

The Upside Down Guide to Life:
Following Jesus to the Cross
Mark 1:9-15
March 5, 2006 (the 1st Sunday in Lent)

A good friend told me the following story: his job forces him to travel internationally and one night he spent the night in a foreign city, thousands of miles away from his family. After an intense day of business he wanted to unwind so he asked the hotel concierge where he could hear some good jazz. The concierge gave him the name and address of what he claimed was the best American jazz in the city. So my friend went to the jazz club. Unfortunately, as my friend found a seat in the club, he quickly discovered this was not his idea of a jazz club. Actually, the place was filled with beautiful women from all over the world – and they let it be known that they were available for him. Now remember that he's thousands of miles away from home. It wouldn't hurt to look, talk and see where it goes from there. No one would know.

This is what we would call a temptation. (By the way, my friend resisted the temptation). Temptation occurs when we know the right path but something lures us off the right path.

The Reality of Temptation. And as my story shows, you don't have to go hunting for temptations; they will come to you. As long as you are a human being, you will be tempted. When you're 13 or 15 or 17 we as parents worry about you because we know the temptations you face – not just the obvious stuff like drugs and premarital sex and “friends with benefits,” but the less obvious temptations: compromising your faith in Christ so you gain popularity points, treating the world like a mall where you never can get enough, living your life for academic success rather than burning with love for God's glory and lost people. But then we get older (like 46 or 76) and we tend to forget that we're also vulnerable to temptation. We can be tempted when we're down and out. But we can also be tempted when we're up and in, glowing with success and popularity. Then we can be tempted to abuse our privileges. We can be tempted by pride. As a biblical example I think of the story of King Daved. (See 2 Samuel 11-12). We can be tempted by good things – wine, for instance, is one of God's good gifts to us (see Psalm 104:15), but when we drink too much wine it will destroy us and others. We can be tempted by an excessive desire for comfort and safety. We can pay tempted by complacency (i.e. the famous middle age pact with the devil that we tend to slide into: don't bother me and I won't bother you).

Actually, the Bible makes it clear that each and every person here is not only being tempted, but we are involved in a war – a war for our hearts, a war of competing desires, an intense spiritual battle (Read Ephesians 6:12 and Peter 5:8-9). That's a given of the Christian life. You are in a battle. I am in a battle. So one thing we can count on is this: if you come up to me and say, “So how's it going?” and I say “It's going great - just fine,” you can assume that I have lied to you – and you can assume that I am living in deep spiritual unreality. In the biblical worldview, temptation exists because we live in a fallen world, where a battle between good and evil is constantly raging and your allegiance is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan and evil.

The reality of temptation, the reality of spiritual warfare forms the backdrop for this little story in the Gospel of Mark. There are three accounts of the story of Jesus' temptation in the Bible. Mark's account is by far the shortest: two blunt, raw, action-packed verses. Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan River and it's a glorious experience: the heavens are torn open, the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and God the Father proclaims words of blessing over his life, "You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased." One of the apocryphal stories of Jesus (that's one of those "secret" stories of Jesus that the early church found inaccurate and unacceptable) has Jesus coming out of the baptismal waters and laughing in contempt at the world (*The Gospel of Phillip* 74.29-31). At the very least we'd just like to savor the sweetness of hearing God's voice and lingering in spiritual safety and comfort. But Jesus' hair is still wet from his baptism, the Father's love-words are still ringing in his ears, and then, immediately, Jesus' is sent into the desert.

Actually, the Greek text reads like this: "At once (or immediately) the Spirit expelled Jesus into the desert..." The little Greek word *euthus*, at once or immediately, is one of Mark's favorite words. He peppers his Gospel with the word, creating a sense of urgency and breathless joy and excitement. God is really working. The Kingdom is really coming. Then it says that the Spirit led Jesus into the desert. That's much too mild. The word actually meant to cast out or expel; it was the same word that was used when Jesus cast out demons. In our day, you must picture a bouncer at a local club who picks up someone and throws him on to the street. Of course Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God the Father always work together in perfect unity. Jesus is voluntarily being bounced or cast out into the desert, the place of temptation and chaos. But this is something that Jesus simply MUST do.

Notice the key difference in how the stories end. Matthew concludes the same story this way: "Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him" (Matthew 4:11). Luke's version concludes: "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time." Mark never says that the devil left him. Does that make his story contradict the other stories? No, he's just emphasizing a different theological truth: yes, the devil left Jesus for the time being, but this was just the first of many battles with the devil. Actually, Jesus would be tempted and harassed his entire life. Just like us, for Jesus, to be human was to be tempted.

