

Temptation

Genesis 3: 1-7, Matthew 4: 1-11

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On my way to the grocery, a driver nearly wrecked me when he cut in front of me; I was tempted to flip him a universal sign of objection. At lunch, a waiter asked if I wanted dessert; I started to ask for the menu. Everybody knows about temptation. We're tempted by the big seven: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, lust, and a host of their little cousins. Those temptations, and any others we might imagine, revolve around a singular temptation: the temptation to be like God. Said another way, we are tempted when we deny and refuse to accept our humanity. For a closer look, I'd like to revisit the garden and then walk to the wilderness.

Genesis is one of my favorite books. It matters not whether you take Genesis as a report of what happened or a metaphor of what is. Either way Genesis is a compelling reading of the human condition.

Chapter three begins with a talking snake; "more crafty than any other wild animal the LORD God had made." The talking snake is a creature made by God. Genesis doesn't explain why God made a talking snake. The snake just is. The snake simply appears; which is not to say that the snake does not have a role to play. It does. The talking snake proposes an alternative way to the way of God: "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God . . ." God wants us to be human. The snake wants us to be like God. To be human is to live within limits. To be human means we are limited physically, emotionally, intellectually—that's God's design. Not the snake—"you will be like God."

A close friend recently tore his bicep. Curtis and I go way back—we were college roommates. In high school, Curtis was a sprinter and a wrestler. He still runs every day, lifts weights. Curtis serves a church in the mountains of North Carolina. A few weeks back they had a snowstorm. Curtis was driving to work when he saw a church member stuck in the snow. He stopped to help. While pushing the car—and I guess he tried to lift it—Curtis tore his bicep; tore it right off the bone. That could have happened when he was eighteen. There are things we can't do—some things are physically impossible. We are human.

Have you ever reached your "breaking point?" We all have one. We are limited not just physically but also emotionally. Jackie Robinson was the first African American to play Major League baseball. If you haven't seen it, take a look at the movie—*42*—it's a great story of Jackie's first two years in the majors. There's a powerful scene where Jackie reaches his breaking point—he's at bat, his first, and the manager of the opposing team taunts him using every ugly racial slur imaginable. After striking out, Jackie heads to the locker room. He's in a narrow brick-lined hallway. It's as if the walls are closing in on him and he smashes his bat against the wall breaking it in pieces. He can't take it. He's done. We all have a breaking point—there are things we can't take. Yes, we can and do pick up the pieces just as Jackie Robinson did—but all of us have our limits—emotionally, physically, intellectually.

Someone once compared intellectual knowledge to an island and the line where the sand meets the sea as the boundary between what we know and what we don't know. If you live on a small island, the line is not very big. There's not much you don't know. Move to a bigger island and the border between the known and the unknown expands. The more we know the more we don't know. That shouldn't defeat us as learners; we shouldn't throw up our hands, much less settle for ignorance. Limited knowledge or acknowledging our limited knowledge makes or should make us more not less curious. Likewise, it should make us humble. We're free not to know everything. And that's a good

thing. Temptation whispers otherwise—temptation says we should know everything or at least appear to!

What about good and evil—our moral sense? That’s where the talking snake attacked: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Wouldn’t it be nice if every person’s moral compass pointed north? That would solve many problems—maybe all of them. But all compasses don’t point north, not individually or collectively. So it was in the garden. Our parents were not content to live with limited knowledge of good and evil. They wanted to be like God so they took the fruit and ate and we’ve been eating it ever since. We become our own judge. We become judge and jury over our brothers and sisters. And we’re simply not up to it. That was the garden, what about the wilderness?

Matthew says Jesus was “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Matthew’s wilderness connects us not only with the wilderness where Aaron made the golden calf, but also to the garden and the talking snake, only this time, the snake doesn’t have his way. Jesus is faithful. Jesus rests in his humanity. He is content to be human and to let God be God.

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.” That was the first temptation. The devil does not question Jesus’ divinity; at issue is his humanity, which is exactly how Jesus responds to the devil’s invitation to use his power to turn stones into bread. Jesus says, “A human being does not live by bread alone.” That’s what Jesus says about being human. “A human being does not live by bread alone.” Being human is about more than bread.

A woman named Katherine Lewis did a word count using *The New York Times* as her data base. Katherine wanted to know how many times the word *citizen* appeared compared to the word *consumer*. Over the last one-hundred years she found virtually no change in the use of the word *citizen*. Not so with the word *consumer*. Katherine found a forty fold increase in the word *consumer*. Maybe that’s just an interesting piece of trivia. Who knows; maybe one day it will show up on *Jeopardy*. Or maybe Katherine’s study makes a telling case about us; could it be that we are increasingly defined as *consumers* rather than citizens? The word *consume* means “to use up, to destroy, to lay waste.” Our economy depends on consumption. The trouble is, at the rate we’re consuming resources, they’ll soon run out. “Human beings do not live by bread alone.” When bread is our only sustenance, we starve, which is not unlike eating from the dangerous tree in the garden. Both lead to death. Jesus offers another way, an alternative form of being human—“not by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

If in the first temptation Jesus is tempted to reduce his humanity to bread, in the second he is tempted to put God to the test. In the second temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and invites Jesus to jump off—“God will save you—just like he saved your people in the desert when he rained down bread from heaven.” Actually, the devil quotes scripture while making that challenge. He quotes a Psalm: “Because you have made the LORD your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.” Jesus answered the devil by saying that we aren’t supposed to test God, which was another way of saying that living by God’s Word does not exempt us from forces like gravity. Living by the word of God makes us human. We are “frail children of dust.” Jesus did not claim an exception, nor should we.

In the third and final temptation, the devil throws down all of his cards: “You see all of these kingdoms. They could be yours.” Think about all of the good Jesus could have done—no more poverty, no slavery, warfare, hardship, injustice, oppression: he who controls the wealth, controls the world, or so the devil thought. Jesus rejected the offer. Jesus was content to let God be God. Jesus served one king and no other. His marching orders came from neither the marketplace nor the fortress. Jesus refused to let those powers define his humanity. He was defined by one and only one relation—he is the son of his Father. Jesus was a human being, a child of God. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”

When Jesus answered, Matthew says that “the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.” I don’t know, but that sounds like a pretty good way to live—at home with our humanity. We are not God. If God is good and just, then maybe, just maybe, you and I can be content to let God run the show. It’s something to think about; better yet, to do. Amen.