

A Day in the Life
Jesus Deals with Temptation - Luke 4:1-13
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Was Jesus a real human being? That was the question opposed by the Docetists, an early group of Christians who challenged the belief that Jesus was an actual flesh-and-blood human who felt all the feelings and emotions of being human. How could he be God and human? Well, because he's Jesus, which is always the right answer. Jesus' humanity is important because we need to know that he felt what we feel.

But if that's true, then Jesus had the same kind of life we do, filled with days that range from exhilarating to "I should have stayed in bed" and everywhere in between. For this new sermon series, we're going to look at some of the more ordinary experiences of Jesus to see how he handles everyday challenges like finding a sense of purpose, getting angry and his friends, and dealing with difficult family dynamics. Today, we'll look at how Jesus deals with temptation.

In our story, Jesus is just getting started in his ministry. Luke tells us that Jesus goes to the Jordan River and is baptized, which marks the beginning of his ministry, and then immediately is led into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and an encounter with Satan. No meet-and-greets, no potluck socials or introductory newsletter articles. At his baptism, Jesus heard a voice say, "This is my son." And now, in the wilderness, he hears, "*If* you are the son of God." Jesus is being forced to question his identity.

But it's not only Jesus' identity that's at stake; it's the whole identity of the Jewish people. The people listening and reading this story when it first circulated would have heard in it many parallels to an earlier story. After Moses freed the Israelites, they spent 40 years wandering around in the wilderness. In fact, Jesus responds to Satan with quotes from the book of Deuteronomy, which chronicles part of that journey.

But this temptation story calls to mind an even earlier tale, in which Satan, in the form of a serpent, tempted some of God's other children. These two weren't as strong as Jesus and gave into the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit. Jesus isn't just fighting for his own identity; he has a chance to undo what was done in the Garden of Eden, to break Satan's sinful hold on humanity. If he can say no to temptation.

So much easier said than done, right? At my last church, there was a lady who loved to make cookies for the church staff. So, quite often I would show up for work and there would be a plate of cookies with red and green M&Ms sitting by the door to my office. I would sit in my office and try to talk my way out of eating those cookies, the red and green M&Ms embodying by struggle: Stop! Go! Stop! Go! I would rationalize and argue with myself and justify and make excuses. Finally, I would decide I was NOT going to give into temptation...and then a few minutes later I would eat a cookie.

If you think that temptation is tough, imagine what Jesus goes through. Now, it's not really fair, because we know the end of the story, but if we try to listen to it like we don't know what's going to happen, we have reason to doubt whether Jesus will be strong enough. After all, he hasn't done any miracles or healed anyone yet. Plus, he's been fasting for forty days. I don't know about you, but when I'm hungry, I'm vulnerable. If I go shopping on an empty stomach, I easily succumb to all kinds of temptations. I'll get home and start putting away groceries and wonder, "Where did all this ice cream come

from? Like Rita Mae Brown said, “Lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself.”

The scripture tells us that Satan tempted Jesus for forty days before hitting him with these final three temptations. Forty days? My resistance to those cookies didn’t last forty seconds! Jesus resisted Satan for forty days, but that at point, Jesus is vulnerable. Isn’t that the way temptation works? It’s when we’re at our weakest, our most exposed, that temptation will try to lure us. Like Mae West said, “I generally avoid temptation, unless I can’t resist it.” It’s hard to resist it when you’re hungry, or lonely, or unhappy.

So Jesus is faced with a series of three tests from Satan. This text is the answer for anyone who questions Jesus’ humanity. Was Jesus really human? This passage tells us that, like any human being, Jesus faced temptation. That means temptation is not a sin. It’s not wrong to be tempted, only to give into it. We don’t think of Martin Luther as a great comedian, but he once said, “You can’t help it if a bird flies over your head, but you don’t need to let it make a nest in your hair.” Temptation is not sin, but it is the wakeup call that tells us sin is lurking close.

In all three of these temptations, Satan tries to get Jesus to act independently of God. First, he tempts him to turn a stone into bread. Now, for a man who hadn’t eaten in 40 days, that had to be a tough one to resist. Making one loaf of bread doesn’t seem like that big a deal, does it? It makes sense that God would want God’s son to eat, right?

Isn’t it easy to rationalize our way into giving in? It’s only a small thing, no one will know, I’ll put an extra \$20 in the offering plate on Sunday to make up for it. We do this, don’t we? We start out arguing with the temptation, ready to show it who’s boss, but we often end up playing with the idea until it becomes too attractive to resist. Like the saying goes, “Free cheese is always available in mousetraps.” If we engage Satan in a debate, we’ll always lose. You’re not going to persuade Satan to change his ways, but he sure can persuade you if you give him a foothold. One decision, one covert conversation, one text, and temptation has a hold on you.

For the second temptation, Satan offers to give Jesus authority over all the world if Jesus will bow down and worship him. What Satan is playing on here is the human inclination for ambition. It’s the desire to get ahead, to climb the ladder. The problem is that ambition often requires us to worship something or someone along the way other than God. Is it possible to be a Godly person and still get ahead? Probably. But for a Godly person, getting ahead isn’t the goal; pleasing God is. There is no goal in life so noble that it is worth abandoning God along the way.

For the third temptation, Satan actually uses scripture to try and convince Jesus. Twice Jesus has answered Satan with scripture, so Satan becomes more devious. It’s important that we realize not every use of scripture has pure and noble intentions. The Bible can be misused for ungodly purposes just as well as it is used by Godly people. That’s why being familiar with the Bible is so important. Otherwise, we’re tempted to believe anything someone says if it’s followed by chapter and verse numbers.

Satan tries to make Jesus test God so that God could demonstrate the faithfulness of his promises. This is a hard one for us to avoid. Without even thinking, we’ll try to coerce God into a “show me” position. We pray for something to happen, and the unspoken part of the prayer is, “If this doesn’t happen, God, you’ve failed me.” And when God doesn’t pass the test we’ve set up, we feel like God has abandoned us. Yes,

anything is possible with God. But as Jesus reminds us, we don't get the luxury of dictating which impossible thing it is that God has to do.

So Jesus survives all three temptations. How would you have done? I'd probably be eating bread and bowing down to Satan while I was falling off the temple. But Jesus doesn't give in, even though he was at his most human. Just think what would have happened if he did. His mission on earth, the reason God created him, would be lost. But, by resisting temptation, he gets to experience all that Satan promised. Jesus *will* make a miraculous amount of bread, but it was to feed others, not himself. Jesus *will* have authority over the kingdoms of the world, but that authority will come through much pain and suffering and obedience. And God *will* rescue Jesus, but not until three days after he is crucified and buried. All of these things will be fulfilled, but it will be because Jesus is dependent on God, not acting independently. Jesus knew his identity.

What's yours? I know. You are a child of God, and you were created for the purpose of bringing God glory and helping to make God's kingdom real here on earth. That is what you were created for. You're going to be tempted to say and do all kinds of things that have nothing to do with that purpose. You'll be tempted to say, "Look at me!" instead of, "Look at God." You'll be tempted to do your own thing instead of doing God's thing. You'll be tempted to forget your identity and to forego your faithfulness. But because of what Jesus did in the wilderness, you have the power to resist those temptations.

We are tempted every day to stray from God's path, sometimes in big ways, but mostly in small ways. All it takes is one step in the wrong direction. My prayer is we remember Jesus' resoluteness, his reliance on scripture, his tenacious clinging to his identity. We can't resist temptation alone, but we're not alone. Jesus knows what it's like, and through prayer, we can call on Jesus to help us resist temptation. Instead of taking that step toward temptation, may God light our path toward faith in Jesus Christ.