

TEMPTATION: NO IFS, ANDS, OR BUTS – LUKE 4.1-13

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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.



This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

I have to say, it was a really busy week for me this last week. We had an Ash Wednesday service in Benson that I was at. I made a couple of visits on new people and on old people. We had a table at the Vail Pride Day with the school district yesterday. Then there's all of the planning that needs to go on in the future with Easter coming up, with a canvassing team coming down, it's just been busy. With all of that going on this week, I just didn't have a lot of time to put into a sermon. So instead of a sermon, we're just going to talk about the gospel from this morning.

Did you buy that excuse? Because that's really what it is, just excuses for why I didn't get something done. Not to worry, despite the busyness of the week, I still prepared a sermon for you. But that introduction serves to highlight excuses that are made. Whether it's a “minor” excuse from a student like “the dog ate my homework,” or a more damaging excuse from a husband, “she was so into me, I couldn't help myself.” We are all familiar with excuses, chances are you've probably made a few excuses just this last week. When you think about excuses, they really are just our way of justifying a bad habit or an unfortunate mistake.

Where it becomes particularly damaging is the excuses we make to God. Before you think that you would never made an excuse to God, just remember that any excuse we have made to other people, is also an excuse to God – an excuse for why we didn't do what we should have done, absolving ourselves from blame and pinning it on someone else, sometimes even pinning it on God. Needless to say, God isn't buying our petty excuses, because he knows exactly where the blame lies. When we realize this, we can have a better appreciation for our gospel this morning – Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. He not only showed us how to fight against temptation, but he fought it for us. There were NO IFS, ANDS, OR BUTS ABOUT TEMPTATION.

The first stone, in Jesus' journey of stones was the stone of temptation. And the temptation of Jesus was important in his all-inclusive life to save sinners. Jesus allowed himself to be tempted, but not in the same way that we might say we allow ourselves to be tempted by putting ourselves in tempting situations. Jesus was not toeing the line of sin, but rather giving the devil an opportunity to do his worst, giving the devil no excuses for why Jesus didn't sin.

Now at first glance when we look at these temptations, we might argue that these aren't really temptations at all, or if they are, they're not difficult ones, even I would be able to hold up against these temptations. One thing we must remember, look at the situation – the devil was given opportunity to tempt Jesus – he was not going to squander that opportunity with mediocre temptations. And secondly, it would be foolish for us to deny these as temptations because we wouldn't be tempted by them. We may not be tempted by alcohol, pornography or smoking, but that does not mean they are not temptations to some. These were real temptations, directed at Jesus, and we see Jesus response.

That's in fact how this account begins, **“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil.”** During those 40 days, the devil had ample opportunity to tempt Jesus. We have recorded for us only three of these temptations, and Luke, the gospel writer, orders them in ever increasing significance. The first temptation Jesus faced was in the middle of the wilderness after he had fasted for forty days and forty nights. Humanly speaking, Jesus was on the edge of starvation, he had not eaten anything. And this is when the devil chose to strike.

“If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” The devil appealed to a natural human need, what was so wrong with that? It was the very fact that the devil questioned who Jesus was, **“if you are the Son of God.”** **“If you are the Son of God,”** it is altogether beneath you to go hungry as you are doing, **“if you are the Son of God”** you have the power to make this stone into bread, just prove it. But what Jesus proved was his trust in the Word of God. **“It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone.’”** It wasn't just that the devil wanted Jesus to eat, but the devil wanted Jesus to doubt the sustaining care of God the Father. Such a minor temptation that would have escaped the notice of everyone else, but Jesus showed there are NO IFS, ANDS OR BUTS TO TEMPTATION, no matter how seemingly small.

The second temptation in Luke's account takes Jesus up to a high place and showed him the kingdoms of the world in an instant. It's pointless to debate where or how this happened – the devil has significant power – but just once again it happened, and it once again was a very real temptation to Jesus. The devil said to Jesus, **“I will give you all their authority and splendor...if you worship me.”** The devil doesn't question Jesus' authority as the Son of God this time, but he plays off it. Now why would this be so tempting to Jesus? Because Jesus' goal was precisely that – to win the kingdoms of the world. And here, the devil was giving it to him on a silver platter, with the only condition – worship me. No suffering, no going to the cross, just simply bowing down, nobody would have to know.

