

“PORTRAITS OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE (#1):  
WRESTLING WITH THE DEVIL”

(Luke 4:1-14)

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[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-13-11 AM]

-I-

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Luke 4:1-14 and Pray.
2. [WATCH VIDEO “*Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*” (2:42:40-2:43:35 – Time 0:55)]

A–Temptation can be a very powerful thing, can’t it?

1–Whether it’s the desire for that drink we don’t need, or to click on that website we need to stay away from, or to pop that bad pill or drug, to eat that food that we could do without, or even to share that juicy bit of gossip with a neighbor,...

2–...Temptation can often seem like an irresistible force, calling our name and (like Frodo in this clip from Lord of the Rings) causing us to do things that we’d otherwise know better than to do.

B–Well, today as we begin a new sermon series Portraits of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke,<sup>1</sup> we’re looking at how Jesus dealt with temptation in his own life, and learning from his example how we (like him) can overcome it when it comes our way.

3. We find this lesson in today’s scripture from Luke 4, where the devil<sup>2</sup> confronts Jesus, and sets before him three kinds of temptation.<sup>3</sup>

A–[Contemp. Service ONLY: Listen to how Jesus deals with each of these... Read MSG version of Luke 4:1-14]

B–And just as Jesus overcame the temptations *he* faced, I believe we find here at least three principles that are essential if we are to overcome temptation in our own lives, as well.<sup>4</sup>

-II-

4. The first thing in overcoming temptation is to **KNOW YOUR VULNERABILITIES** (your “*blind spots*”)– get to know the *particular* temptation(s) that *you’re* most susceptible to, and also *when* it is that you’re most vulnerable to them.<sup>5</sup>

A–In today’s story, the devil knew that because of Jesus’ identity and mission, he was most vulnerable to a desire for physical sustenance, for power, and perhaps even to his own ego – & he tailored his temptations for Jesus around these three things there in the desert.

1– But Jesus had obviously also learned some things about himself, and knowing his own vulnerabilities, he’d already prepared how to protect himself from these dangers by using scripture.<sup>6</sup>

2–Well, if the devil knew *Jesus'* weaknesses, and *when* it was that *he* was most vulnerable to them, you better believe that he also knows the vulnerabilities that you and I have, and *when* to exploit them to fullest advantage *in us*, as well. <sup>7</sup>

B–You may say, “*I don’t really know what my vulnerabilities are.*” Well, one of the best ways to find out is to look back on your *failures* (the times you *knew* that you weren’t acting Godly) and consider both what *form* those failures took, and *when* they usually occurred – when you do, you’ll begin to see *patterns* emerge that can help you avoid making those same kinds of mistakes in the future.

C–For example, if other people have told you that you have a problem with alcohol, guess what? You probably do! So learn that *that* alcohol is a vulnerability of yours.

1–And then, look back to see what you were going through in the times you were drunk, and more than likely you’ll find that you were tired, or lonely, or feeling rejected, hurt, stressed out, or even entitled in some way.

2–And that should teach you that the next time you feel those things, you better be on guard and be willing to do the next two steps I’ll talk about, because in those moments you are especially susceptible to acting out.

D–Now, this awareness applies to *any* struggle, as well: drugs; smoking; overeating; gambling; pornography; gossip – all of these are merely symptoms of the vulnerabilities of our lives, and the more we know *what* they are and *when* it is that we’re most susceptible, the easier it becomes to conquer them. So get to know your vulnerabilities!

5. That’s the first step to overcoming temptation. But here’s a necessary second one: **STAY IN GOD’S PRESENCE THROUGH HIS HOLY SPIRIT.**

A–Verses 1 and 14 tell us that both *before* and *after* his temptations, Jesus was “*full of the (power of the) Holy Spirit....*”

1–I can’t help but believe that his being “*full of the Spirit*” and his victory over these temptations are somehow connected – that the one was made possible by the other.

2–You see, in addition to knowing our weaknesses, we also have to *live and walk in the relationship* with God that His Word talks about. <sup>8</sup>

B–You know, in my own life I’ve found that when I neglect my spiritual walk with God – when I don’t take time to pray, or read my Bible, or worship, or give or serve – *those* are the times when I am most susceptible to giving in to temptation.

1–And that’s because *none* of us (not even Jesus) has the power to fight and defeat temptation *alone and in our own strength.*

2–No. The *only* way we can overcome it is by staying close to God by walking daily with his Holy Spirit (just like Jesus did in today’s story).<sup>9</sup>

C–So let me ask: What’s *your* life with God like these days?

1–Do you have an active prayer life? Are you reading God’s Word daily? Are you worshipping with other Christians on a regular basis? Are you giving God your finances sacrificially? Are you serving God through a ministry of your church?

2–If you’re not, then you’re going to be vulnerable and “on your own” when temptations come your way – you’re going to find it difficult to “just say no” because you’re trying to face temptation in your own strength, without God!

6. And so, there’s also a third thing we need in order to successfully overcome temptation: **ACCOUNTABILITY.**

A–Now, you might say, “*Now hang on! Wasn’t Jesus alone in the wilderness when he faced these temptations?*”<sup>10</sup>

1–And the answer is “*Yes, he was.*” But have you ever wondered how Luke (the author of this story) found out about this encounter with the devil in the first place?

