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Character, Temptation – and the Christ

Matthew 4: 1-11

There is a principle engrained within the structure of life, that the more complete something can ultimately become, the longer it remains temporarily incomplete. Nature manifests this principle clearly.

Put a young tadpole, a young snake and a human infant at the edge of a pond. The tadpole will swim away instantly, the snake will find a hole in which to hide – and the human infant will die.

Do the human baby's potentialities far outstrip the tadpole's and the snake's? Absolutely.

But because its potential for maturity is greater, its period of immaturity and dependence is greater, too.

Development cannot be rushed. It takes longer to nurture a whale than a fruit fly.

Theologically, this principle finds expression in the fact that our souls, that most complex of entities, requires a lifetime to be fully formed – perhaps even longer.

Human character cannot be rushed into completeness.

This is true for every human creature, and it was even true for the One we regard as the Son of God.

As we ponder and place into context this scene that we generally refer to as the “temptation of Christ,” we realize that Christ is being tempted even before he is being tempted.

He has been baptized by John the Baptist. He has seen the Holy Spirit float down from heaven like a dove, alighting upon him. He has heard the very voice of the heavenly Father intone,

“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

What a baptismal moment! What a royal send-off! What an ordination!

But notice what our Lord does not do:

he does not rush from the baptismal waters and straightway enter the fray of ministry.

He senses that he might be ripe to be a celebrity, but he is not ready to be the Christ.

Rather, he allows himself to be drawn by the Spirit into the wilderness.

He is drawn by the Spirit to develop the very skills that we talked about last week –

passivity, receptivity, the power of reflection, and the discipline of prayer,

all designed to connect him to God's energy and wisdom.

Our Lord recognizes that he must patiently develop the competency of soul sufficient to be the Christ.

Contrast our Lord's behavior with the examples of many in our society.

Those of us who follow sports can point to hundreds of stories involving young athletes

who burst on the scene highly touted, greatly and rightly acclaimed as being filled with potential.

But they are not patient. They leap into the professional fray as quickly as possible,

drawn by the lure of riches, then they flame out, having been insufficiently prepared for the challenges

ahead. They enter the game not fully developed, and we never hear of them again. Why?

Because they have confused acclaim with competence and equated potential with maturity.

Our Lord opts for a different way. He allows the Spirit to draw him into the wilderness and allows his soul to develop over time. Through patience, through passivity, through receptivity, through reflection,

our Lord shapes his character in such a way as to become the Christ.

Our Lord realizes that the Father who says, “This is my beloved Son,” does not want him to spring first into action, but to spring first into patience.

As we try to develop our own characters here is a lesson from which we can learn.

Do you want to develop character?

Then you must peer inside yourself and wrestle with the dark demons inside your own heart.

Matthew says Jesus is tempted by the devil, but the word Matthew uses really means, “Tempter.”

These temptations that our Lord face do not really come from outside him, but from inside him.

They come from nascent, dark inclinations within his own heart.

That fact may be disturbing for us, yet it must be true for this scene to have authenticity.

A temptation has to be a temptation in order to be a temptation. What do I mean?

I mean that if the Lord said to me tonight, “Dr. Kremer, I don’t want you to spend any more money at Mary Jo’s Fabric Store,” I could say, “Lord, I’m down with that!”

If the Lord said, “I don’t want you to spend any money on brussels sprouts or beets,”

I could gladly say, “Thy will be done!”

A temptation has to be a temptation in order to be a temptation.

These temptations swell up from within our Lord’s own heart as potential pathways he can take.

He must wrestle with them and choose not to succumb to them in order to claim his destiny as the Christ.

You and I cannot mature in soul, and cannot grow in character,

unless we face squarely and wrestle honestly with the destructive impulses within our own being.

So it is, the Tempter comes unto Jesus and says,

“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

On the surface, there seems nothing wrong with this request. It seems like a reasonable thing to do.

Yet there is something about that request that seems not quite right.

It’s that subtle little word, “If.”

That little word “if” has been a wicked little crowbar to open the door to so much destruction.

By that word the Tempter is probing Jesus’ psyche to detect any insecurity,

just as people often probe the insecurity of *our psyche* with that little word “if.”

“*If* you are really cool, you won’t mind experimenting with this illicit substance.”

“*If* you are really interested in succeeding, you won’t mind breaking this law.”

“*If* you are one of us, you’ll go along with this foolhardy and destructive action.”

The little word “if” can often be a dare to stupidity.

The little word “if” can be an attempt to define us by somebody else’s warped standards.

By the little word “if,” the Tempter is subtly trying to define what kind of Christ Christ should be.

It is the same sort of thing that happens when one of our friends says to us,

“If you are my friend, you won’t tell the truth about what I’ve done.”

That’s a subtle invitation to sin, but something in it trips a wire inside our Lord’s head, and a warning light goes off and he stops, looks and listens.

Likewise, if we want to shape our character there are times when we must heed the little trip wires inside our heads and stop, look and listen. Rarely does one embrace a destructive path by one calamitous choice.

More often than not, we move in a destructive direction by a long series of subtle wrong choices.

Conversely, most of us shape our character positively by a long series of subtle good choices.

So our Lord says to the Tempter, “I will live by the words that come out of the mouth of God.”

When you make those subtle choices for good, they shape the nature of your character.

I use that phrase, “shape your character” advisedly – intentionally,

The very word “character,” comes from a Greek verb meaning “to engrave.”

