



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Resisting the short cut

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

17 February 2013

Luke 4:1–13

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.³ The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”⁴ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.⁶ And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours.”⁸ Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here.¹⁰ For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”¹² Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.”

In the book *Invitation to Pilgrimage*, John Ailey wrote, ‘I am sure that bit of the road that most requires to be illuminated is the point where it forks.’

This conclusion is undoubtedly correct. There is no place on our life’s journey where we need more light than when we come to a place where we must make a significant decision or series of decisions … a fork in the road. We have to choose which direction we are going to take.

Driving has many dangers about it, but one that presents itself to most drivers is the danger of the short cut. We can see it clearly on the map—if only I just duck off here on the left. A friend tells us about it and we think we recall it well … or, perhaps even more worrying, we are tired of the long journey and have a gut feeling that there must be an easier route!

Jesus came to a significant fork as his public ministry began. He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and was tempted … and in my words … ‘to take a short cut’—in point of fact a number of short cuts.

First of all, let’s put the temptations of Jesus into context. Our Lord’s time of testing follows the high moment and even triumph of his baptism. This is helpful because periods of testing often follow experiences of the exact opposite. At these times we learn how to survive in the wilderness.

Throughout our Lord's time of testing, he exhibited great strength under control. Of course, the opposite is often evident in life's 'short cuts' ... and that is when strength is out of control, desperately seeking an easier way.

When we reach the fork in the road, the big question we must ask ourselves is the dilemma Jesus faced. Are we going to follow the leading of the Spirit, or give way to the temptation of the devil ... to an easier way?

The question is far from elementary and we recognise that discerning the Spirit of God is a huge challenge for us all. Let us look at Jesus choosing the difficult way and resisting the short cut!

George Eliot writes helpfully about temptation: 'No person is matriculated in the art of life til they have been well tempted.'

From a very different source, Charles H Spurgeon said, 'Beware no man more than yourself; we carry our worst enemies within us.'

The temptations are as simple or complex as we choose to make them. I invite you to consider just what each temptation has to say to you. I would, however, commend the overarching thought that we resist the easy ways, the short cuts and the selfish temptations and decide on the better way.

We are frequently confronted by people or situations which present us with avenues of response which are open to each of us—we can react emotionally, intuitively or behaviourally. Put simply—we cry, talk or punch.

There is something sacred about the account of the temptations. There are no witnesses to tell of what happened and so the source must be Christ himself ... sharing the intimate journey of his own life when confronted with temptation.

The devil tempts Jesus to use his strength and satisfy his own hunger and desires—v.v. 3–4

Jesus is taunted by the temptation to make a purely emotional response. After 40 days of fasting, how did Jesus feel? Hungry, I suspect!

What are the options before him:

- Turning stones into bread is his short cut. It would relieve his hunger and such a short cut could consume and define the whole of his response.
- How often do we find one aspect of our lives takes over everything else?
- This first temptation attends to physical needs and disregards the spiritual.

When we reach our moment of temptation it can be that we are looking to our own needs and are not concerned about the needs of others. It takes a disciplined life to handle situations like this and cannot be learned overnight.

Jesus' response is to put the incident into a larger context and this is the Old Testament truth that life is more than bread. If we are to live life to the full, it will be about far more than 'bread alone'.

Luke seems to be closely connecting the temptation of Jesus Christ with his identity as the Son of God. If he gave way to the first temptation, it would be a private act which would

provide for his needs alone and do no harm to anyone else. It could be defined as the temptation to take matters into our own hands and disconnect with God.

Jesus refuses to exercise a selfish power because he lives out of divine grace.

Jesus' reply points to the fact that the request being asked of him is not a challenge to be strong, but to be independent. As Darrell L Bock puts it, 'Such independence is weakness and leads to failure.'

- The priority of things in life is not run by food.
- Life is defined by doing God's will.
- The Old Testament reply refers to living by ... what proceeds from God.

Jesus responds to the devil ... not by attempting to argue, but by relying on scripture. Tom Wright reminds us, 'Arguing with temptation is often a way of playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist.'

The devil tempts Jesus with material benefit—v.v. 5–8

This is the temptation to which we most often relate. We are not tempted by being placed on the high point and offered the kingdoms of the world. However, the lure of riches, power and authority is real, especially when it is linked to that of a higher vision.

A rational and reasonable response would be to give way on this to help others and the larger vision of God's kingdom, but it is God himself who calls us back from such a place. It is interesting that the gift of the devil is made available simply by offering worship to that which is less than God.

There is a subtlety in this temptation which offers itself to Jesus and appeals to his trust in God.

There is the temptation to want the Lord to prove himself. We see this happening all the time. People want the Lord to prove his presence, to prove his power, to prove his love.

That temptation is tied into our being enamoured with the spectacular. Have you heard the story about the lion who was stalking through the jungle looking for trouble?

He thought he was really something. The king of the jungle; the greatest best of the wild ... and he wanted to make sure everyone else thought that as well.