2–Well, it’s probably because Jesus shared it with Luke and the other disciples – in other words, even the son of God had what we today would call “*accountability partners*” – people with whom he felt free to share his struggles with temptation, and who he knew would love him regardless of how he dealt with them.<sup>11</sup>

B–Now in this case, he shared a “success story” in his *overcoming* of temptation.

1–Well, sometimes *your* story and *mine* may *not* be “success” stories – we may have screwed up! But that doesn’t negate the strength & healing we find in the *telling!*

2–James 5:16 says, “*Confess your sins to one another,.. so that you may be healed*” – and it’s also been said that “*Secrecy kills. But honesty heals.*”<sup>12</sup>

3–In other words, maybe the reason Jesus told his disciples about his struggle was *not* to “wow” them with his great power over temptation, but to instill in them (and us) the importance of *accountability* and *confession* to and with one another.<sup>13</sup>

C–Remember that in the Lord of the Rings clip we saw earlier, Frodo had a friend (Sam) who helped keep him from falling to the temptation of putting on the evil “One Ring.” So here’s a question for today...

1–Do *you* have a friend, or a spouse, or a group of Christian sisters or brothers who’ll hold *you* accountable for the things that most often tempt you?

2—...Who'll ask you the tough questions about what you've been doing with your time, your money, your thoughts (even your body), but who'll not judge you or condemn you no matter what – because you're doing the same for them?

3—And if not, *WHY NOT?* Jesus did. And maybe it'll encourage you to know that as your Pastor, I also have a group of Christian men I meet with once a week for this very purpose, and it's made all the difference in my life and ministry.

D—You see, even Jesus didn't keep his experience of temptation to himself – he shared it with his disciples (*his* “accountability partners”), and in so doing I believe he not only received strength himself, but he also taught *us* the importance of accountability in overcoming temptation in our own lives, as well.

–III–

7. Now, I don't know what kind or form of temptations you're face today – or in what way you're “*Wrestling with the Devil.*”

A—But I can tell you this: if you want to be victorious, then you need to...

1– *Know your vulnerabilities,*

2– You need to *Stay in God's presence through the power of His Holy Spirit,*

3—And you need *Accountability* with other Christian sisters or brothers.

B—And as we do these three on a consistent, regular basis, we'll find freedom from the chains that bind us, and discover forgiveness and joy from the God who knows the worst we'll *ever* do and loves us still!

8. [PRAYER... (*Prayer for those in bondage to sin and continual falling to temptation, and for us all to know our vulnerabilities, walk daily with God, and be open to accountability in order that we may 'confess our sins so that we are healed'*); ]

9. [Invite those who want freedom to seek out a Pastor to pray and talk confidentially with about specific steps to help them overcome the regular temptations of their lives...]

10. [*Potential Hymns: #397, “I Need Thee Every Hour” or #365, Grace Greater Than Our Sin”]*

### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Though there was not time to offer a brief overview of the gospel of Luke in its historical background and setting in my sermon, I offer it here for the benefit of those of you reading this who'll use it in your bible study time. The gospel of Luke was probably the 2<sup>nd</sup> gospel written (after Mark), and in fact it's Volume 1 of a 2-volume set --Volume 2 is what we know today as the book of Acts (Read Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1).

Nowhere does the gospel of Luke or the book of Acts (the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of this set) give us the name “Luke” as its author. Instead, church tradition has inferred Luke's authorship from numerous New Testament scripture references (Read Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11; Acts 28:16). From these, we learn that Luke was probably a traveling companion of Paul, and was therefore most likely put to death along with Paul while in prison in Rome (this would explain why his Volume 2/Acts doesn't contain an account either of his own or of Paul's death).

These clues suggest that the gospel was written probably sometime in early the early 60s AD (Paul was put to death probably around 64AD). The first 4 verses of the gospel explain the purpose of its writing (Read Luke 1:1-4). From these verses, we learn that that main reason was to pull together the divergent writings of his time about Jesus and put them together as “*an orderly account*” of the story of Jesus “*so that [Theophilus] would know the truth concerning the things*” of Jesus. For us today, the reason why this gospel is important is that we, likewise, might also “*know the truth*” about Jesus in our own lives.

2. Today’s scripture highlights the fact that evil not only exists, but is actively at work in our world today (and has been throughout time). The apostle Paul says that “*Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6:12). You see, evil doesn’t go away simply by us closing our eyes and pretending it doesn’t exist – that evil is simply a myth that “unsophisticated” people believe in. No. Evil is a spiritual reality of our universe, and no matter how educated way may claim to be, we deny and/or ignore it’s existence and work at our own peril.

