

“3 Temptations & 3 Ways to Resist”

So today we are going to look at three kinds of temptation and three ways to resist them.

The three temptations that Jesus faced are basically the same in each of the gospel narratives. There's the 1 about turning stones into bread, the 1 about ruling over people, and the 1 about testing God. As I was reflecting on those this week it occurred to me that we are really talking about one kind of temptation that has to do with ourselves, one kind of temptation that has to do with the way we relate to other people, and one kind of temptation that has to do with the way we relate to God.

Let me explain.

The first temptation has to do with our physical safety and material comfort.

Now while there's nothing wrong with material comforts in theory, they can get in the way of our experiencing the abundant life God desires for us. We get confused because when we think of abundant life, we think of material comforts and yet while abundant life may include physical comfort at times, we cannot find abundant life through the seeking of material comforts.

Rather, it is when we focus on what God has to give us – whether that's physical comfort or the lack of physical comfort – that we find abundant life.

Think for a moment about why Jesus went into the desert.

He went there to fast and pray. He fasted in order to focus on God and not himself. That was his goal.

And so if he had given into the temptation to assuage his hunger, his focus would have been shifted from God to himself and he would not have accomplished his goal.

Often God calls us to do things that involve pain and suffering.

In our lesson it says that after these temptations were over, the devil left but would return at an opportune time.

Probably the devil returned many times in Jesus's life to tempt him, but the one case that we know specifically about was when he was in the garden of Gethsemane and he didn't want to suffer and die. He wanted the cup to pass from him.

And yet it was not about Jesus's physical comfort, but about what God needed him to do.

Sometimes we are called to suffer.

Sometimes we may have to suffer physical pain or mental illness.

Sometimes we may be called to step out of our comfort zone and do things that make us uncomfortable or afraid.

God doesn't call us to do these things to hurt us,

but simply because such suffering will end up being part of God's larger plan for our lives.

If we try to avoid the pain and suffering then we are getting in the way of God's will.

In other words, there is something more important than our physical safety and material comfort – and that something is to do God's will.

The second temptation has to do with power over people.

The devil offered Jesus power over all of the world.

The devil offers us power over other people, whether over individuals or groups of people.

Jesus could have exerted his power over others, but he knew that was not what God wanted, so he chose not to do that.

But we, too, have power in our lives, and anytime we seek that power

or exert that power in a way that God does not want us to exert it, we are not only breaking our relationship of love with other people, we are breaking our relationship of love with God.

The third temptation has to do with our relationship with God – specifically whether we are following God or trying to lead God. In this temptation, the devil says Jesus, “Do this and ask God to back you up”. But Jesus says “No! That’s backwards!

God is the one who decides what I am to do and when I follow then God will back me up.”

So many times we succumb to that temptation in our own lives, both as individuals and as a community of faith. How often do we decide what we want to do or decide what we think God wants us to do and then we ask God to bless us and bless our decision.

That’s very different than saying, “God, what would you have me do?” and then doing it no matter what it is. I was at a worship service several weeks ago and in the middle of a service the leader said,

“I feel the Spirit needs us to re-orient ourselves in this room so I’m going to ask you to move your chairs so that instead of facing this direction let’s make them face this direction.”

And so in the middle of worship we got up and moved chairs!

The leader continued by saying, “I’m not sure why God is calling us to do this, but even though we don’t understand the reason we need to obey.

Perhaps it’s practice because God is going to ask us to do more things that we can’t see the rhyme or reason for and we are going to have to obey no matter how crazy it seems.”

What Jesus understood and what we need to understand is that God is the leader and we are the followers – not vice versa.

So those are the three temptations.

The first is about our own self, our own physical safety and material comfort and being willing to put those aside in order to put our focus on God.

The second is about our relationships of power over other people.

And the third is the temptation to direct God instead of following God’s directions.

So those are the three temptations and now let’s look at three ways to overcome them.

In the first temptation about material and physical comfort,

Jesus tells the devil, “Humans do not live by material comforts but by the word of God as found in scripture.

Instead of thinking about our own physical safety and material comfort, we need to focus on God’s word as found in scripture.

We need to read God’s word, reflect on God’s word, study God’s word, follow God’s word, obey God’s Word.

So if it comes to a choice between worshipping in a way that meets my own personal desire, or worshipping in a way that reaches out to those who don’t know Christ, the great commission in God’s word determines that choice for us.

The second way of resisting temptation is to listen to God in the voices of those over whom we have power or privilege, for as we listen to “the least of these“ we are listening to Jesus.

The third way of resisting temptation is to listen to God through prayer.

It’s not up to us to decide how we are to live our lives, or what we are to do either as individuals or as a faith community, but rather it is up to us to discern God’s will, and once we discern God’s will, we need to follow it – even if it makes no sense.

So we have three temptations – one about our own physical comfort and material safety, one about the relationships that we have with other people, and one about the relationship that we have with God.

And the three ways to resist temptation are to listen to God through scripture, through people who have less power than us, and through prayer.

But I want to point out one more thing before I conclude.

Luke talks about Jesus being filled with the Holy Spirit and being led by the Spirit into a place where he wanted to discern God's will for his life and where he encountered temptation. There are three things I want to say about the Spirit.

First it's the spirit that helps us identify temptation.

Human beings by and large don't set out to do evil.

Most every human being I know has a reason for doing what they do.

I'm sure that in Putin's mind he is doing the right thing for the right reasons.

Of course he's not doing the right thing,

but he is simply unable to identify the temptation to which he has succumbed.

It was precisely because Jesus was filled with the Spirit that he could identify the two choices before him – to choose God and goodness and life or to choose the devil and evil and death.

It is the Spirit that helps us identify the choices before us –

the choice between following God and following the devil,

the choice between submitting to God's will and exerting our own,

the choice between doing what God wants or what we want.

The second thing that the Spirit does is to help us hear God speak –

through prayer, through scripture, and through other people,

especially those who have less power and privilege than we do.

And the third thing that the Spirit does is give us the courage to do the things God calls us to do

– to face physical and material discomfort and suffering and pain and fear,

to give up our power and privilege and pride

in order to hear God speak through those we have been taught to see as inferior to us, and to do what God says even if we see no rhyme or reason for it.

During this season of Lent our task is to take a look inside ourselves

and today's lesson gives us one way of doing that -

to look at the three kinds of temptation in our lives,

to resist these temptations by listening to God in prayer, in scripture and in the voices of others,

and to rely on the Spirit to help us to identify the choices and temptations before us,

to help us to discern God's will,

and to give us the courage to obey God's will no matter what it is or where it leads.

My prayer for each of us is this:

that our focus would be not on our own comfort but on God's will,

not on holding onto power but giving it away,

and not on leading but on following God.

May God guide us on our Lenten journey. Amen