

Lead Us Not into Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11

The story is old, originating more than 500 years before the life of Christ, but in a variety of versions it continues to be told around the world with reverence and meaning.

Siddhartha Gautama was born in southern Nepal to parents who were of a high caste family. Given all the privileges throughout his childhood and youth that life could afford at the time, Siddhartha was still not satisfied with the purpose and meaning to his existence. Even marriage to a beautiful young woman could not bring contentment.

As he surveyed the world around him, often hidden from his eyes by his family, Siddhartha came to discover the plight of many people and contemplated their suffering. In response, he cast aside all the pleasures of his known life to that time, as well as his Hindu religion. He adopted the life of a beggar for a while to understand what it was like to have nothing; then he studied meditation with two different masters. Following that he tried to live an ascetic life apart from others, but still was unable to find the Truth he sought.

In 531 BCE, when he was 34-years-old, Siddhartha meditated under a *bo* tree for 49 days, during which he battled his greatest tormentor, Mara, the Evil One, who tried to take control of him and his senses through three temptations.

The first temptation was seduction by three beautiful women whose names were “Desire, Fulfillment, and Regrets.”¹ Siddhartha

¹ Names coined by Joseph Campbell in his book, *The Power of Myth*, 1988, pg. 140.

resisted this temptation to lust and seek sexual gratification with them, his existence no longer tied to his personal ego and sensual appetites.

The second temptation came in the form of an army of demons that inspired paralyzing fear in ordinary men. But Siddhartha had detached himself from the need for personal survival and protection by integrating his own life into the greater existence of all living beings, so that arrow and spear could not threaten him. The weapons, in turn, became lotus flowers that fell at his feet.

The third temptation from the Evil One took aim on his call to duty. Mara chided him, “Why aren’t you leading your people and taking seriously your responsibility and duty to others? Why don’t you ascend to the seat of power where someone of your status and wisdom belongs?” But Siddhartha resisted the temptation for glory and power, responding by

...simply touching the earth with the tips of the fingers of his right hand. Then the voice of the goddess mother of the universe was heard, like thunder rolling on the horizon, saying, “This, my beloved son, has already so given of himself to the world that there is no one here to be ordered about. Give up this nonsense.”²

In that moment, the Great Tempter, Mara, no longer had power over him, for Siddhartha Gautama had achieved complete illumination, and thus became known to the world as Buddha, the great teacher of wisdom and enlightenment.

Until I read this tale about the transformation of Siddhartha Gautama into Buddha, I never realized how remarkably similar it is to the story of the testing of Jesus. It’s intriguing, because it’s hard to

² Ibid.

imagine this to be a mere coincidence; some scholars believe ancient mythic typology shaped the two parallel stories. The similarity also illustrates what each of them possessed, i.e., a spiritual centeredness that detached them both from the things that tempt and test the human soul.

Buddhism and Christianity have many things in common, particularly in the practices of meditation and prayer, simple living, and worldly detachment. So it's not surprising that the stories of Buddha and Jesus may overlap as well. Certainly, as we've seen, both Siddhartha and Jesus had a great tempter, i.e., the embodiment of evil—Mara for Buddha and Satan for Christ. Both faced the challenge of control of their basic human appetites—the universal test for all human beings, represented in the sexual drive for one and hunger for nourishment for the other. Both were tested in their courage and trust in relation to facing intimidation and fear—fear of death, of vulnerability, insecurity, and failure. Both were tempted with the power bestowed upon earthly rulers, where the world would conform to their personal will and command.

Both Siddhartha and Jesus resisted their tempters by quieting their egos, controlling their responses and reactions, and redirecting their sense of purpose away from common human desires and weaknesses toward the universal wisdom of life. With self-control and ego detachment, Siddhartha found enlightenment and became Buddha and Jesus focused on his divine purpose and calling as the Christ. Together, they presented a heroic model of self-control and spiritual discipline that brings purpose, meaning, grace and peace to

those who follow in their ways. Those who do are like us—spiritual pilgrims on a journey of life and faith.

Traditionally, for Christians, the season of Lent has been a period of forty days mirroring Jesus' experience of testing, beginning with Ash Wednesday. Christians down through the ages and in a variety of traditions have viewed Lent as a sober and solemn time to get serious about their spiritual life—to fast and pray, to acknowledge and confess their sins, and to work on developing the kind of self-control necessary to resist temptation in the world.

However, within our Baptist, free-church tradition (in my experience anyway), very little emphasis was ever made on collectively practicing the ancient disciplines during Lent. When I was growing up, Ash Wednesday was a “Catholic” thing. In the weeks prior to Holy Week, instead of fasting, we Baptists would hold potluck suppers. Rather than meditate in silence, we'd conduct hymn sings. As kids, we thought Lent was something our mothers told us to scrape out of our belly buttons, not something that would order our lives in the weeks leading up to Good Friday and Easter!

But even within traditions and denominations that took seriously the purpose of this season of Lent, more often than not, the ancient disciplines were treated piously, as religious requirements designed to please God, instead of disciplines that helped human beings gain control over their lives and choices. People would go through ritual and ceremony more in fear of disobeying God, than really having a clue for what it was for. As a result, Christians, as a whole, are not well-educated or well-prepared to resist temptation in life or for employing spiritual discipline for the purpose of

strengthening our individual and collective resolve to be good and to do good in the world. We cannot be at our best as spiritual beings if we can't control our basic appetites, our primal fears, or our selfish egos (or the choices we make or the actions we take in light of them), which explain why we often dishonor the faith we profess and the Christ we love with actions and attitudes unbecoming (if not hypocritical) of a person of moral character and faith.

