

# The First/Last Temptation

sermon digest

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Luke 4:1-13

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In the fall of 1988, we moved to Oak Ridge. As we were settling into our new home, the news media zeroed in on a movie coming to local theaters and reports of outrage and protests from Christian groups. The movie was “The Last Temptation of Christ,” based on the controversial 1955 novel by Nikos Kazantzakis. The novel had been banned by the Roman Catholic Church, and the Greek Orthodox Church excommunicated Kazantzakis. The film was biblical fiction. Similar to most treatments of biblical subjects in the entertainment industry, the novel and film exaggerated characters and situations in the Gospels beyond recognition. Outraged Christians took offense with the suggestion of a relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Mary is portrayed in the movie as a Jewish prostitute. The “last temptation” is a delirious vision of the crucified Christ. In his hour of death, Jesus envisions another life in which he chooses the love of Mary, marriage, and children. But in the wild delirium of his agonizing death, Jesus spurns a normal life for the mission to which he has been called.

The suggestion that Jesus the man could have harbored any sexual feelings or a desire for a life of love and family was taken as heresy. Nationwide some 1,200 Christian radio stations publicly condemned the film and 3,500 cinemas refused to show it. Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ offered to reimburse Universal Studios in exchange for the destruction of the movie. Several cities, including Savannah, New Orleans, Oklahoma City, and Santa Anna, banned the movie. When it was released on video in 1989, Blockbuster refused to stock the video for rental. Ironically, Martin Scorsese was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Director for “The Last Temptation of Christ,” and in 1997 he was awarded the coveted Life Achievement Award by the American Film Institute.

The humanity of Jesus was vigorously debated by early Christians. Some denied that Jesus was a real man suggesting that he only “appeared” to be human—the docetic Christ. Others denied that he suffered. The idea of a suffering God suggested weakness. Some denied that he actually died on the cross, making his resurrection unnecessary. Speculation about a life of love and possible marriage to Mary Magdalene is not unique to the Kazantzakis novel. Fragments from Gnostic gospels can be interpreted to imply a love relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* was based on the legend, and the whole issue was stirred again last fall when a Harvard professor identified another fragment dating to the second century that may suggest a married Jesus. However scandalous these claims may seem to us, they are not new. Our Gospels do not suggest a romantic involvement between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, but they also do not deny the real humanity of Jesus. The story of the temptation in the wilderness following the baptism of Jesus is symbolic of the human struggle of the man throughout his life.

**What’s wrong with being human?** The biological necessities of life like food, the desire to rule, and hunger for human recognition are normal human desires that most parents try to instill in their children. I heard all of my life that temptation to sin is normal; the problem is when we cross the line between imagination and action. Old Dr. Humphrey in a lecture on the Sermon on the Mount at Baylor made the statement, “We cannot keep the birds from flying over our heads, but we don’t have to let them nest in our hair.” In the Sermon it does seem that the problem is not just adultery but lust, not just murder but hate.

The famous *Playboy Magazine* interview with born-again Christian, Baptist Sunday School teacher, Jimmy Carter led to the admission, “I have lusted in my heart.” It became the one statement that no one could forget, until perhaps Bill Clinton came along to demonstrate the difference between lust in the heart and lust in action.

None of the lures in the temptation of Jesus seems to appeal to the worst evil that lurks within the human mind. Jesus is not invited to rape, murder, or torture others. Thus, Mark (1:13) is satisfied to summarize the temptation without detail: “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.” The expanded version in Matthew and Luke identifies three invitations to very normal interests—bread, power, and fame. All four Gospels recite the story of feeding the multitude. If making bread is so wrong, why does Jesus feed the multitude?

The affirmation “my beloved son” at the Baptism seems to distinguish the Jesus experience from the ordinary. Satan challenges the essential identity of the Christ and the nature of his calling, “If you are the Son of God,” which can also mean, “Since you are the Son of God.” Jesus is challenged to establish his ministry on easy bread, world domination, and sensational demonstrations of power. Everything belongs to the context. Matthew and Luke seem to be saying that taking the right things for the wrong reasons is the

root of evil. The *what* is never as important as the *why*. I had a psychology professor who warned the coeds to look out for the easy pledge of love. When he says "I love you," he means I love me and want you.

