

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Disciples' Prayer *Part VII: Lead Us Not Into Temptation*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
March, 21, 2010

Scripture Reading: Matthew 4: 1-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I realized I was going to have to choose a path when I would go into the library and look at where some of these stories came from... like the one today. I realized that they were thousands of years older than Christianity. The temptation story has been told of Buddha, it has been told of Zoroaster, it has been told of Horace, of Krishna. At first that kind of shook me a little bit. Because if you have been raised in a traditional setting, the whole point is that you are supposed to believe this really, physically happened and then you get to go to heaven and hear the harp music. If not, the lodgings are not quite as accommodating. Yet, what do you do with the fact that many, if not most, of the stories in the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament, came from earlier forms of religion? They would have been heard in that way by those people who heard the story. You have got to reframe it. I realize this process is uncomfortable for the church, and a lot of people do not want to do it, *but it is time that we got really honest*. I am not speaking to you specifically, but to the church as a whole. This is not controversial. Professors know these truths in seminaries around the country, but basically, you just get a fearful look when you ask, "how can I say that to a congregation"?. Their answer, of course, is that you don't.

When you read the same story that has been told thousands of times in thousands of different places, you realize that you are hearing a very important truth about the human condition. That's much more important than if it just happened in one place to one group of people. These are the truths of your own heart... of every human heart. If we go deeply enough into the human heart we will discover certain consistent factors around the world. But if we live at the level of our culture or society it is very hard to hear that voice of your own heart. That is what we are going to try to do today – to learn from some of these different stories. If you want to do the research yourself, I have some hand outs here, or, on your computer, you can type in "world scripture and temptation" and you will find these same stories happening all over the world. What happens when you study various versions of it is that you realize what is important. You realize where to put the weight. One of the temptations is power, sometimes the temptation is fear or desire but the point is that every spiritual pilgrim will run across certain crises as they grow.

You were taught a very immature form of religion. Why? Because you are immature when you start. Every one of us starts off "drooling" which is nothing to be ashamed of. You were a baby, so you had to be taught the symbols in a very immature way. The problem is that you have grown up, and you now can

see through them. They are not historically true, so how are they true? That is what we want to try to get at. One of the things that you learn when you look at all of these stories is that the point of the temptation is to bring the greatness out in the pilgrim. The trials that take place are not meant to trick or undermine the person. When we look at the trials of our own lives, we have that option - to see them as teachers and not as something that has been set up to trip us up and thwart us. The second thing is that we are going to have to have a little more compassionate idea of poor mister Satan. In traditional Christianity, Satan is just bad. But in the Jewish tradition, if you read the book of Job, for example, Satan is an angel whose job it is to put people through tough times to bring out the greatness - sort of like a District Attorney. He sets up tests not to undermine you, but to bring out your greatness. If you want to toughen steel you have to put it in fire. That is the thinking here. If you want to learn courage you have to go through danger. If you want to learn wisdom, then you have to go through ambiguity - times when you don't have the answers. So these are the kind of crisis points that every pilgrim will come up against.

Satan is able to take different roles, however, and in this particular story he almost comes across as a televangelist. He has a Bible in one hand and he is quoting it all through the story. Isn't that interesting? Sometimes the greatest enemy of mature religion is immature religion. There is going to be this kind of tug-of-war. The first immature religion that Jesus is tempted with is to do miracles. "Turn these stones into bread." Back then the bread looked a lot more like stones. If you were in the desert and you were very hungry, you would see mirages of water, but you would also see what looked like loaves of bread. That is the image that is here. In these stories, what the pilgrim is running up against is the illusions that our desires and fears cast upon our world. We think of ourselves as looking at the world objectively, but the truth is that much of what we see is a reflection of *what we fear* and *what we desire*. Have you ever had the experience - when you first fall in love - of walking along and seeing that person in the crowd... but it is not that person? No? Well that is too bad (laughter). Let's flip to the other side. Have you ever been in a forest and you saw a stick but thought it was a snake? Ok. So you have had that experience (laughter). Well good luck on the other one! We cast upon the world our own fears, for example, US foreign policy, or our desire, which is the US economy.

Jesus answers that calling to go after desires by saying that a human being does not live by bread alone. Realize that in the disciples' prayer he has already prayed, "give us this day our daily bread." It is not wrong to have needs but you will sometimes have to choose between a religion of needs and a religion of aspirations. As a child you are taught religion is something that meets your needs. But there is a place in your heart that is longing for a religion that calls you to greatness and that is not comfortable. That longing does not call you to the same place as a religion of need. You need both of them, but in a time of crisis or growth, you may have to choose which of those religions you are going to bet your life on.