The Latin word “character,” meant an engraving tool.

Those of us of a certain age have heard the word “character,” used as a synonym for a letter of alphabet.

To shape a character is to give it a definite form. Why is that relevant?

Let us ask the question, what is the core of our Lord’s greatness?

It is his miracle-working power, his piercing intelligence, his incisive grasp of human behavior, his charismatic personality? No. All of these talents are but instruments of greatness.

These gifts could have been used for ill just as easily as for good.

The Tempter realizes this and offers our Lord a second temptation wrapped in a spiritual garb.

“You are going to call people to worship you. I can make a few suggestions that will make that call easier.

Go up to the pinnacle of the Temple and throw yourself off –

God will have to save you, you are the son of God.
In so doing you will define for people the kind of God you are going to be,
a gravity-defying deity, a god who promises magic, who promises to eliminate people's limits,
who promises to solve their pain.
Then you'll be the kind of deity that people are looking for.
Nobody wants a crucified Christ. Nobody wants a suffering, vulnerable God.
Nobody will believe an obscure resurrection.
Jump from the Temple heights and establish that you'll be the kind of God that people want."

Our Lord says simple words, "No. I won't. I won't do it."
Our Lord refuses to presume that he can define God.
Rather, he opts to allow God's will to define him.
Sometimes we can put ourselves in a positive direction simply by saying a simple, "No, I won't do that."
But in so doing our Lord is giving an imprint of his character,
and is pledging to invest all of his gifts for the glory of God.
Yet this is a decision that he will have to make not once, but time and time again, for indeed,
to shape a character there are some choices that one has to make over and over and over again.
Our Lord will continually have to make choices that define in whose behalf he will use his gifts.

Then again, there are those choices that when you make them once, they set the tenor of your life.
The Tempter shows our Lord all of the kingdoms of the earth in all their glory.
The Tempter says, "Every prize that the world has to offer can be yours if you will just worship me."
Our Lord answers with a decision that governs the direction of his entire life.
"No! You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."
It is not enough to say, "No!" There must be something in your life to which you say, "Yes."
When our Lord says, "I will worship the Lord my God with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind,"
he is making a decisive decision that governs the entire direction of his life.

How many people lose their souls in response to this temptation!
They are enormously gifted. They have been blessed with more talents than they can count.
They could have transformed lives with their gifts. They could have changed the world.
They could have been an instrument in ushering in the kindnesses of God's kingdom.
But they aspire instead to all the prizes that the world has to offer.
Jesus says, "I will worship the Lord God and him only shall I serve."
That will be the bedrock principle that governs the shape of his character.
Such a choice will govern the direction of our lives, too, and have a conclusive effect on our character.

It is easy to look at Christ in the wilderness, alone wrestling with the Tempter,
and think, "That's a spiritual drama that doesn't have any relevance for my life."
Ah, but it does. I think of a great movie from about fifteen years ago, *Scent of a Woman*,
which starred Al Pacino, one of the great actors of our generation, who plays an ex-army officer
named Frank Slade, who at this point in his life is a bitter, blind, guilt-ridden, alcoholic.
He has secretly resolved to take his life.
But he happens to have his life intersected by a young high school student named Charlie,
Charlie Simms, who has been hired to take care of Frank during a holiday weekend,
and when Charlie learns of Frank's plan, he tries to dissuade him, and succeeds,
mainly by the force of his character.
But Charlie has his own problems.
He has witnessed an act of vandalism that has enraged his headmaster.
The headmaster has ordered Charlie to reveal the perpetrators of the deed,
and has gone so far as to offer him a bribe.

Charlie, a poor kid, can receive a full scholarship to Harvard, if he will just provide the names. Even though Charlie doesn't like the guys who did the deed, he will not tell on them. So he is brought before the entire school for a disciplinary hearing. As Charlie is on the verge of expulsion, in walks this ex-Army officer whose life Charlie has touched with the power of his compassion. The ex-officer speaks on Charlie's behalf. I offer you just a fraction of Frank's speech:

"What kind of a show are you guys putting on here today? I mean the only class in this act is sitting next to me, and I'm here to tell you that this boy's soul is intact, it is non-negotiable. You know how I know? Someone here, and I'm not going to say who, offered to buy it, only Charlie here wasn't selling. . . . I don't know if Charlie's silence here today is right or wrong. I'm not a judge or jury. But I can tell you this: he won't sell anybody out to buy his future! And that, my friends, is called INTEGRITY! That's called COURAGE! Now that's the stuff leaders should be made of. Now I have come to the crossroads of my life. I always knew what the right path was. Without exception I knew. But I never took it. You know why? It was too damn hard. Now here's Charlie. He has come to the crossroads. And he has chosen a path. It is the right path. It is a path made of principle that leads to character. . . ."

If you fashion your life around a pathway of principles that say,
"I will live by the words that come out of the mouth of God.
I will worship the Lord God and Him only shall I serve,"
then you will be walking on a pathway that leads to character.
But walking on such a journey is not easy.

I am reminded of the great American writer Stephen Crane and his little poem "Temptation":

"The traveler
perceiving the pathway to truth
was struck with astonishment.
It was thickly grown with weeds.
'Ha,' he said, 'I see no one has passed here in a long time.'
Later he saw that each weed was a singular knife.
'Well,' he mumbled at last.
'Doubtless there are other roads.' "

Yes, there are other roads than that defined by the principles of Christ.
But only by following the path formed by those principles will we achieve the highest character.

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