

## **THE DEVIL DIDN'T MAKE JESUS DO IT**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

True confession time. I can't keep it a secret any longer. I told myself not to do it. I knew I shouldn't do it. I tried to convince myself that I didn't want to do it. I told myself all of the reasons **not** to do it. But, last Tuesday afternoon — I bought a big bag of peanut M&M's! I tried to rationalize what I did by telling myself it was Valentine's Day, and you have to have chocolate on Valentine's Day. That didn't really work. So, I guess I can just say, "The devil made me do it!" There, I feel much better now! At least I don't have to take responsibility for buying that bag of peanut M&M's.

The devil made me do it! How many of you remember the preacher's wife, Geraldine Jones, who, any time she did something wrong or inappropriate, would say, "The devil made me do it!"? The comedian, Flip Wilson, made Geraldine famous in the 1970's. His fourth comedy album was called *The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress*. In that routine, Geraldine defends herself to her husband, the reverend, when he gets angry about her buying an expensive dress, the third dress in a week's time. Geraldine tells him, "The devil made me buy this dress. I didn't wanna buy no dress. The devil kept following me. I was going down the street . . . lalalalalalalala and the devil kept following me. And he kept telling me how (snaps fingers) good I looked." According to Geraldine, despite her constant objections, the devil pushed her in the dress shop door, shoved her over to where the dress was, grabbed her and made her try on the dress. When Geraldine told the devil she wasn't going to buy the dress, she said the devil pulled a gun on her, threatened her, and made her sign the reverend's name to a check. Exasperated, the reverend asks Geraldine, "How come every time the devil makes you do something it's for your benefit? When is the devil gonna do me a favor?" Geraldine replied, "He did already. I was asking him about that. He said if it wasn't for him you wouldn't have a job!"<sup>1</sup>

That reminds me of the joke about the woman who was heading out the door to go shopping. Her husband told her, "Don't you buy any expensive dresses!" His wife said, "What if I find one I really like?" Her husband replied, "Just say, 'Get behind me, Satan!'" A couple of hours later, the woman came home with a new, very expensive dress. Her husband was furious with her. "What did I tell you?" he fumed. "Well," the woman said, "I saw this dress and I just wanted to try it on. I went in the dressing room, put it on, and looked in the mirror. It was so beautiful and I really wanted to buy it. Then I remembered what you said, so I said, 'Get behind me, Satan!'" Her husband was flabbergasted, "Then why did you buy the dress?" "Well," said his wife, "when I said, 'Get behind me, Satan,' he said, 'Looks good from behind too!'"

The devil made me do it! That's a handy phrase to use when you're caught giving into temptation. Of course, it absolves you of all responsibility for any and every choice you make. What could be better? The devil made me do it! But, in light of the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, we really ought to ask, What could be worse?

This sermon is not going to be about resisting that second piece of cheesecake or putting that bag of peanut M&M's back on the grocery store shelf or not looking at that particular website online or how you should quit spending so much time with that attractive co-worker, or any other particular, isolated behavior or action, or giving in to the various temptations of life. Even though that would be worth preaching a sermon on, today's sermon is not about trying to make some kind of exhaustive list of behaviors and temptations to avoid. Instead, today's sermon is about a much more fundamental issue for you and me as Christians — Who are we and what kind of life are we going to lead?

When I was a kid — and especially when I got to be a teenager — when I would leave the house to go to a friend's house or to a party or on a date or to a school dance or football game, my parents would say to me, "We love you. Have a good time. Be careful. Remember who you are and where you come from." That's what this story about Jesus being tempted by the devil in the wilderness is really all about. Of course, the devil tempts Jesus with three very specific temptations of the flesh — eat some bread, grab some power, wow the crowds. But, at the heart of each of those temptations are the most important questions that Jesus has to answer: Who are you? What kind of life are you going to lead?

A few weeks ago, we heard the story about Jesus getting baptized. Do you remember what Luke told us? "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" (Luke 3:21-22) Right from the get-go, we **know** who Jesus is and **where** Jesus comes from. We hear it right from God's mouth — Jesus is the Son of God!

So, how is it that just a few verses later, in his first temptation of Jesus, the devil says, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread"? Didn't the devil know who he was dealing with? Is there really any question at this point about who Jesus is, even before he starts his teaching, preaching, and healing ministry? No, the devil knows who he's dealing with, and that's exactly why he phrases the temptation the way he does. Actually, another way to translate what the devil says is, "**Since** you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Likewise, a third time he tempts Jesus by saying, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here . . ."