The strength of self-control is both the lesson and the example of Buddha's and Jesus' resistance to temptation. In each tradition, the temptations were directly reflective of what tempts the human soul—what throws us off balance; it's what human beings are constantly challenged by. But in each case, it was the responses made to the tests that mattered—that revealed the inner strength, determination, and wisdom of Siddhartha and Jesus and the moral choices they made to the challenge of temptation.

In Jesus' case, the story states that sometime following his baptism Jesus went out into the Judean wilderness for a period of testing—for a time to confirm his calling and find his focus. He fasted for forty days, symbolic of when the Israelites were tested in the Sinai for forty years. Fasting as a spiritual practice was for disciplining one's spirit—a self-imposed crisis through self-denial that both Jesus and Buddha experienced which, through a period of extended deprivation, provides insight into the various things that control a person (attitudes, desires, anger, etc.). It is a stress-test form of spiritual purification, winnowing out the pleasures and comforts that often mask who we truly are under duress. When one's needs are not met, when your desires are unsatisfied, and when you are out of your

comfort zone, it becomes very easy to notice the things that control your spirit and actually motivate your actions. Frankly, it's hard to be gracious, loving, and considerate when you're uncomfortable and weak, which is why spiritual discipline is needed.

In this story we gain some insight into what were the challenges for Jesus at the very core of his being. Turning stones into bread meant, could Jesus maintain control over all of his natural needs and impulses, so that he could choose when to be satisfied and not be driven uncontrollably toward it? What does it mean for any of us to have control over our natural appetites for food or drink, for sex, for comfort, for sleep, for space, for territory, and the like? Some of these are basic animal instincts over which humans possess the mental and spiritual power of control. How well do we control these needs and natural drives and how much are we controlled by them? When people are driven by their appetites to constantly satisfy their essential needs, how easy it is to make each day only about their quest for sensual pleasure and satisfaction. If that's all it is, then there is not much spiritual value to one's life.

The second temptation in this story tested Jesus' relationships, specifically with God, but I think it also had implications on his relationships with others. The challenge before him was to prove to the world that heavenly angels would deliver him in a time of crisis—a test of his primal fears over survival, as well as his trust of God's love. Would God be there for him when his life was on the line (a question that may come to our minds as well)?

Much like Siddhartha's unwillingness to react to the threats to his survival, Jesus resisted the temptation to test God's love for him

in a self-created crisis by leaping off the highest point of the temple. Putting God's love and protection on the line was not trust-building—it was *trust-testing*—something that undermines the relationship and neither proves God's love or anyone's faith. We might test God's love by making our faith conditional (e.g., "I'll believe in you, Lord, if you heal my daughter...").

A related temptation in human experience is when we needlessly test the love of others by putting our relationships on the line or at risk over harmful words, abusive behavior, inconsiderate acts and foolish choices that undermine the trust between people. A clear head (and controlled spirit) doesn't take unnecessary and harmful risks to prove a point. Faithfulness protects, not tests, love.

The last of the trials in this story related to the ego and the temptations that stir ambitions for power, fame, respect, authority, and the like. For some, it follows along the lines of the three "p's"—the quest for power, privilege, and possessions—to be lord of the earth (or at least one's part of it!). As we've seen so many times before, trying to rule the world only makes you another slave to it—you lose your life chasing after that which you hope to gain.

In effect, that's what Jesus rejected—the opportunity to be glorified, particularly on the world's terms, which could have been quite alluring for one who was brought up subject to imperial powers ("if I sell my soul to the devil, I can have it all!"). For Jesus it may even have been more sharply focused. A messianic dream to deliver the people of Israel from the Roman Empire and claim a throne for God is something Jesus would have cared about very deeply and would have been so appealing to his ego with popular acclaim and a

sense of heroic righteousness. But from the start, he disciplined his spirit to forsake ego gratification by maintaining control and checking his own interests, enlisting the moral logic of faith in following the path God set before him.

In the end, resisting temptation is a matter of self-control—of being able to thoughtfully judge situations to make the faithful “yes” or the faithful “no”—resisting anything that seeks to dominate or control us in ways that will ultimately harm or weaken us or harm and weaken others. It’s not the external things around us that seduce us and lead us into temptation; it is what’s inside us that largely determines how susceptible we will be to making unwise choices and taking unnecessary risks—our internal control over our needs, our fears, and our ego. That’s how we will not be led into temptation.

As Christians who embrace this season of Lent, this is no small matter as we seek to reconnect to our essential being in Christ. As one writer put it, “At root...all temptation is to get us to forget that we are the beloved of God, or as another wisely put it, “It’s not who we are, but whose we are.”³

This is the time to recognize and address all that prevents us from seeing and being that in life. Who are we in Christ; who are we as truly spiritual people; who are we as God’s beloved sons and daughters? Though we religiously ponder and admire the examples of both Jesus and Buddha, it’s what we do in our lives that, in God’s view, matters just as much.

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³ Robert Stuhlmann, “The Temptations of Jesus and Siddhartha,” *Stories from a Priestly Life*, 2014.