Like baptism, the wilderness experience was preparation for the mission ahead, honing the edge for cutting through the dense evil ahead. Elijah spent forty days in the wilderness before hearing the still, small, voice of God. Moses spent forty days on the mountain receiving the Law of God. Israel wandered in the desert for forty years before entering into the promise of God. The number *forty* connects with the history of Israel as a revival of past trials and failures. Lent picks up on the number forty. Beginning with Ash Wednesday and excluding Sundays, Easter follows the forty days of Lent. In identity with Christ and his wilderness experience, Christians prepared for Easter through sacrifice. In a radio interview after the papal resignation, a Jesuit priest quipped that he has given new meaning to "Lenten sacrifice."

***Temptation is the norm rather than the exception.*** From the day Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise, from the desert education of Moses, and from the moment the Jews set foot on the wilderness of Sinai, the People of God have lived in the crucible of temptation. In the times of trial, they/we have failed, miserably and repeatedly. What an embarrassment! We can't help asking, is the universal experience of temptation the failure of God? One of the stories that came out of Auschwitz, later produced in a play, was the trial of God. Maybe God was on trial in the wilderness as much as Jesus.

To borrow from Paul, Jesus is the second Adam walking the line again (1 Cor. 15:22): "for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." We have been waiting from the beginning of it all for someone to survive the test of life around here, and most of us agree with Paul that no one survives the challenge. "All have sinned." No one gets out alive. No one ever seems to win.

The Gospel message is not a temptation. It is *the* Temptation, like *the* Fall. It is far bigger than, "once upon a time." In fact the temptation story seems to be more a summary of the whole life experience of Jesus than a once-and-for-all moment in his life. Temptation and Fall are universal, constant, perpetual. Adam is not just a man; Adam is *the human*. The very word in Hebrew speaks of source and destiny. *Adamah* means "from the ground," the man Adam lives from dirt to dirt. The temptation of Christ is not just another interesting experience on the way to the cross. It is the trial of existence. Hebrews (4:15) recapitulated: "we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

Everybody spends time in the wilderness, and every last one of us emerges starved, drained, and beaten. It was true long before Christ came, and it will continue to be the case until the last human sigh is heard on planet earth. No one escapes the wilderness—not even the Christ, especially not the Christ! The lure of the world and lust of the flesh are only the tip of the iceberg.

***The risk of failure, sin, blunder, disaster is basic to following Christ.*** The wilderness experience described in the Gospels is common ground to everyone who dares to get involved in the mess of this world. At bottom, the basic temptation was safety first. Long after the embarrassing scandal of the cross, long after the dust had settled on the counter-cultural tendencies in the Jesus movement, Christians remembered the man who dared to risk opposition in order to accomplish his mission. They admired Jesus for getting out of the house, leaving the family, and facing the leaders of his own religion and irritating the Roman governors of his own homeland. For centuries Christians have accused Jews for the crucifixion of Jesus in direct contradiction to the clear authority of Rome in the matter. In the final analysis, early Christians came to the conclusion that Jesus made choices that led to his death. The Fourth Gospel may have been closest to the truth. "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." More than a grand theological scheme, the cross may well have been the natural outcome of events based on the words and deeds of Jesus.

It took a while before I made the discovery that we cannot follow Christ without leaving our safe hiding places. I was coming of age along with the Civil Rights Movement and took note of the high price that some pastors paid for speaking the truth in love about race. I recall John Claypool's sarcastic characterization of the politics of ministry in the quip: "Be it weal or be it woe, whatever my status make it quo." In the political heat of the Vietnam War, I recall the statement of a friend mocking the pastoral role by saying, "Some of my friends are Republicans, and some are Democrats. I always vote with my friends." Actually it is not about partisan politics, but when either party is at odds with the fair play and justice advocated by Jesus and the prophets, we cannot be silent.

The way of the cross we proclaim in sermon and song is a costly road of risking our very lives on the love of God we find in Christ.