

Living the Story

A Study through Scripture

Introduction:

I am indebted to Henri Nouwen's work, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) for his reflections on the temptations of Jesus. We understand being tempted—we all are—but we often wonder how to read Hebrews 4.15 that says Jesus was tempted just like we were. I have talked to more high school students than I can remember who have trouble believing Jesus faced the same temptations that these hormone filled students did.

What Nouwen points out is that beyond the actual temptation itself, there is a bigger picture. So, Jesus was not only tempted to turn stones into bread, he was tempted to become relevant. He was being asked to do more than simply jump off the temple, he was being asked to prove himself spectacular. And, rather than just having all the kingdoms of the world, the last temptation was one of power.

When framed through this perspective, I discover I feel more aware of the ways I too am being tempted in these ways. My desire to help people deal with important issues in their lives takes on a sense of relevancy. I too, like so many others, want to be noticed in my ministry and so wrestle with being spectacular. I can justify in many different ways how my desire for power is not a temptation, but a way to see God working through me ... when I know it really is not about God but about my power.

This week I want us to look at these temptations through these lenses and hopefully, gain a better perspective of how to address the temptations of our lives.

Summary of the Text:

As we begin today's reading, a couple of things stand out. First, Jesus' movement into the desert was a divine thing. He was led by the Spirit and for a specific purpose: to be tempted by the devil. We are not told specifically the purpose of this tempting. One might think that it is to test Jesus' mettle, to make sure he is ready, but looking through the different Gospel accounts of this story, it is not the idea you get. The second thing, something I think we can see with a little more clarity, is that this time of fasting was a time of preparation. When we wrote about Nehemiah a couple of weeks ago, we mentioned his fasting prior to going to Jerusalem. We also talked about Esther's command to Mordecai to have the people fast. Fasting, in scripture and still to this day, focuses people on God and allows them to prepare for what is at hand. It is not surprising then that Jesus would begin his earthly ministry through a time of fasting.

We should also not be surprised that Jesus goes into the wilderness. We tend to think of the desert as a barren place, devoid of anything good. It was, however, in the desert or the wilderness that the people of Israel met with God and received his covenant promise. Throughout Christian history, the desert has proven to be a place of meeting God rather than a retreat from God.

To me, Matthew states the obvious here: Jesus fasted for forty days and was hungry. This may be the most difficult temptation, at least from our earthly perspective, for Jesus to overcome. He was hungry and had the keys, if you will, for a quick fix. The other two temptations do not seem to have such a strong sense of physical urgency. However, if Jesus was indeed preparing for his earthly ministry, to be spectacular or have power would certainly come in handy ... perhaps it would even prevent some of the difficult things he was about to have to go through.

LESSON #24

Date: 3/3/2013

Text: Matthew 4.1-11

The Story: Chapter 23

The Big Picture: We wonder if Jesus was really tempted in the same ways we were, but when we realize he was tempted to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful, we see the ways we too are tempted in these ways.

Materials Needed: none

Jesus addresses each of the “tempters” attacks in the same way: with a scriptural rebuttal. I think it is important for us to not overlook the importance of knowing Scripture as a way of defending ourselves against the temptations Satan throws at us. Randy Harris, professor at ACU, has commented that the students he sees are the most spiritual, yet most Biblically illiterate he has ever seen. What would we say about ourselves? How well are we able to use that which we have placed on our heart to overcome the evil one?

Nouwen says that the temptation for Jesus to turn stones into bread is about relevancy. How convenient would it be to just make rocks into sustenance for those in need, ourselves included? Think about it. How big of an issue is world hunger today? If we could eliminate that, how much more could the message of the Gospel be heard? Perhaps a great deal more and on the one hand, that doesn't seem like such a bad deal, but when our dependence is on what others have provided, how much room do we have for God? Jesus' comment to the tempter is key: do we rely only on God?

The temptation of throwing himself off the temple, according to Nouwen, is the temptation for Jesus to be spectacular. This one in many ways hits closer to home for me than any of the others. If they were truthful, many ministers wrestle with this. It is not ill intended, but rather, a desire to be the type of person others notice and because of that noticing, they have a desire to follow and learn from. If Jesus had thrown himself from the temple, there would be little debate as to which one of the teachers was most spectacular! But again, according to how Jesus responds, the point is not to use God to prove your worth. It really comes back to trusting God.

Finally, for bowing down to Satan, Jesus could have all the kingdoms of the earth and gain the power he sought ... at least the power Satan thought Jesus sought. We know that Jesus' power was through weakness, that his submission in service was the most powerful thing he could do. In reality, to bow down and gain the kingdoms was a shortcut that excluded the plan of God. It would be seeking the easy way out. Nouwen's words are particularly insightful here: “What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life.” (Page 59)

Preparing for the Group Time:

We often get nervous when it comes to talking about our temptations. I am reminded to the old joke that says: “You know what the most famous last words of a preacher are? We are all going to talk about our worst sins and I will go first.” At times we feel the same way about our temptations.

I am not going to ask you to talk about your temptations to your group. If you choose to, that is fine. I do want you to spend some time thinking about the ways you are specifically tempted by relevancy, being spectacular, and power. In what ways do these areas try to pull you away from trusting in God? In what ways can you model the ways Jesus avoided falling to these temptations?

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Lesson Outline:

If you grew up in the Churches of Christ, you probably sang the song "Tempted and Tried." (I am not sure the exact title.) You sang: Tempted and tried, we're oft' made to wonder, why it should be such, all the days long." Why do you think it should be that we are tempted and tried ... all the days long?

When you read in Hebrews 4.15 that Jesus was tempted in every way that you were, does that give you comfort or make you wonder a little bit about Jesus? Why do you think this is the case?

Read Matthew 4.1-11.

Answer the discussion questions.

Close in prayer for one another that we will be strong in the ways we handle temptations, specifically the temptations of being relevant, spectacular, and powerful.

Discussion Questions:

We are told that Jesus goes in the wilderness to fast. How can being in a wilderness be beneficial to your faith? How does fasting help prepare you for things to come?

Why do you think we have gotten away from the spiritual discipline of fasting?

What does the way Jesus handled temptation tell us about the way we ourselves should address temptation in our lives?

In what ways have you or people you know been tempted to be relevant?

In what ways have you or people you know been tempted to be spectacular?

In what ways have you or people you know been tempted to be powerful?

How can we encourage one another to better handle times of temptation?

For the Children:

Depending on the age of the children in your group, your children may have a more difficult time discerning what is means to rely on God for the strength and ability to overcome temptation. For some children, overcoming temptation is more about willpower than anything else. (OK, some adults think about it in the same way!) Ask your children what temptations they face. Then, ask them how they see God helping them overcome those temptations. Remind them that God has promised his power to do just that. You might even pray a prayer over your children asking God to keep them from temptations and the evil one.

Living the Story:

The specific "take-away" from this week may depend on how well your group shares with one another. I cannot think that people will not come away from a lesson like this without thinking about the ways they face various temptations. This is a good and needed thing. I would encourage them to do so.

I do think, however, that it is also good to take some time to encourage one another to trust in God. If your group shares a lot of their temptations and ways they struggle to trust in God, you have an open door to ask group members to encourage one another throughout the week. If your group remains fairly closed, you might ask them to name specific ways the entire group can help one another. Whatever the case, please be sure to let groups members know you and the entire group is praying that everyone in the group continues to trust first in God this week.