

The Devil is in the Details

Luke 4:1-13

A couple of weeks ago I went for my annual checkup at my “PCP”—not the illegal narcotic known as “angel dust,” but rather my other dealer of a more legal form of drug-trafficking, i.e. my primary care physician. Every time we go through the ceremony of checking out my vitals (and every other part of me that is increasingly less vital), I always come away with a feeling like I come up short of expectations. It’s as if the medical world is in complete denial of the third law of thermodynamics, i.e., the natural process of entropy (which simply stated is: we are born into this world and everything from there goes downhill).

Instead of accepting the fact that I’m slowly wasting away as Nature would have it, I’m being measured mercilessly by things like BMI, which refers to Body Mass Index (which is quite different from “bowel movement irregularity,” which for the longest time was what I thought they were asking about). Once I got that straightened out, I still didn’t fare well. Every year, my doctor tells me that I’m overweight by 25 pounds and that I should lose more than the three pounds I gained since my last visit. I always think to myself, “who is he kidding?”—25 pounds less would leave me looking like the skeleton perched up on the other side of the exam room.

I try to explain to him: “Well, Doc, it’s like this. I’m carrying a lot more baggage now that I’m getting older. Someday, my fresh-faced medical chart, when you grow up, you’ll understand what I mean.”

Of course, that's about the time he measures my blood pressure, which then reads abnormally high given the sudden stress and anxiety he's put me through. But that doesn't matter, he writes it up as if that's another reason to dispense me a pill that will make my life that much better.

Invariably, we end this charade with him giving me a lecture about how I need to make better choices in my diet and in daily exercise. I try to explain that I do my best; I even go through a crash diet a few days before my exam! But he comes back with the proverbial wisdom: "Paul, the devil is in the details. It's your daily choices throughout the year that make the difference, not the three bushels of leafy green vegetables you ate the week before your checkup."

He's right. I leave his office, my paunchy stomach soured in sudden disgrace, knowing he's right. The devil is in the details. It's the daily choices I make that determine the trend and the outcome, not the periodic points of obsessive commitment toward a goal. Life is best handled as a series of good choices over time, not the back and forth between laziness and obsessive zeal that it often ends up being. Self-control is something that matters to us every day.

Self-control, of course, is one of the great virtues of life, well-honored throughout human civilization. Aristotle's great proverb, "What lies in our power to do, lies in our power not to do," is echoed by sages down through the ages. As my good doctor noted, the daily choices we make largely determine who we are and will be in the future. Dreams are accomplished one day at a time; achievements are measured by the smaller steps one takes to arrive at a goal.

Conversely, if we come up short, it's usually because of something that has distracted us or how we have let larger priorities become less important in our daily lives. The direction we take on our life journey depends on where we choose to place our feet at every step.

Lent, as we know, carries this message in its rituals and practices within many Christian traditions. This serves as a period of preparation for Holy Week, but more significantly, as a time of personal and collective reflection on how well we are running the course toward being more like Christ in our lives. It's also a season to strengthen the core of who we are, much like strenuous workouts do for athletes. Except, instead of core muscles, it's working on strengthening core values, core behavioral patterns, and core relationships of our lives. We do that with the intention of becoming less lazy and casual about our character and being, and more intentional and wise. It's based largely on the premise of Jesus' own preparation and testing as he began his mission into the world.

This is our text for today—a story that explores the testing of Jesus' sense of control over his needs, desires, ambitions, and purpose for his life—a passage better known as the “temptations of Christ.” The account of this story is meant to be more proverbial than literal, in that they are tests that anyone might face over the course of life, as they are reflective of the struggles of human nature. In the face of those challenges, Jesus made his moral choices—not to succumb to the temptations and distractions that seem to exemplify the human drama with life. His example is intended for us to ponder.

As the story is told in Luke, it states that sometime following his baptism Jesus went out into the Judean wilderness for a period of

testing—presumably for a time to confirm his calling and find his focus. In Luke’s storytelling, the 40 days reflect Israel’s 40-year testing in the wilderness before they were ready to enter the Promised Land. Jesus did his through a period of fasting, which is quite different from dieting, though the two are often confused.

Fasting is an ancient spiritual practice found in many religious traditions meant for disciplining the spirit (not for taking a few pounds off)—a self-imposed crisis through a period of extended deprivation that gives a person insight into the various attitudes, desires, and needs that control him or her.

The effect is straight-forward: when your needs are not met, when your desires are unsatisfied, and when you are out of your comfort zone, the stress tests your sensibilities and self-discipline (and even your soul), particularly what normally controls your attitude and actions. Discomfort unmasks our inner weaknesses. You get to clearly see the person you are, what kind of character you possess, how much control you have over your fundamental needs and desires. For that reason, fasting has been a part of the Lenten regimen for many Christian traditions.

In this story Jesus was first tested to turn a stone into a loaf of bread to satisfy his natural hunger. Aside from the obvious motivation with being famished, it was meant to reveal his control over his personal life and bodily needs—for nourishment, for comfort, for sexual gratification, for physical strength. What choices would he make when his basic needs were unsatisfied? Similar to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, turning stones into bread meant, could Jesus maintain control over all of his bodily needs and impulses, so that he

could choose when to be satisfied and not be driven uncontrollably toward it?

