

POINTS TO PONDER

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the adversary."

— *Matthew 4.1*

"The wilderness is a wonderful place to get our bearings, and to have some alone time with our spirit to consider all of the things that consume our lives. While I don't believe God tempts or tests us, as that doesn't sound like something one known for compassion would do, I trust that God nudges us to go to sacred places to deal with the temptations of life...to see our reality in a different light as we learn the lessons of life by the nature we observe around us.

And while we all likely have 'adversaries' in our life at one time or another, often the adversary we most need to contend with is our own unwillingness to carry through with what we feel led by God to do. When God calls us to a mission, it usually involves sacrifice, and even some suffering. God calls us to make the world a better place in whatever ways we are gifted to do so. But sharing our gifts, unless perhaps it is music, is not something that is always appreciated by others – particularly if our gift is to challenge others to think differently about their lives and the world.

The most ethical persons who encourage others to be ethical are often met with resistance, and sometimes even violence. How tempting it is to do something less than our calling that doesn't trouble the waters, and that will make our lives more comfortable. How tempting it is to give people what they want, and not what they may need.

What temptations do you find in life? Are you ever tempted to not live up to your calling to make the world a better place? Are you ever fearful of doing what you think is right when others may disagree, show resistance, or even become irate? What helps you to answer your calling rather than your fear?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/21/2023*

"He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written, one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

— *Matthew 4.2-4*

"Ever notice how often in the Bible you hear about 'forty' days, nights, or years? It is a colloquial expression indicating a long time, not exactly forty days, nights, or years. Jesus, in trying to become clear about how to engage and implement his newfound mission in life, had gone to the wilderness and practiced the spiritual discipline of fasting. Often, fasting was not going without any food, but restricting the quantity and times one would eat to specific parts of the day. This makes more sense if he was out there for any longer than a week, as going without any food for a prolonged period can result in damage to our organs.

'Son of God' was also a colloquial expression in ancient Israel, denoting that someone has been assigned a sacred task by God in which one was to carry out with the virtues and values of God. Prophets and other leaders were routinely called 'sons of God' because of the tasks they were to do on behalf of the people and world. While we are all 'children of God' in that we are created good and with the divine image of God within us, there is a still stronger use of the phrase that means we also take on the tasks and character of God. When we live by God's virtues and values, we are 'God's children' not only by our birthright, but also in living by God's own Spirit and character traits.

While we all are to recognize our original goodness as the children of God, those who feel a special calling from God, may have to contend with thoughts or feelings that they are somehow more special than other children of God. We may start to see our worth as more important than the worth of other people or parts of creation. This temptation of Jesus is particularly subtle in that most people would consider their worth as greater than the worth of a rock. But Jewish tradition teaches that all that God has created is good,

and that there are not degrees of goodness attributed to different parts of creation. We are all needed, interconnected, and interdependent upon one another. Science tells us that humans couldn't exist without plants, so to claim humans are of more worth is hubris and is not in accord with how God loves us all as creations created in love.

It is not insignificant that Jesus is tempted first by something that may seem inconsequential to most people. Rarely does temptation start out as some outlandish thing we are tempted with in which we would readily perceive it as a major temptation in which we need to resist. Most usually, temptation starts out subtle and builds from there. If this is an accurate way to read this temptation, one can readily see how one could be convinced that it is not much of a temptation at all. If we had the power to turn a rock into bread and we did so, would that be all that bad – especially when we could really use the food? Again, fasting usually did not involve going without any food, but rather going without food during the daylight hours, and then eating what one had (usually less than one would normally consume in a day) after dark. If this was the case for Jesus, then it really doesn't seem like a violation to eat some bread.

But I suspect that eating something was not considered the violation; but rather the real violation would be changing a part of God's creation into something different than it was created to be – in this case, changing a rock into bread. If God created all things good as depicted in Genesis, then Jesus not recognizing the 'goodness' and sacred nature of the rock would be a violation against the rock as a part of God's creation that has inherent worth.

Most people would retort, 'But it is only a rock!' Yet, again, whenever we treat anything, even a rock, as having less than the worth than God has endowed it with, we disparage the goodness of creation; and by implication, the Creator who made it.

Temptation starts out so subtle, being in agreement with the prejudices of humanity that we adopt, that we usually don't even recognize it is a temptation until we've already done it. Often it is only in hindsight that we recognize that our 'good,' or supposedly benign, intentions were not being respectful of other parts of creation. I recall either my grandfather or one of my parents telling me that I should not write graffiti on a rock, wall, or anything else, as it would be a violation of that thing's worth as created by God. Jesus, here, was being asked to change the rock into bread when he was hungry, and this would have been a much greater violation than simply writing graffiti on it. And yet, the prejudices of humanity typically would say writing on a rock, or even changing it into bread, is not that big of a deal – so begins the subtle temptation of disaffirming the beauty and goodness of all creation.