Whether or not we believe in the existence of a supernatural *being* called the “devil” or “Satan,” both scripture and our own experience attest to the fact that there is an intentional force of opposition to ways/will of God at work in our world. We find references to this “force of opposition” in many places throughout the scripture, personified by the name “devil” or “Satan” (For example, read Genesis 3, Job 1-2, Ephesians 6, Hebrews 2, James 4:7, 2 Peter 5:8, and Revelation 12 & 20). Remember, though, that “the devil” is *not* to blame for *all* bad thing that happen in life – sometimes bad things happen simply because we live in a fallen world (IE, a world where there are earthquakes and tornadoes and accidents, and where some people exercise their own free will and choose to hurt others). What’s more is that there are some Christians who give the devil far too much credit than he’s deserves for bad things that happen. Thank goodness, though, that we serve a Savior who not only has overcome the temptations of evil, but can empower us to do the same.

3. The temptations faced by Jesus highlight the fact that temptation in our own lives can take at least three forms, as well: (#1) The temptation to deal with *internal* needs by addressing the *external illusions* of those needs; (#2) The temptation to compromise or sell out to evil (even for good intentions); and (#3) The temptation to be led by our own ego, rather than the Spirit of God – *either* to think of ourselves more highly than we should, *or* to think of ourselves as a “nobody” (both of which are lies).

4. Notice that this experience happens to Jesus near the beginning of Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry, just as we’re using it to mark the beginning of the Christian season of Lent. One possible message in this is the fact that just as Jesus grappled with doubts and challenges at the outset of his ministry, so we are often called upon to face the doubts and challenges that hinder our own commitments to God before we can truly experience spiritual victory and success in God’s ministry through us.

When we’re in the midst of temptation, there’s a tendency for us to think that it’s *impossible* for us to overcome it –we think or might even say: “*Well, I’m only human! I can’t help but fall!*” True, we *are* human. But the Bible (and the experience of countless people of faith throughout history) is clear that we *can* overcome temptation with the help of God (but *only* with the help of God!) [Read 1 Corinthians 10:13, “*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.*” Read also 1 John 3:6 & 9, and 1 John 5:18].

5. Author Jim Burnett once wrote “*When we don’t recognize temptation, we may allow it to overrun us*” (Jim Burnett, writer for The Upper Room Devotional Guide, March 2, 2004). In other words, if we’re going to “*Wrestle With the Devil*,” we need to not only know and recognize his tactics, but more importantly we also know how to defend ourselves.

6. In each case, when the devil tried to use lies and half-truths to exploit Jesus’ vulnerabilities, Jesus was able to respond with ultimate Truth (God’s Word) that was able to overcome the lies.

7. Notice, too, that all three of Jesus' temptations occur while he is in what was known as the "wilderness" of Palestine. This was a 500 square mile region just west of the Dead Sea comprised of a of limestone hills, jagged rocks, blistering heat and sand, and dangerous precipices over 1200 feet high. It was in this desolate landscape of nothingness that Jesus faced these three temptations. I can't help but wonder if there's a short message in even this: ...Jesus' temptations did not occur in the midst of his busy ministry, but when he had nothing better to do = i.e., when he was physically, spiritually, and emotionally hungry, tired, bored, and lonely. In my own experience, temptation quite often attacks in those same "wilderness" moments of our own life, as well – it's when we're NOT busy working or doing something that are the times when we're most emotionally vulnerable to what Ephesians 6:16 calls the "flaming arrows of the evil one."

8. In Methodist/Wesleyan Christianity, we refer to this as attending to the "Means of Grace" – things like the Christian practices of prayer, Bible study, fasting, Holy Communion, worship, Christian fellowship, etc.

9. "Resisting evil and ministering to human need are not left to will power and psychic strategies; the effective presence of God is offered and available [to accomplish these]" (Preaching the New Common Lectionary, p. 30). James 4:7-8 puts it this way: "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (Note the order here: "submit to God" first, and that gives us the ability to "resist the devil"). What happens here is that when we allow room for anything but God *alone* (i.e., when we are anything but 100% "full" of God), then it means we've left room for something else *besides* God (i.e., which is one definition of "sin" = "the lack of God"). It's in those moments when we're in most danger of falling to temptation, because we haven't allowed ourselves to be completely "full" of the Holy Spirit within us.

10. I believe this has parallels in our own lives: as Christians, you and I are most often tempted to give in to temptation when we're alone and no one else is there watching us. I've even heard it said that "Integrity is what we do when we're by ourselves and only God is watching.."

11. Although it's not found in Luke's version of the story, in Matthew 4:11 we learn that following Jesus' third temptation, "the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on [i.e., ministered to] him." One could easily argue that in one sense, even the angels were Jesus' "ministering accountability partners."

12. This saying is often shared in the weekly men's accountability group of which I am a regular part.

13. The following are a few **Benefits and Blessings of Accountability**: (1) Shared strength in mutually shared brokenness; (2) Knowledge that one is not alone in their struggle; (3) Having a safety net for one another; (4) Ability for "iron to sharpen iron" in relationships (Proverbs 27:17); (5) Being a "cord of three strands" for each other that is not easily broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12); (6) Strong friendships that develop among accountability partners; (7) Loving, non-judgmental support in times and experiences of failure; (8) Mutual celebration in times and experiences of victory and success; (9) Loving encouragement to seek God first and to seek to grow in Christ; (10) Power of confession of sin with "safe" people – this confession breaks the power of sin and brings spiritual and emotional healing to our lives (James 5:16).