The Anatomy of Temptation. What does temptation look like? What is the anatomy of temptation? There is no better case study than the desert experience of the children of Israel – a story which constantly looms in the background of Jesus' temptation story. That first temptation story goes like this: the children of Israel were enslaved and hopeless but God heard their cries for help, and brought them out of slavery and into the Promised Land – but first they had to pass through the desert. The desert was the place of testing and the big test was this: would they trust in the good heart of God or would they try to find a "better god" than the real God? Is good God? Can I trust God? Does God have a Father-heart of love for me, even in the midst of difficult situations? Or is God incompetent or uncaring? Do I need to launch out on my own and find a better god,

a more manageable god, a more caring god? Over and over again, the people of God in the Older Testament failed the test. They kept saying, “The real God is just too Wild and unmanageable; I’ll go run after less wild gods, more manageable gods.” The rift between God and God’s chosen people started very early – actually it started right after God delivered them from slavery (see Exodus 16:3; see also Jeremiah 2:5-6). They failed the test; they didn’t trust God’s good heart for them. Then their desire went haywire. They lusted and panted after all kinds of other gods to meet their needs.

This message forms the core of temptation: is God really good? In the very first temptation recorded in the Bible, the tempter says to Eve in the garden, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” In other words, what kind of God is that – denying you what you really need? What a killjoy god! How repressive and unfair! God’s trying to limit your joy and happiness. Your heart can’t trust God.

And so temptation takes root when our desire goes haywire. Rather than directing our desire towards God, (hungering for God, thirsting for God, crying for God’s word like a baby cries for milk), we let our desire get off track. There may be all kinds of external factors that lure us into temptation, but ultimately the battle rages right through every single human heart. The Bible puts it this way: “A person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death” (see James 1:14-15). Or as someone has said, “When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go in silent search of other lovers” (Maurice Roberts, quoted in *Wild at Heart* by John Eldredge).

We might be tempted to think that desire is the problem. Desire is not the problem; the problem is disordered desire, misdirected desire, out-of-bounds desire – i.e., desiring the wrong things in the wrong way at the wrong time and not focusing our desire on God and God’s good gifts to us. You see, God promises to give us the deepest desires of our heart (Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart”), but God will do it in his timing and in his way – not necessarily our way. So the question once again is this: Can we trust God’s good heart towards us? That God really wants to be like a loving Father to us?

Examples: (1) a woman in a dull and mediocre marriage meets a co-worker who makes her heart flutter and come alive; (2) a family hears the message of financial generosity but they pull back in fear and anxiety; (3) a father hears his son or daughter say, “Dad, I think God is calling me to bring the Good News of Jesus to the poorest of the poor” and the father says, “Wait a minute, son, look, let’s not take this Christianity stuff too far”; (4) someone has hurt you and you desperately want to hang on to hurt – you want to get even. Different temptations, but they have common thread: will I trust God? Is God good? Will I make Jesus the Lord of my life in this concrete situation? “When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go in silent search of other lovers.”

The Hope of Temptation. But here’s the good news of the Gospel: although temptation is a harsh reality, Christ does not leave us in our temptation. He does not say, “Shame on you for being tempted! Shame on you for not trusting God!” No, he comes to us in our

temptation – hence the strange title to this message “Finding Jesus in our Temptations.” Not “finding Jesus after our temptations.” Not “finding Jesus by avoiding temptation.” No “finding Jesus in the midst of our temptations.” That’s the message of the New Testament Book of Hebrews. Jesus wants to meet us at our point of need. Look with me at chapter 2 verse 16 on page ---. Isn’t that amazing? God really does want to help us. God is on our side. So how does he do that? It must be up close and personal. See verse 17 – “For this reason (because he wanted to help us in our human struggles) he had to be made like his brothers in every way ... Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted.” Was Jesus really tempted? I mean, could Jesus really have sinned? Yes. Like us, he had free will. Like us, he could have pulled away from God the Father and said, “I won’t trust you. Your heart is not good. I will find more manageable gods to meet my needs.” He knows what it’s like. He’s been there, as we would say. But unlike the children of Israel, he passed the test, the blazed the trail so now he can help us when we are tempted.

In this Gospel story Jesus is Israel reduced to One Person. As Israel was baptized in the waters of the Red Sea, so Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. As the children of Israel were led through the wilderness, so Jesus is thrown out into the desert. As God’s people were tempted in the wilderness for forty years, so Jesus will be tempted for forty days. Jesus is reliving the story. The main difference of course is this: Jesus trusts God the Father and passes the test. He did what the children of God failed to do. He thus becomes the righteousness of God, the perfectly Righteous One.

