

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 4:1-15

Sermon Title: "Tempted, But I'll Choose God's Ways Instead"

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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Years ago, I was reading a book from a Russian author named Fyodor Dostoevsky. We wrote many novels that intertwined philosophy and religion, exploring both topics amid the troubled political, social, and spiritual atmosphere of his 19th-century Russia.¹ I was reading one of Dostoevsky's lengthy books, the one called *The Brothers Karamazov*, and I came across this interesting mini-story that comes directly from our passage today, Luke 4:1-15.

This is how Dostoevsky's mini-story goes: Christ has come back to earth and is ministering to people in Spain.² They gather to Christ and he heals them, very much like he did in the Gospels. His ministry captures the attention of a cardinal – The Grand Inquisitor is his title – and he arrests Christ and throws him in a cell. He visits Christ at one point, and goes on to tell him why he had him arrested. Just as he did before Pontius Pilate, Christ is silent as the Grand Inquisitor speaks. In his pompous lecture, he

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Dostoyevsky.

² <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/brothersk/section7.rhtml>.

reminds Christ of the time he suffered in the desert with Satan for forty days. He lists the three temptations that Christ endured, and then he has the audacity, the nerve, to say that Christ should have given over to all three.

The first temptation was bread. After forty days of fasting, Christ is severely hungry. Satan appears and offers him the chance to make bread. Christ refuses. The Grand Inquisitor says this was a mistake. Of course, he should have taken the bread, because he was hungry. People cannot just live on the word of God as food. In fact, they will reject God's word for a loaf of good bread, if they are starving. Christ should have taken the bread and then freed humanity from hungry itself, so they could be completely open to God's word.

The second temptation (not in order) was miracles. Satan and Christ visit the highest point in Jerusalem, overlooking the city. Satan says, "Jump from the pinnacle." Christ refuses. "But the angels will save you," Satan says. Christ refuses. Again the Grand Inquisitor says this was a mistake. Christ should have performed the miracle, because people would have looked up and seen the miracle, and they would have believed in God. "Most people need to see the miraculous in order to be content in their religious

faith,” the Grand Inquisitor tells Christ.³ People need to see a supernatural being, and Christ refused them their desires.

The third temptation was power. Satan shows Christ all the kingdoms of the world. He can give him all of those kingdoms. Christ refuses. “But you will control them all,” Satan says. Christ refuses. “Big mistake!” the Grand Inquisitor announces. If Christ had taken over, there would be no sin, and definitely no need to have inquisitions to eradicate sin. But since Christ refused to take over, the Church has had to take over, the Grand Inquisitor says, in order to purge sin.

Christ sat silently as the Grand Inquisitor judged him. Even when he is told that Satan was correct all three times in the desert, and not Christ himself, Christ says not a word, but allows the Grand Inquisitor to blame him.

Let us get one thing straight: Christ could have done all three things. Whatever Satan threw at him, Jesus could have responded without one problem. He is the Christ, the Savior, the Son of God.

Christ turned water into wine at a wedding, so in the desert he could have certainly turned a stone into bread and eaten it. He divided bread and fishes into

³ Ibid.

feasts for 5000 and 4000 men and their families, so he had control over food. After suffering in the desert for forty days, angels did attend to him according to Matthew 4:11. Jesus performed hundreds and thousands of miracles from healing blind men to raising dead children. He drove demons out of people and commanded servants of Satan to say not a word to him. And when Pontius Pilate asked Jesus if was a king, he said that his kingdom was not of this earth. We believe in The Apostles' Creed that Christ sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, waiting for the time to return to judge the living and dead. Bread and miracles and power were not problems to Jesus. He could have easily responded to Satan's temptations and executed them with a word, if necessary.

But that's what they were: temptations. A temptation is something that entices, something that lures and provokes a person to do something that is morally wrong. Satan's name is the Deceiver, the one who tempts and entices, and makes people forget themselves, and makes people forget their God, and provokes people to disrupt and hurt and destroy anything that God offers out of love.

Jesus sees through the devil for what he is, and he sees the devil's tricks for what they are. They could distract Jesus from real ministry. They might lure

Jesus away from being the Son of God who takes away the sins of the world. But Jesus avoids Satan's tricks.

We have a more difficult time seeing what the devil is really all about. We face temptations, and we might not know they are temptations, because they feel so good, because they seem like the right thing to do. We are surrounded by so many temptations throughout the day. Just log on to the Interweb, and when we think we are innocently Googling a topic to research, all of a sudden there is that advertisement that pops up. All of a sudden we are thinking about something more alluring, something more sensual; but all we were doing in the first place was Googling how much Disneyworld tickets will be this summer, or how close is the nearest Publix supermarket.

