

Getting It Right

Mark 1:9-15

Next year my high school class will observe the fiftieth anniversary of our graduation. Not long ago at the funeral of one of my classmates I was able to reconnect with several high school friends and from them to learn about several others. When I returned home, I pulled out the Laurens High School yearbook for 1960. I looked at the eighteen-year-old faces of the eighty-five members of my class and read the captions and predictions that seemed so important then.

At first I indulged in the usual vanities. I thought that surely I am thinner than most of the other guys in my class. Then I wondered whether I have aged as much as they have. Finally, I began to think seriously about the lives of the persons with whom I went to high school. Some of my classmates have lived full and rewarding lives; others have experienced tragedy; a few have brought terrible pain upon themselves and upon those whom they love. I was not then and I am not now being judgmental. I try not to judge anyone. But it's interesting to look at lives over a span of almost fifty years and to reflect on the importance of the choices we make and how those choices impact lives.

We choose professions, life partners, friendships, lifestyles, and value systems. We choose the way we respond to difficulties or questions. We choose our beliefs and we choose the means by which we make decisions. All these choices have consequences. It is vitally important to get them right.

The temptation of Jesus was a highly significant experience in his life. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place this episode at the beginning of their accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. You would expect that to be so. Any hero story should begin with a test. The test shows the person's readiness or qualifications for a particular task.

Jesus' mission was to point to the kingdom of God in the world and to reveal the heart of God. In doing so Jesus would guide persons to see God in terms of love and grace, mercy and acceptance. He would reveal a God in contrast to the capricious gods of the Greeks and Romans and even to the stern lawgiver of his own people. The message of love would be earth-shattering. We have yet to probe its meaning and implications.

The gist of the temptation story is whether love was and is to be the way for the kingdom, for the divine-human relationship, and for all human relationships. Jesus had a choice to make, and he had to get it right.

The temptation of Jesus was not an isolated incident. It is connected to what came before and what followed. The placement is crucial to understanding what it meant. The temptation of Jesus, according to the three gospel writers, came after the baptism of Jesus. At the baptism of Jesus, he heard the voice saying, "You are the beloved!" It is clear that Jesus felt the love of God. Maybe the pronouncement at his baptism was the culmination of years of study and thought. It is also clear from what follows that Jesus made the conscious decision to proclaim a kingdom based on love. The temptation was the test as to whether Jesus would maintain that commitment in the face of opposition and, at times, failure.

Notice how the three temptations described by Matthew and Luke relate to Jesus' commitment to love. First, after a period of fasting Jesus heard a voice (said to be the voice of Satan) encouraging him to convert the stones he saw around him to bread. The place where we are told Jesus endured temptation is a wild and barren desert. Stones are everywhere. The temptation was to use whatever power he possessed to provide food to win a following. One stone and one loaf would have been enough to satisfy Jesus' own hunger. The idea of changing "these stones" was excessive. Jesus could have fed an army. He

could have gained an immediate following. But he would have established a following with magic. Jesus chose to maintain his dedication to love.

The second temptation (Matthew and Luke have the second and third temptations reversed.) came at the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus was challenged to leap from the “pinnacle of the Temple” and allow the angels of God to rescue him in some sensational demonstration of his power as Son of God. Such a feat would bring instant success to Jesus’ mission. Again Jesus refused. Love does not win persons in such a fashion.

The third temptation was to “bow to Satan” and thus possess “all the kingdoms of the world.” The test was to be like the Romans. The Romans had power. They held military power, political power, and cultural and economic power. Those are usually the approaches leaders take. If you want control over people, you have to work in those areas. In responding that one should worship and serve God alone, Jesus was reiterating his decision to work through love.

Matthew and Luke have a fascinating comment at the end of these stories. Both say, “The devil left him.” Certainly, the demonic was to return. The demonic still returns to challenge the place of love. But that line indicates that Jesus’ commitment to love broke the power of Satan.

Thereafter Jesus’ life and message radiated the power of love. Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mk. 12:30-31); “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt. 5:44); “I give you a new commandment: love one another; as I have loved you, so you are to love one another” (Jn. 13:34). In his actions Jesus lived up to what he taught. He related to all persons with love. He died for his commitment to love.

Our reading of the temptation experience of Jesus this morning is contained in a single verse in Mark's gospel. Mark has a version different from that in Matthew and Luke. Mark's account gives only two clauses, each with two parts: (1) Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan; and (2) Jesus was with wild beasts, and angels ministered to him. (*The Interpreter's Bible*, VIII, 535.) The forty days in the wilderness recalls the forty years of wandering and futility of the Israelites in the wilderness. They got it wrong. The Israelites kept trying to find salvation in some way other through obedience and love toward God. They could not. The comment about Jesus being "with the wild beasts" refers to the story of Adam who also lived with the beasts of creation. Adam also failed through pride and vanity.

Adam failed. But "as in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive." Adam got it wrong. The story of Adam shows that usually we humans act out of self-interest and self-preservation. Jesus got it right. He chose love as the basis for all action and relationships. The Israelites looked for help in the golden calf. Later the nation looked for deliverance through ritual and regulation. They failed to see the priority of love.

Jesus chose love. He was tempted to seek to proclaim and spread the kingdom through some other form of power. But he remembered that he was the Beloved. He sought to show that we are all the Beloved of God. He got it right.

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1 March 2009