



# Lexington Presbyterian Church

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## Doing the Right Thing When Nobody's Looking

Luke 4:1-13 & Romans 10:8b-13

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10 March 2019

8 "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Rm. 10:8b-13 NRSV)

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" 5 Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. 6 And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. 7 If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." 8 Jesus answered him, "It is written, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." 9 Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written, "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," 11 and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." 12 Jesus answered him, "It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." 13 When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Lk. 4:1-13 NRSV)

1

What temptation would put you over the edge? What would tempt you beyond your ability to resist? What might tempt you to sell your very soul?

Let's do a little experiment. Imagine there is a button on the rail of the pew in front of you. It is a magic button. If you press this button your worst enemy will vanish without a trace. No one will ever know you pushed the button. You will never be caught or punished for pressing the button. All you have to do is press the button and 'poof,' he or she will be gone.

Tempting, isn't it...especially when you know that absolutely no one will ever know. Now...do you press the button?

This exercise pushes all sorts of moral, ethical, and theological buttons for us, doesn't it? Here's one it pushes for me. Do we only behave because we fear being caught...whether being caught means jail time or social ridicule?

Strategist J. C. Watts once said the measure of true character is..."doing the right thing when nobody's looking." From what he has observed - which, by the way, is what

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you and I have observed, as well – there are too many people who think the only thing that is “right” is to get by...and the only thing that is “wrong” is to get caught.

What temptation would put you over the edge? What would tempt you beyond your ability to resist? What might tempt you to sell your very soul?

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These are difficult questions. It is one thing to say you would never give in to temptation. But I submit that very much depends upon the matter at hand.

Think about the man kneeling beside his dying wife...or the mother holding her starving child. Husband and mother would sell their soul if it would change the circumstance.

When I was in seminary I was involved in a weekly ministry to the penitentiary. A conversation with a man has stuck with me. He was there because he stole a loaf of bread, a carton of eggs, a tin of tuna fish, and a gallon of milk. “What made you steal these things?” I asked. “My family had not eaten for two days,” he said. “I had no money. I was desperate.”

“Had you ever resorted to stealing before?” I asked. “No,” he said. “I had been tempted many times because things had been tight for a long time. But I had been able to raise just enough money at the last minute. I am not a thief. I never thought I would have to steal to get by.”

His story is too close for comfort, isn’t it? Many of us are a pay check or two away from where he was. If push-came-to-shove I wonder if any of us would resist temptation or make the type of compromises to our principles for the sake of feeding our family. What is more, I wonder what kind of people we would be if we valued the rule forbidding stealing more than we valued feeding our family!

Temptation is a complicated matter. The word “temptation” comes from a Latin word that means “**to stretch**.” That is a good way to think about temptation, isn’t it? It stretches us – whether we give in to it or we do not. Dealing with the temptation, whatever the temptation might be, changes us – stretches us. Sometimes it stretches us this way and that until we become unrecognizable – to ourselves and to others?

I thought about saying it makes us unrecognizable to God...but that is not possible. God knows us through and through. God knows us when we are unrecognizable to anyone else. God has claimed us with a love that will not let us go.

Still...how do we deal with temptation that threatens to remake us in ways contrary to God’s dream for us?

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Jesus was tempted. Fresh from the waters of his baptism, the Holy Spirit drove him into the wilderness where he was tempted 40 days and nights. By Luke’s accounting, Jesus’ days were filled with the devil’s tempting might. At the end of those 40 days, the devil put three classic temptations to Jesus.

Those temptations were – ❶ turn stones to bread; ❷ worship the devil; and ❸ test the level of God’s love for him. At a glance, these seem like harmless temptations. I mean, who would see them. Who would deny a hungry man bread? The temptation aimed at persuading Jesus to worship the devil had to do with the devil giving Jesus dominion over all the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus would be the most benevolent ruler imaginable – so,

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wouldn't that be a good thing? The third temptation had to do with Jesus throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple trusting that God loved him so much he would send his angels to catch Jesus before he hit the stones below. That was something like a circus act that would make good theater. So...why didn't Jesus take the devil up on any of these wonderful offers?

Temptation is a complicated matter, as I have said...and that is certainly the case with Jesus' temptation. Bottom line, Jesus was not going to receive any of these earthly delights from anyone **but** God himself. If God wanted to send him bread to feed his hunger, Jesus would gladly receive it - which, according to Matthew's version of this story, the angels did once the temptations were over. If God was going to deliver him from harm, he would welcome it. As it turned out, God did not deliver him, did he? Jesus died on the cross. If God was going to give him authority over all nations then that was God's to give - not the devils.

Jesus was not going to give evil a foothold in his life. As attractive and seemingly harmless as the specific temptations may appear to us...they amounted to Jesus giving glory to a power other than God. This he would not do. Because God was his first thought by day and last thought by night, Jesus could do the right thing when no one was watching. Against such devotion to God alone, the devil's tempting might was turned away...discarded...cast on the dust-heap.

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Is there a lesson here to be learned about temptation? On one level, this is a story about Jesus. The temptations put to him were uniquely his. They are not the temptations that present themselves to us. We can read this story and give thanks that Jesus resisted evil's tempting might. We can praise God that Jesus did not sell his soul to the devil.

On another level, though, there is something here for us to learn about the temptations that may come our way. Temptations do not generally come to us dressed as evil. Those things that are obviously evil are easy to resist...well, at least for most people. I mean, I think it is safe to say none of you are tempted to push old ladies off the curb into the street - or to take food from a hungry child - or to murder your neighbor. These things do not tempt us.

The evils that tempt us come dressed in pretty packages. They come in the form of increased power or prestige or material gain. They come in the form of the kind of self-righteous arrogance that leads us to think we have the right to say and do whatever we want. They come in the form of the sort of delusion that allows us to think we have nothing to learn. They come in a form that permits us to justify or rationalize our advantage over others. The evils that tempt us work to convince us they are not so evil after all. "Go ahead. Everyone does it," we hear whispered in our ear. "Go ahead. The good done will outweigh the harm inflicted," we hear whispered in the other ear.

Someone once gave me some sound advice that I have heard repeated a number of times. He said, "If you want to know for sure when you're being tempted by evil, just ask yourself if you would like to have a report of that action printed in the newspaper." That certainly has the potential of restraining the evils we might do.

But that does not go far enough. As followers of Jesus we don't just behave when people are looking. We want to do the right thing...the thing God wants us to do...when

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nobody is looking. We want to do the right thing even when it might never appear in the local newspaper...as a witness to the only God in our lives. We want our lips and our hearts and our lives to proclaim God's praise.

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I began by asking you what temptation would put you over the edge. What temptation would stretch you beyond your ability to resist? What might tempt you to sell your very soul?

God deliver us from giving in to the kind of temptations that would require us to give away what belongs only to God. Amen.



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