Are you always aware of the temptations in your life? Do you ever look back and see decisions you made as being the result of being tempted to live by standards that were not in accordance with your, or God's, ideals? Are not the hardest temptations to resist the ones in which we can easily justify as not really much of a temptation at all? How can we learn to see the subtlety of our temptations so that we do not violate our character and God's Spirit in even seemingly insignificant ways?

The genuinely ethical person will see violations of virtue and character where others would not even think to look. Jesus recognized that even 'minor' violations were still violations, and that to resist temptation, we cannot treat any being, or any created thing, as having less worth than the worth in which God endowed it."

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/21/2023*

"Then the adversary took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, "God will command the angels concerning you", and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone."' Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, Do not put the Virtuous One your God to the test.'"

— *Matthew 4.5-7*

"The adversary inside us often has us imagine realities in which are not yet; inviting us to consider what it would be like to have powers in which we could do spectacular and superhuman things. While an active fantasy life can be used in positive ways, it can also lead us down the path of temptation. How we control our fantasy life affects how we live our actual lives.

In this situation, Jesus considers what it would be like if he did a death-defying act and was saved by God because of how he believed God valued and loved him. Have you ever been tempted to have someone prove their loyalty to you? What does it say about us that we would feel the need to require such a test of their loyalty, faithfulness, or love? Would not such a test by us toward another be an act of manipulation, perhaps even coercion? How is this trusting them? How is it respecting them? How is it caring for them?

Such testing of others reveals our own insecurities, while disrespecting them. If we really believe someone is good and decent, why would we need to have them prove it? And even if we were unsure, or actually didn't think they were always good and decent, then why prove to them that we are not trusting of them by having them jump through these hoops?

We don't lift others up by testing whether they are worthy of our trust. We lift them up when we believe in them, and trust, even in instances in which they have failed us, that they are persons we are not quick to give up on and who we trust to do better next time.

Jesus did not want to violate his relationship with God by asking God to prove to him that God loved and cared for him. Are we as respectful of others as Jesus was of God? Do we require people to prove themselves to us before we are willing to trust them; or do we trust them until they prove that they cannot be trusted? How does how we answer those questions reflect our own character and loyalty to relationships?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/21/2023*

"Again, the adversary took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' ¹⁰Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written, Worship the Virtuous One your God, and serve only God.'"

— *Matthew 4.8-10*

"This is an interesting temptation given Jesus' cultural context. Caesar pretty much had control of most of the Western and Middle Eastern world at that time, so this is essentially asking Jesus to imagine himself to be Caesar – that is, the one whom his values are most opposed.

This is particularly revealing as it asks Jesus to consider whether he is opposed to Caesar because of their differing value systems, or whether there might be some envy in his simply wanting the power that Caesar had. The temptation also involves whether Jesus is willing to renounce his own values and loyalties to divine values represented by God for the human values represented by Satan if control of the world was handed over to him.

Jesus passes this test with flying colors as he does not envy Caesar, and doesn't want the power Caesar has, but simply sees his own values in direct refutation to those of Caesar. One might imagine it would be tempting to be given the power to rule the world. Consider all the good that a genuinely virtuous person could do if given authoritarian power. Yet, Jesus outrightly rejects authoritarian power here, for it would be to do a complete reversal of his character; which is to love people without trying to control them.

Jesus values people being able to decide their own destinies more than he values a peace created by coercion. Jesus rejects the Pax Romano in which is won by force and intimidation rather than through the development of a virtuous character. Jesus has no interest in ruling over people, but has as his goal the

showing them the way of peace, justice, and love that they do not by compulsion, but by their own choice in seeing that God's ways are the better way in which to live our lives.

For Jesus, it would be better to not have a harmonious society that controls people and limits their own moral decision-making, than to have an unharmonious society in which people are acting in accordance with their own consciences. Even if only a few choose to serve God for the right reasons with pure motives, this is preferable than having a whole society acting out of fear and compulsion.

To love the world is not to control it, even if one thinks one can help it to be more harmonious. To love the world is to encourage people to develop their own inner character, to freely choose their own moral course, and to care for them even when they make poor or wrongful choices. It is a more soul-wrenching way to live when we see that many make choices that not only hurt themselves, but others; but to take away their moral decision-making is an even worse fate, for it involves renouncing the divine image within them to be creative, self-thinking, and accountable for their own thought, feelings, actions, and practices – thereby taking away all their dignity, humanity, moral virtue, and spiritual autonomy.