See how similar this is to the temptation the devil offered to Eve – “Look at the fruit, eat it and you will become like God!” We know of course the sad results of acting according to Satan's lie. Instead of receiving the power which he promises, we become his slaves. To her grief and shame Eve had to find this

out, just as everyone does who listens to similar temptations of Satan today. But once again, Jesus passes this temptation with flying colors by turning back to Scripture – **“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”** Jesus showed there are NO IFS, ANDS OR BUTS TO TEMPTATION.

The final culminating temptation in Luke’s account takes place in Jerusalem, the Holy City. It was at peak of the temple where the unholy tempter made his last stand. As the temple was opening its gates for sacrifice and worship, the devil whispered in Jesus’ ear, **“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”**

This was more than just the devil asking Jesus to throw himself in front of a bus (or a stampede of camels), he could have done that anywhere. But imagine the sight it would have caused in the temple! If Jesus had cast himself down from the highest peak into the temple courtyard with nary a scratch on his body everybody would be amazed and give him the praise and glory he deserved. The devil even quoted Scripture in his attempts to make Jesus fall. Yet, we know how this story ends, **“Jesus answered, ‘It is said: Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”** Once again, Jesus showed there are NO IFS, ANDS, OR BUTS TO TEMPTATION.

Not only did Jesus not make an excuse and succumb to temptation (nor did the tempting thought even enter his mind), but he did not make use of his divine power to rebuke the devil. Jesus certainly had the power to command the devil to leave him, but he didn’t. Instead, he uses a tool that is available to our disposal as well – the Word of God. With all three temptations, Jesus turned it back to God’s Word. Even in the final temptation, he did not pit one word of Scripture against another, but rather he used Scripture to interpret Scripture.

We can look at these and take them to heart in our own lives. We don’t need to rely on our own strength (in fact, that would be foolish), but need only use God’s Word. When we use God’s Word as intended (instead of twisting it to our own purposes), the devil cannot stand. This is why Martin Luther wrote “one little word can fell him [the devil]” in his famous reformation hymn *A Mighty Fortress*. So instead of making excuses for temptation, realize there are NO IFS, ANDS, OR BUTS to temptation.

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Unfortunately, that may be the key thing that someone might take from this story: Jesus showed us how to overcome temptation, now go and do likewise. But to take that message from it leads to disaster. Because even if we know the story of Jesus’ temptation, even if we know that we need only use Scripture to rebuke the devil, we still cannot do it. We still have our habitual temptations which plague us, despite our best efforts. We still have spur-of-the-moment temptations like lust, like greed. We still have temptations that have haunted us in the past. And it doesn’t matter how many or how few people know about the temptations we have fallen prey to – God knows.

And so any Christian who looks at the story of Jesus’ temptation as just a way that I can be a better person will soon find themselves lost in despair. In fact if that’s the way we look at the Bible – just some “self-help” book to make us better people, we’ve doomed ourselves. That’s because the Bible is not a self-help book. The Bible is not to make us better people. The Bible tells us what Jesus did for us – not as example, but as substitute.

The temptations Jesus went through – not only these ones, but throughout his life – he went through perfectly in our place. The book of Hebrews records for us, **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”** It isn’t just that Jesus was tempted, it was that he overcame temptation, just like he overcame death. We consider this point more clearly now during the time of Lent, a time when our focus turns towards the road Jesus walked in our place so that we might be saved. He met temptation head on and won. This is the story we must share, not the story of how to be better.

Jesus points out quite clearly there are NO IFS, ANDS, OR BUTS TO TEMPTATION. Whether it was Eve’s temptation or your temptation. Whether the temptation is private or public. The excuses we make for our temptations are just that – excuses. Excuses do not absolve us of any of our sins. Neither will our best efforts absolve us of any of our sins. The only thing that absolves us of our sins is Jesus. He absolves us freely, without cost. This is what the Bible says, and there are NO IFS, ANDS, OR BUTS ABOUT IT. Amen.