

“Don’t Settle for Less Than Your Best”

Luke 4:1-13

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This morning our attention is focused upon the temptations Jesus faced in the desert soon after he was baptized. This memorable event occurred somewhere between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea, a barren area known for being as hot as a furnace in the day time.

Luke wants us to know Jesus was not traveling through the desert to get somewhere else, as most people did. He went there intending to stay for a lengthy period of time.

Luke also informs us Jesus was led by God to the desert. In all likelihood, Jesus would have chosen a safer and more comfortable place to meditate and pray.

Why the desert? He would be alone there and could focus all his attention upon how he was going to fashion and shape his public ministry. With few, or at times no distractions, Jesus could hear the voice of God giving him guidance and direction.

Jesus was also identifying with his ancestors who spent forty years wandering in the wilderness in search of a new and better life. On a much smaller scale, Jesus was retracing their steps in search of a better life for his friends and neighbors.

We know Jesus was not alone the entire time he was on this retreat. At some point, he was joined by the Prince of Darkness, commonly referred to as the Evil One, Satan or the devil.

Obviously, the devil wanted to offer suggestions on how Jesus could shape his ministry and use the power God granted him.

Turn stones to bread and you will never go hungry.

Worship me and you can have everything your heart desires.

Jump off the highest point of the Temple and you will become an instant celebrity when you are rescued by the angels.

Look carefully at these temptations because they have something in common. They were designed to undermine Jesus' call to serve. Satan was tempting Jesus to make his ministry more about him than them, the people who so desperately needed his help.

Thankfully, Jesus was grounded in a faith that taught him how to respond to such appealing temptations. In a place where water was scarce, Jesus drew from the deep well of his faith to remain faithful to God and loyal to the call to reflect the heart, mind, nature and image of the one he lovingly called Father.

As a result, Jesus chose to offer an alternative vision, one that valued love over hate, serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over war.

Jesus, like God, became passionate about confronting evil, righting wrong, lifting up the lowly, finding the forgotten, liberating the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, loving the unlovely, encouraging people to achieve their potential, forgiving people who made mistakes, giving people a second chance, teaching people how to live peaceably with one another and inspiring people to build bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate.

All his life, Jesus faced the temptation to reverse direction and be lured into the old, self-serving ways of the religious establishment. Each time, Jesus refused to replace kingdom values with the values of the world. He stayed the course and remained faithful to God all the way to the cross.

What do you think Luke wanted his readers to take away from this story that Jesus must have shared with his disciples and had been handed down to him? As I pondered this question last week, these lessons came to mind I would like for you to consider.

Every promise made among friends will be tested in a hostile environment. There are no exceptions.

In Luke, before Jesus called a disciple, taught a lesson, preached a sermon or performed a miracle, he was tempted to be something less than God created him to be. This pattern will be true for us, too.

When you...

...make a promise, you will be tempted to break it;

...start a journey down an unfamiliar road, you will be tempted to turn around;

...accept a challenge, you will be tempted to quit;

...get married, you will be tempted to forget your vows and cheat on your mate;

...are baptized, you will be tempted to hide your faith;

...rededicate your life to be more faithful, you will be tempted to adopt the world's values;

...go away to college, you will be tempted to neglect your studies;

...join a team, you will be tempted to become a superstar instead of a team player;

...start a diet, you will be tempted to give up;

...confront an addiction and decide to get help, you will be tempted to fall back into your old ways;

...encounter an obstacle, you will be tempted to settle for mediocrity.

No good intention, promise or commitment is off limits. Every decision you make that honors God and makes life better for you and those around you will be tested. I challenge you to name one that wasn't.

Be careful whose voice you listen to when you are confronted with choices. Who you listen to determines who you are becoming.

Jesus had to choose between listening to the prophets or Satan. He chose the prophets, not because their advice was easy, but it was best.

Be leery of anyone who encourages you to break a promise you made in good faith. Carefully examine their motives, which are usually selfish.

Surround yourself with wise, loving people who will encourage you and hold you accountable. Jesus did.

Immediately after this experience with Satan, Jesus began calling his disciples. Why?

He needed traveling companions on this journey of faith who would listen to him, offer sound advice and pray for him. If Jesus needed a support group to remain faithful, how much more do we?

All of us need friends who will hold us up and hold us accountable. We need companions who will ask tough questions of us at the right time.

Do you really want to do this? What will the consequences be? Who will be hurt or helped by this decision? Does this decision strengthen the promises you have made or undermine them? Does this decision reflect the values Jesus embraced? Do you need to think about this more before moving forward?

The people who really care about you and your family will ask these questions. Wise is the person who answers them.

Always look at the short and long term consequences to every decision you make. The Great Law of the Iroquois requires that their leaders must think seven generations ahead before making a decision. Shouldn't we do this, too?

Stay focused and disciplined. Keep your eyes on the people who need you to do the right thing. Never lose sight of them.

Every time Jesus met with resistance, he had to decide if this mission was about him or the people he came to serve. Had he decided at any point along his journey life was more about him than them, he would have thrown in the towel. The risks, dangers and frustrations would have become too much for him to endure. Fear and disappointment would have ruled and reigned.

Every door of opportunity you walk through closes other doors around you. There are some things you refuse to do because you are married, you are a parent, you are a leader, you are a student, you are a role model, you are a church member, you are a citizen, you are a neighbor and you are a child of God.

Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should, as Jesus demonstrated in this text. Everything good is not always good for you and me. Learn when to say no as well as yes. Life will be much better for everyone when you do.

Rely upon God to help you. Yes, Jesus needed a support group and called the disciples to walk with him, but he also needed and sought God's help on a daily basis.

This would not be Jesus' last encounter with Satan. Often, he would return with new and better deals. It would be impossible to resist these temptations and remain faithful to God and loyal to his mission without God's help. Others had tried and failed, and he would, too.

So will we. We cannot be true to God's call upon our lives in the face of invitations to choose lesser goals without God's help. Only when we rely upon God can we "face up to our dark side and soft spots," as my friend, Dr. Colin Harris, teaches.

Jesus is described as “full of the Holy Spirit and led by the Spirit” all throughout Luke’s gospel. He was never overconfident.

Neither must we be. “Deliver us from evil,” needs to be our prayer, too.

Don’t be too hard on yourself. No one lives a mistake free life.

Must we forever live with guilt and shame? I can tell you this is not what God wants.

Forgiveness is real and transformative. Hope springs out of being loved unconditionally.

Own up to your mistakes and ask for forgiveness from God and others. Seek to understand why you broke a promise or reneged on a commitment. By God’s grace, change your flawed thinking and behavior.

Perhaps you are the victim of someone’s bad behavior and broken promises. There is hope for you, too.

Allow God to help you heal and move forward. Life will never be the same, but it will still be good.

The same God who reached into a sealed and guarded tomb to bring his Son back to life can do the same for you. Trust God and invite God to join you on your journey toward hope and healing.