Oh, the devil knows who he's dealing with, and he's tempting Jesus to forget who he is and where he came from. Or, to be more exact, the devil is tempting Jesus to use who he is and where he came from to serve and save himself, rather than to serve God the Father and save others. C.S. Lewis put it this way, not just for Jesus but for all of us

who are called children of God: “The temptation is to trust something far less than what God offers us.”

Here at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, he faces the temptation to be less than what God intended him to be. What would it hurt if he made a little bread to eat, since he was so hungry after fasting for forty days? What would it hurt if he had the authority of all the world’s kingdoms? Wouldn’t he be able to do good things for all the people? What would it hurt if he demonstrated his power and God’s power in a spectacular fashion? Then the crowds would be wowed and follow him. What would it hurt?

But that’s not who Jesus was and what Jesus was sent to earth to be and do. Near the end of Luke’s gospel, as he hung on the cross, Jesus faced the very same temptation. The leaders scoffed at him and said, “He saved others; let him save himself.” The soldiers mocked him and said, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” (Luke 23:35, 37) The irony in these taunts is that it is precisely because Jesus saved others that he couldn’t save himself. Or, to put it another way, if he had saved himself, he could not have saved others. It’s the same thought expressed in the wonderful “Christ hymn” in Philippians 2, where Paul writes, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:5-11)

Someone has said that the temptations that are the most dangerous are the ones that sound most like good, the ones that sound most like God. You might have heard someone say, “The devil wears a three-piece suit.” In his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, T.S. Eliot dramatized the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket in the Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. As the archbishop sits in his hall and reflects on his life, three priests come in and give him advice (or offer him temptations, much like the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness). A fourth tempter arrives and urges Becket to seek the glory of martyrdom. He says, “You hold the keys of heaven and hell. Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind, King and bishop under your heel. King, emperor, bishop, baron, king.” Archbishop Becket replies to all of his tempters with these words: “Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain: Temptation shall not come in this kind again. The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right thing for the wrong reason.”<sup>2</sup>

On the surface, the temptations Jesus faced don’t seem all that serious — Take care of yourself. Save the world. Prove your faith. However, if Jesus had said “Yes!” to the devil, he would have said “No!” to God. He would have done the right thing (at least from the world’s point of view) for the wrong reason. Somebody has called what the devil was trying to get away with with Jesus there in the wilderness “identity theft.” That’s exactly right! God offered Jesus, “You are my Son, the beloved.” The devil offered Jesus something far less in his life and for his future. But Jesus remembered who he was, whose he was, and chose to live out of his identity as the beloved Son of God.

Ah, but we might say, there’s the difference — Jesus was the Son of God! Yes, he was, and thank God for that. But he also emptied himself and became like us humans.

Don't think for a minute that Jesus didn't struggle with the temptation there in the wilderness to be less than what God desired him to be and to do with his life.

Look at the margin note next to today's Affirmation of Faith in the bulletin. It says, "Child of the covenant, in baptism, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked as Christ's own forever, and called to follow Christ in mission." That's what I say to a baby or a child or a teenager or an adult after I have said, "Child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." It's what we'll sing in a few minutes: "All newborn servants of the Crucified bear on their brow the seal of Christ who died. Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name."

I've shared the story many times, about how the great reformer, Martin Luther, in his times of greatest stress and danger and temptation and discouragement, would touch his forehead and say out loud, "I **am** baptized." In other words, when he was tempted to trade what God offered him in Jesus Christ for something far less worthy, Luther would remember who he was (a baptized child of God) and that would encourage him and strengthen him in what he was doing for God and God's people.

Here are a couple of companion scripture verses to chew on as you remember who you are and where you have come from. Hebrews 4:14-16 says, "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." 1 John 3:1 says, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

Jesus was tempted not to trust God, for his identity, for his security, for his vocation in life, and for his future. That's exactly how we are tempted each and every day, along with the temptation to eat that second piece of cheesecake or to buy the big bag of peanut M&M's.

When Jesus was tempted, he remembered who he was and where his life came from. When we are tempted, with Jesus' help, let us remember who we are and where our lives come from.

Thank God, the devil didn't make Jesus do it. Let us hope and pray that when we are tempted to trade our relationship with God as his beloved children for something far less worthy, with Jesus' help, the devil won't make us do it, either.

***Let us pray: (1st & 2nd verses of Hymn #166, "Lord, Who throughout These Forty Days")***

***Lord, who throughout these forty days for us did fast and pray, teach us with you to mourn our sins and close by you to stay. As you with Satan did contend and did the victory win, O give us strength to persevere, in you to conquer sin. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “I Love This Joke: The Devil Made Me Buy This Dress,” at [www.experienceproject.com](http://www.experienceproject.com).

<sup>2</sup> *Murder in the Cathedral* at [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder\\_in\\_the\\_Cathedral](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_in_the_Cathedral)