The second test that is given the pilgrim is very interesting as well. It is literally a leap of faith. What happens sometimes is we are so frustrated by not having answers that somebody comes along and says "Just leap into this thing; just give your heart to it. Surrender to it, jump into it and everything will be fine." You might be so desperate that you simply jump. Very often, people teach that as religion, but in this story you remember that faith isn't like a leap. Sometimes faith is like a walk, sometimes like a run or sometimes on hands and knees crawling. Jesus says we are not here to test God. He realizes that the trauma he is going through can make him strong, but not if he questions reality or life itself - not when we condemn life itself. Have you ever known someone that condemns all human beings - that says all people are stupid, dumb or mean? When we make those kinds of statements, they are religious statements and they are a like an acid that corrodes everything we care about. Jesus is saying that he is presenting himself to be transformed by life, but he will not question life itself. He will say yes to the trials.

The third and last test in this particular version of the story is what you might call a success ministry. Do you know what you call people who go to success seminars? Poor people. The people that run the

seminars and the people that go to them think entirely differently about the world. The idea that if you just give yourself over to this plan...that is not how rich people think. Love money and you will attract it to yourself...abundance thinking...that is how poor people think. Rich people know there is work involved and sometimes not always ethical things involved. In the story, Jesus is taken up on a hill and sees all the nations of the Earth. Now what hill do you think that is? From which hill on Earth can you see all the countries? Your parable has just broken unless you believe the Earth is flat. There is no mountain like that. Now maybe it is possible he was taken to a mountain on the moon. (laughter). The parables break down because the point is to get into your inner life, and not to believe something external. That idea that if you just make a compromise with the world...you do what you know is wrong in your own heart, and then when you get into power, you will do that right thing. Another name for this is the healthcare proposal. You compromise and compromise and compromise until you have something worse than what you started with.

I gave a speech on healthcare some time ago and people were really disappointed when I didn't support the healthcare bill. I am for universal healthcare. But when people tell me we have to sometimes compromise, there is a difference between going three steps forward, then two steps back, and going two steps forward and three steps back. At that point you are going in the wrong direction. (Sorry, that is an aside.) I thought about using the healthcare proposal as one of the temptations but that is probably... think of that temptation though. If you just compromise to get power, think of all the good you could do for the world. That is the temptation there. All I am asking is that you give up your integrity. Give up that you are a human being and you can have all power.

The first trade off is need or aspirations. The second one is certainty or wonder. Do you want all the answers? Do you want to prove God or want a religion that awakens you to the world that you are going to live in? And this is the third. When it comes to value, do you want to *have* something of value or do you want to *be* something of value? You may have to make that decision in order to get the trophies of the culture, or to be something noble and worthwhile. You may not get approval. You may get less approval, or rejection if you make that choice, but in the story that is the right choice to make. Sometimes you don't know what to do, but you remember your path. You move as far as you can in that direction, even if it is only an inch on this one day. I read about caged birds that sometimes for a while they will face in the direction they are supposed to migrate when they are first taken into captivity. They go to sleep facing in the direction they know they are supposed to go... until they forget. Don't ever give up on that direction. It will not feel good. Sometimes it feels like a thirst, or a doubt, but it is your calling and you can always turn in that direction.

Know that as long as religion is theoretical, you won't have to make these choices. As long as you are running with the herd you won't have any of these decisions to make. *But if you ever decide to live an authentic life these three choices will stare you in the face.* Will you choose your needs or your aspirations? You want both, but you have to choose between your lower needs and who you are as a human being. What is your decision between a life of certainty-where you have the answers, or a religion that does not have answers, but awakens you to wonderment and life it self? Or finally, on the question of value, will you give up trying to get things of value and give your life to being a person of value? You may lose control of a lot of things, but you will never ever have your path stolen from you. You may trade it or you may choose something else, *but it is written in the fabric of your own heart.* This day and everyday, even if you know nothing else to do, remember that bird in the cage and turn in the direction of your path. If you will do that, even if you don't know what to do, you will not lose hope.

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The Disciples' Prayer Series

Part I: February 7, 2010, Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part II: February 14, 2010, John 14:1-4; 8-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*);

World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

Part III: Hallowed Be Thy Name. February 21, 2010, John 8:30-59; Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part IV: Thy Kingdom Come. February 28, 2010, Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part V: Our Daily Bread. March 7, 2010, Exodus 16:13-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VI: Forgive Us Our Debts. March 14, 2010, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VII: Lead Us Not Into Temptation. March 21, 2010, Matthew 4:1-11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VIII: For Thine is the Kingdom. March 28, 2010, Acts 4:32-5:6 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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