He grabbed a tiger who was passing by and he put a strangle-hold on him. He growled ferociously and said, 'Who's the king of the jungle?' The tiger, trembling and shaking, said, 'You are, O lion. You are the king of the jungle!'

Then there was a bear that passed by. Again the lion grabbed him and put a strangle-hold on him and growled ferociously and said, 'Who's the king of the jungle?' And the bear too, trembling like the tiger, said, 'You are, O lion. No question about it. You are the king of the jungle!'

And then the lion came upon a mighty elephant, huge, massive, towering many feet above the lion! Once more he asked with a ferocious growl, 'Who's the king of the jungle? Who's the greatest beast of the wild?' The elephant didn't say anything. He just picked up the lion with his trunk, whirled him around several times and smashed him into a tree. As the lion got up, broken and bleeding, he said to the elephant, 'Look, mate, just because you don't know the answer there's no need to get so rough!'

The way to respond to the power of temptation with regard to material benefit is to have better priorities:

- You cannot shut out the music by stopping your ears.
- But we can fill our lives with sweeter music.
- Then we see temptation exerts no power on us.

We have to be very careful that we don't try to tempt the Lord by always wanting him to prove himself.

The devil tempts with something less—v.v. 9–12

The third and final temptation was the temptation to something less. This is the on-going short cut which we must face.

When we are at our fork in the road and are offered a short cut, we must remind ourselves that we make a choice and a commitment ... and that is the ultimate call upon our life. It may not be easy to follow, but we must be clear in our decision-making and direction.

There is a story of the woman who was trying to get into a parking space in a heavily congested car park one Christmas. She tried to manipulate her beautiful, long, sleek car, but couldn't quite get the angle needed to squeeze into the space.

Finally she reversed a good distance back and swung out as far as she possibly could. But then, just as she was ready to point the nose of her car towards the space, a young man in a bright little sports car zipped in ahead of her and got the space for himself. You can imagine this really upset the woman. She shouted out of the window to the young man, 'You know I was trying to get that space. Why did you do that?'

He just smiled and waved and said, 'Because I'm young and fast!' And with that, he disappeared into the store.

A little later, as he was shopping, he heard a horrible crashing and banging going on outside. He rushed to the front window to see what was going on ... and behold, this more mature driver was ramming his little sports car with her big car. She would run into it and back up and run into it again. She did that repeatedly, over and over again—crash, crash, crash.

The young man went running out of the store and shouted, 'Hey, why are you doing that?'

The woman responded, 'Because I'm old and rich!'

Now whether we are young or old, rich or otherwise, it makes no difference. We all have the freedom to express ourselves in whatever way we choose.

But the issue is beyond the freedom to express ourselves. It lies in the question: How we express ourselves. When we arrive at those forks in the road, which face each one of us at some point in our lives—forks that determine our direction and destiny—how do we choose?

Jesus is taken to the temple in Jerusalem and is tempted to consider the way of intervention. If, from the pinnacle of the temple, he cast himself down, then ... interestingly, we have a picture of the devil now quoting scripture and turning the nature of temptation on end.

Of course, the ultimate key to lessening temptation's hold on your life is to love God with all your heart and with all your mind, not to make presumptuous calls on God's nature. The

action artificially creates a need for God to act. It puts God in a ‘show me’ position ... and he is not the God of the flashy display!

David Jeremiah says this: ‘Over time I believe I’ve discovered that temptation isn’t so much a matter of what we do, but whom we love. Knowing Christ ... really knowing him, not simply knowing about him ... changes everything. More often than not, power in the time of temptation comes because we’ve filled our minds with his magnificence and there’s not room for the world’s shabby offerings. There’s power in the name of Christ and there’s power in his presence as well.

‘Worship and fellowship with God in the morning actually make it difficult to walk right out into the world and commit some transgression. Knowing that we’ve just been in the presence of the Lord of creation, and that we’re carrying him with us, makes it very difficult to sink to our lowest levels. The best escape Jesus provides is his own embrace.’

The best escape from temptation is to turn your gaze towards Jesus.

Leslie Dunkin recalled a dog he had when he was a boy. This was an unusually obedient dog. Periodically his father would test the dog’s obedience. He would place a tempting piece of meat on the floor. Then he would turn toward the dog and give the command, ‘No!’ The dog, which must have had a strong urge to go for the meat, was placed in a most difficult situation—to obey or to disobey his master’s command.

Dunkin said, ‘The dog never looked at the meat. He seemed to feel that if he did, the temptation to disobey would be good great. So he looked steadily at my father’s face.’

Dunkin then made this spiritual application: ‘There is a lesson for us all. Always look up to the Master’s face.’

We remind ourselves that the departure of the devil isn’t going to be for long ... since confrontation will soon be alongside Jesus again ... as it is for us also!

When we reach that fork in the middle of the road, presenting a number of options, we must resist the idea of the short cut, simply because it is easier ... it can cause serious damage in the long run. Choose to stay close to Christ and his people ... don’t give way to the destructive power of selfishness.