My family and I can watch a certain program on TV, enjoying the humor of the show and laughing at every joke, and then a commercial comes on to the screen, and our happy family atmosphere is interrupted by violence or sex or something else unpleasant. Thank goodness we have a DVR and can pause commercials, and thus reduce the chance for temptations to enter our home. But temptations are there. Satan uses all he can to make us think of something else, not of God, not of the fact that we are God's children.

Last week we visited John the Baptist, and we heard what he had to say to groups of people who arrived to be baptized. His advice was sound and spiritual. To the one who has two tunics or coats, give one to the person who has none. Be courteous and share, especially when we don't need that second or third coat or blanket or dollar bill. Resist the temptation of being selfish and of withholding grace to another person. Tax collectors: make a fair wage and don't steal from anyone. Be kind and respectful in our relationships, whether we have relationships with people in business or church or work or wherever. Resist the temptation of taking what we can from others, using them for our benefit, and thus robbing grace from them. Soldiers: do not make trouble but keep the peace. Be thoughtful and calm around others. Resist the temptation to add more fuel to an already-hot situation, and be a calming presence among others. Where there is darkness, shed light. Where there is sadness, spread joy.

One thing we didn't discuss last week was John the Baptist's words toward Herod the Roman ruler who enticed his brother's wife to, shall we say, "hook up with him." Herod lusted after his brother's wife and stole her away to be his own. Boy, what we could say about that situation, the mountain of temptations that both Herod and his brother's wife pursued and fell

feet-first into. John the Baptist had plenty to say to that king although, sadly, we don't know what he said to him. None of the Gospels record those words. But we who surf the Interweb and we who are surprised by the commercials that appear on TV, we know the temptations and we know to resist them. We know to look away, ignore, do not go any farther; or they will thrust us into a world of trouble. I once heard a lawyer say that if he doesn't know if something is unethical and he feels the need to push the limit to see if it is unethical, then that thing is unethical. Stop and do not go any farther. If we have questions, and think we could push the boundaries, then it is a temptation that Satan is using to forget ourselves, others, and God.

But we are not the only ones who suffer temptations. Jesus suffered them throughout his ministry, the most obvious ones coming from Luke 4. And he stood against those temptations. He could have done any one of the things that Satan suggested, but he was not going to do them to please Satan. He would turn water to wine when it was time to reveal God's glory. He would multiply bread and fishes, drive out demons, heal various diseases, die for our sin, and rise up to the throne of heaven at their right times; and all for the glory of God the Father.

We should ask ourselves when feeling tempted: “Is it to the glory of God, doing what I want to do?” Will God be pleased and will God be revealed for his love and grace? We could pretty much do anything we want. We pretty much have the capacity within us to do almost anything we desire. We are told this as young children, “Study hard and get good grades, so that as adults you can be anything you want.” I grew up with the story that anybody could become President. Any person from any city or town could grow up and become the President of the United States. That statement is false, because in the 230 some odd years that our country has been around, only 44 men have become President, so our chances are quite slim. But besides become the leader of our country, we could practically do anything our hearts desire. We have been told this since childhood.

But are those the things God wants us to do? That opportunity we want to pursue, that person we want, that thing that we desire: are they what God wants us to pursue or want or desire? Do they give God the glory, the credit, the praise? Jesus could have done anything he wanted, but he came to earth only to reveal the Father to us all. He struggled against temptations, he wrestled against opposition, he even came face-to-face with “the acceptable thing that everyone does,” and yet not what God does. Jesus

knew who he was, he knew the power he possessed, and he only used it to repair and restore and regenerate poor and helpless people. If Jesus struggled, then we are not exempt either. But in the struggle, we may still remember who we are, and even whose we are. We may remember that Jesus did all things for God and so can we, because the death and resurrection of Christ reside in us. Things may change, lives may turn around, life itself may become better, when we strive to carry out God's choices and strive to reach God's goals.

Do remember Dostoevsky and the story we started with a few moments ago? The Grand Inquisitor had just blamed Christ for not giving over to the temptations and doing everything Satan wanted him to do. The whole time Christ sat silently and listened to the accusations. And when the Grand Inquisitor was finished, Christ walked up to the man and kissed him gently on the lips. The Grand Inquisitor was shocked and overcome with what Christ did. All he could do was free Christ and tell him never to return again.⁴

And Christ went out of the wilderness, having stood against all Satan could throw at him, and Christ did all things that he was born to do. Alongside Christ we may go out as well, and do all things that we were created to do.

⁴ <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/brothersk/section7.rhtml>.

The Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the good news! Christ Jesus lives and reigns in heaven above, holding the keys to death. Christ reigns in power with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, and he tells us to not be afraid. All sin is forgiven: large and small, secret and revealed. We are saved from death, and life is our reward. Believe this good news. You and I are forgiven through Christ our Lord. Amen.