If Jesus respects rocks enough not to turn them into bread, then not to respect people to freely choose their own lives is far worse; essentially turning them into rocks, and making them objects of our manipulation, and not treating them as moral agents and spiritual beings with integrity. Dehumanizing people in order to make them abide by law and order is a bigger loss than letting them dehumanize themselves by their making bad choices.

Jesus' choice in allowing humans ethical autonomy is consistent with his view of God, who loves us so much that God would rather us to be free and make sinful choices, than to be programmed to do as God wishes with no free choice or dignity in self-determination. We may suspect that whatever Jesus' view of God is with regard to divine powers, the power of love requires of God, and us, to not use the powers of manipulation, coercion, intimidation, physical force, emotional abuse, or any form of violence to get people to act in the right way. We are not to behave as do the Caesars of the world, but as God would have us to behave: with mutuality of respect, loving-kindness, and a trust (warranted or not) to allow people to make their own choices as morally free beings – i.e., as beings made in the image of God.

Jesus does not see God as an authoritarian, and does not agree with the Caesars and empires of the world being authoritarian. He does not change his ideals of who God represents in order to gain more control over people. Nor does he conceive of God as an authoritarian, as so many Western Christians have done.

Is it not surprising that those in our country who are attracted to authoritarianism often have an authoritarian view of God as well? How many egalitarian Christians do you know – i.e., people who think that everyone should be equals and treated equally, with no respect to nationality, citizenship, ethnicity, sexual identity, religious beliefs, etc.? If you do know any, how do they imagine God to be? What do they emphasize as the prime traits of God's character and practices? What does it mean to them to serve only God?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/21/2023*

"Then the adversary left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him."

— *Matthew 4.11*

"We wrestle with ourselves and our conscience until we have taken the time to be away by ourselves to resolve who we are to be and what we are to do, commit ourselves to those ideals, and begin the path that will fulfill our calling.

When we have done this inner work in our spirit and soul, the adversary of our 'what ifs' leaves us. We gain focus and no longer worry about the 'what ifs,' for we have chosen our path, and we are intent on following it wherever it leads. The feeling of relief in having found our identity and purpose is as though

angels come to be with us, for we are no longer tempted by the other values in which we have rejected. We are freed to pursue the journey of being and becoming our best selves, for we are no longer distracted by the temptations with which the world thinks we need to be concerned.

It is not, however, as if temptations will not come again; but they can be easily resisted, though not without consequences, once we have prioritized our values. When we make our choices, others may not like our choices. They may try to change our choices for their own benefit rather than respect the values by which we have decided to live. They will become aggravated at us for no longer conforming to their ideas of who they think we should be; particularly when our new values no longer conform to their self-serving interests. Living into our values means not letting others substitute their values for our own. This, of course, results in hostility from those who look to control our actions rather than being content to control only their own. But more importantly, it means that we have ended the war within ourselves as to what we should do when we have not yet prioritized what matters most.

Jesus felt this freedom at the end of his wilderness experience; but he well knew that his new purpose would be life-changing and challenging for him. He knew that sacrifices would have to be made, some new relationships would be created while some old ones would be severed, and that he would meet criticism and resistance at every turn. Such is life whenever we make a stand for some values over other ones. We all know the rest of the story of his struggle to implement and teach his virtues and values in a world that was opposed to them.

Still, the spiritual liberation of having found his purpose freed him to live audaciously in accordance with God's Spirit despite all of the misunderstandings, rejections, condemnation, ridicule, persecution, and eventually torture and crucifixion from others that he would suffer for living by that purpose. Doing the inner work is the first half of the battle, but the remainder is practicing what we purpose ourselves to do. That we feel angels with us in the inner work does not mean that they will necessarily intervene on our behalf in the outer work of our relationships with others in this world. We may meet human angels (viz., messengers of God) along our life's path, and some of them may even have our back; but each of us must walk the path of our own choices and calling – too often alone.

Could the sacrifice, effort, and suffering involved in standing for higher principles be the reason so many do not do so? Is it not easier to live a life in which we conform to other people's idea of who we should be rather than God's idea of who we should be? Is the spiritual liberation of finding our purpose and calling worth the struggle we will endure and the resistance that we face in living by it?

What are the priorities of our life? Is our verbal answer to that consistent to how we actually live our lives? Will we ever be able to feel fulfilled until the two are consistent?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/22/2023*