch the itch of temptation with the balm of unfaithfulness? Or is the devil perhaps not out there but within us, that inclination to sin that comes not from some external force we can blame, but from our own sinful hearts? Theologian Paul Scherer saw that possibility and raised the question this way:

*Could it be that the Bible has found out who it is that does the tempting?
From generation to generation, through the Old Testament and through the New, it keeps gazing steadily at us!*⁵

Look in the mirror. Who do you see staring back at you – the tempter or the one tempted – or both?

In Lent we are led back into the wilderness to confront the tempter and the one tempted who reside in each of us. In these forty days we come face to face with who we are – we meet the other wolf inside us and perhaps the devil too. In Lent we feed the good wolf inside us and discover once again that we need the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ in order to survive, for we cannot do it alone. And so we pray, “Lord, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Deliver us from the devil. Deliver us from ourselves! Amen

¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, bk.V, 4

² T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), pt.1

³ N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, HarperOne:2020, p.7

⁴ Id. at p.137

⁵ Paul Scherer, *The Word God Sent*, Baker, 1977, p.144