That's a fundamental matter of self-control—the spirit mastering the body—an exercise in self-denial that is constantly challenged by various forms of temptation and yearning. Those who master their body and senses have a tremendous advantage over those who can't in terms of spiritual strength, focus, and consciousness.

Consider the ways people obsess over their perceived needs, or take advantage of others to satisfy their personal longings, as well as the effort and time spent seeking bodily satisfaction and comfort. It's evident having control over these natural drives and desires is fundamental to a person's capacity to make choices that are right for the moment—that are not reactive, self-gratifying, manipulative, hedonistic, and selfish—the very things that tend to result in poor choices. Jesus' resistance to give in to his bodily yearnings was representative of mastering the human condition; to maintain control under duress was essential to maintaining a right and focused spirit.

The second of the challenges tested Jesus' ego, as well as his ambition for influence and authority, i.e., the quest for power, prestige, respect, and privilege. This is a classic ambition for humans (e.g., male ego), particularly seductive to anyone with a fertile and competitive desire to be at the top. Athletes, like many others, will push themselves to incredible extremes to be their best. Yet, we often find that some will cheat along the way, not because they are fundamentally unethical, but because of the insatiable ambition to be at the top of their game. The rewards are so high for excelling above

all others, that a “win at all costs” mindset deludes them to the point where they lose their moral bearings and sensibilities. We can translate that to other settings like business, politics, academics, and the like, and it’s not hard to explain why there are so many social and ethical problems within our society. It’s a classic Faustian flaw which, at some point, renders those who would seek to rule their world finding themselves enslaved to it —they lose their life chasing after that which they hope to gain. Metaphorically, that’s what Jesus rejected—the temptation to sell his soul to the devil for personal glory or to place his ego needs above all else.

The last temptation in this story has to do with one’s sense of purpose. The challenge before Jesus was to test his confidence in God—to prove to himself and the Judean world that he was special, that his purpose was larger than life, and that his status with God was secure, symbolized by angels delivering him in a time of crisis—a common component of spiritual security. For Jesus, it could characterize the temptation to take on a messianic complex, with a deep desire to prove to the world who he truly was.

Why would this be considered a temptation? Was this self-create crisis representative of a desire within Jesus to prove to himself, let alone to others, that his life had special purpose, proven by God being there for him when his life was on the line?

That’s a question many people wrestle with when they’re faced with personal risks, or when they’re trying to figure out their purpose in life, or even when facing the reality of their own death. Will God be there for us? Is there a real underlying purpose for our existence—one that will be protected even by God?

Yet, to be fair, the issue here in the story is the difference between *trusting* God and *testing* God. Jesus' response suggests that possessing confidence in God's presence to protect and deliver doesn't require testing this trust—it's meant to be assumed and certain. The confidence of love, if it's experienced on a regular basis in meaningful ways, doesn't require a supreme test. Since it's Valentine's Day, I'll put it this way: it's insulting to the lover for the one who is loved to manipulate and test that confidence, as if to question it. In this story, Jesus resisted the temptation to have to dramatically prove God's faithfulness to him, since doing so would have only revealed his own insecurities and uncertainties about God's love and presence. It didn't need to be tested.

If you are like me, when you ponder this story long enough, you begin to realize that this isn't just about Jesus, this is also a story about any of us who wrestle with similar feelings and uncertainties and challenges in life. Part of trying to cultivate a meaningful faith, as well as spiritual consciousness and self-awareness, involves asking yourself: what motivates me in any given situation? What underlies the choices I make in my life? What great purpose guides me in my life that has to be reflected in my daily choices and conduct? Have I mastered my senses so that I'm not driven to behave in a shortsighted, selfish, and foolish manner? Am I secure enough as an individual so that my ego needs don't compel me to make poor choices I'll later regret?

As I see it, the testing of Jesus represents the self-examination we all go through to explore the motivations and needs behind our decisions and moral choices every day. Are we making choices that

we'll later regret when we meet the Great Physician? Or are they wise—decisions upon which we can build trust with others, live transparently and honestly, and reflect the integrity and selflessness that better serve us in the long run?

Like my doctor said, the challenge to being in a better state isn't once in a while when I'm particularly tuned into it or feel the need because of sudden accountability. The challenge comes every day, in the choices I make and the attitudes I carry. The devil is in the details of life, not just in the worst moments of hardship or reckoning.

Though this is a natural part of being human, it's important for us to remember, there's also a part of God within us. The nurturing Spirit of God is present with us each and every day encouraging us through our consciences and circumstances to think about what we do, what we say, and how we conduct our lives. We foster the better results when we heed such guidance. If we remember that our body is a temple of God—something we need to take care of, and that our spirits are meant to be in tune with God's Spirit, it will help us to navigate as spiritual beings, this human journey we are on. That will make being human a little easier and our spirits a bit stronger to face the challenges of this thing we call, life.

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