Later on the author of Hebrews will say it again like this (see chapter 4:15-16): “For we do not have a high priest who is not able to sympathize with our weaknesses...” In other words, Jesus isn’t ashamed and appalled and surprised and disappointed by our temptations – no matter how shameful they may seem to us. He can sympathize with our weaknesses. The word “weaknesses” encompasses any form of felt need. Everyone in this room has points of weakness – it may be lust or pride or greed or cowardice or anxiety, but you have points of weakness. Jesus meets us where we hurt and struggle. Then the author goes on to say, “(Christ) has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet without sin.” He says, “Look, I’ve been there. We’re not that different.”

Let’s go back to the story of Jesus’ temptation in the Gospel of Mark. Notice verse 13: “he was with the wild animals.” Mark doesn’t waste words; every word counts. So why was this detail important? This detail highlights the loneliness, danger and desolation of the desert. It’s not a fun place. The wild animals aren’t squirrels and bunny rabbits; these are jackals and lions and snakes and scorpions and lots and lots of biting flies. It’s a place for spiritual battle and struggle; it’s the place without props; it’s the places in our lives and our hearts where we face tough questions: what do I really believe? Do I really trust God? Or do I trust in some other lesser, false god of my own making? We’d like to believe that we can arrange our lives to avoid these questions. If I just get a little more money or a little more success or a bigger house or better grades or a nice spouse, then I could avoid these questions. But there they keep getting in our face, nipping at our heels.

There's another twist to this detail that the original hearers of Mark's Gospel may have found very encouraging. You see, the original hearers of Mark's Gospel were in the midst of a great battle. One early historian (a man named Tacitus) recorded the brutal reign of terror from the Roman emperor named Nero. Tacitus wrote that in the early 60's Christians were "covered with the hides of the wild beasts and torn to pieces by (wild) dogs." Mark may be sending a powerful message of encouragement in the midst of their battles: don't forget that Jesus himself was tempted, he knows what it's like to be in a great battle and to feel like giving up; he even knows what it's like to face wild beasts that threaten to tear you to pieces. That's the kind of Savior, Friend and Elder Brother you have. He's not off in the distance telling you to run the race faster; no, he's running right beside you every step of the way; he's covered the same ground.

As we gather around the Lord's Table, let me ask, "What difference does all this make?" Let me suggest three words:

1. **COME.** And then note the result of meeting Christ in our temptations from Hebrews 4:16: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence..." It leads to confident living. Not hanging your head in defeat and shame living: "Gosh, I'm such a wreck. I have such awful temptations. They're so ugly and messy and embarrassing: pornography, an affair, on-line chat rooms, eating too much, raging out at others, holding on to our hurts, remaining angry and bitter, self-righteous attitudes, racism, hatred of women or hatred of men, anxiety disorders, addiction to alcohol or drugs, greed, gossip about people. These are embarrassing temptations and perhaps you'd rather have me not mention them, but my brothers and sisters, if we say that Jesus is Lord and Savior then he must be Lord over our whole life and he must be the Savior over all our temptations and sins – even the ugliest and messiest and most embarrassing sins and temptations. But notice the confidence. "Let us approach." That's the invitation: come, come now, come as you are and do not delay. Do not wait until you're better. I heard this week about a woman who can't come to Christ because as she put it, "I could never be good enough." Yes, that's the point. But you have a Savior and Brother who is your righteousness; he is good enough and you come always and only through him. So draw near. Draw near with confidence. God is ready and waiting to give you mercy and grace to help you in your time of need
2. **SHARE.** Christian community is the place we share our temptations. We were never meant to handle them alone – nor were we meant to handle them with just Jesus and me. One of the beautiful things about our small groups is that, hopefully, as you grow in trust, they become safe places to share the specific points of temptation and struggle.
3. **SERVE.** As Jesus identifies with us so we identify with Jesus. So in the same way the Spirit of God descends on us and God the Father showers us with his love. Perhaps we're tempted to just stay in the glow of it all. We could just hang out with God and our cozy friends in our comfortable church, consuming all kinds of Christian goodies, stuffing our faces. But the presence of God is never another consumer good. But then the Holy Spirit picks us up by the collar, tosses us out into the world. And not just the world - the desert, the marginal places with

marginal people, the wastelands, the godforsaken and lonely places, the places of judgment and struggle. I wonder what this means for us as a church family. The Spirit descends on you and the first order of business is a not did I get fed or did my family get our needs met? The first order of business is a blunt, brutal battle with the devil on the edge of polite society. We get called to the margins where people are struggling with messy marriages and at-risk children and poverty and hunger.

In a few minutes you will be invited to come to Christ afresh. We need a Savior who is compassionate enough to meet us in our temptations and powerful enough to lead us through our temptations. If that is the desire of your heart, if your heart is hungry and thirsty for that, then come. Come as you are.