

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Thompson
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“The temptation of power!”

Text: “The devil took Christ up a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them: He said, “All these things will I give you if you will fall down and worship me.”

Did you know that it can be argued that the Presbyterian Church was founded as a direct result of the medieval church succumbing to this Third temptation?

Two great writers, Dostoyevsky the Russian author, and Barbara Tuchman, author of The March of Folly, both very different authors coming from very different perspectives, argue that the medieval church succumbed to this temptation.

In Dostoyevsky’s The Grand Inquisitor, the temptations of Christ are debated. Set in Spain, Christ in the story is supposed to have returned to earth. The Grand Inquisitor arrests Christ on behalf of the Church during the period of the Spanish inquisition. The Inquisitor says to Christ;

“It’s a long time- eight centuries since we left you and went over to him. (meaning the Devil). Exactly 8 centuries ago we took from him what you rejected with scorn, the last gift he offered you, after showing you all the Kingdoms of the earth.”

What is Dostoyevsky talking about? In the year 1073 Hildebrand took over the Papacy. At the time the Papacy held these views:

- It was a divinely appointed sovereignty which all must obey and to which all earthly sovereigns were responsible, not only for their spiritual welfare, but for their temporal good government
- The Pope alone could use the imperial insignia
- The Pope alone could depose Emperors
- The Pope alone could be judged of no one
- The Pope alone could absolve subjects from the fealty of their rulers

This was all about power, the ideal of a world sovereignty claimed by the Church.

Barbara Tuchman, historian, argues that the renaissance Popes from 1470-1530, totally secularized the Papacy and actually provoked the protestant Reformation out of which The Presbyterian Church sprang. For instance, in the reign of Sixtus the 4th (n 1471-1484), Sixtus prided himself on “ a total repudiation of the doctrine of Jesus.” A very interesting position when Sixtus was head of the Church!.

Why seek this kind of power?

According to Dostoyevsky, the whole point of this temptation to power is to wield power over people’s sense of right and wrong in return for their livelihood. He says: “Who is to wield dominion over human beings if not those who have taken possession of their consciences and in whose hand is their bread?”

How is the world to be ruled and by whom? Scripture says that the sovereignty of the world rightly belongs to God. Humans are to serve God and each other with humility and compassion.

But if we don’t surrender the sovereignty to God, we succumb to the temptation of power, which is always it seems a slippery slope. It is often at first an exhilarating drug. But at the end as Lord Acton once said; “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely!”

The temptations that the Satan presented, were absolutely real for The Historical Jesus.

1) To live by bread alone without dependence on God. (Turning stones to bread is something the hungry would hope for.)

- 2) To go for Political Power, meaning world sovereignty. Will Jesus submit to the ruler of this world to achieve good for the people of the world? (The oppressed would hope so) The temptation would be to claim world sovereignty for God by getting people to surrender their consciences to a collective sense of what is right and wrong in return for a material prosperity looked after by the government without dissent being allowed. Think modern day China where dissent is not allowed, and all is fine if you leave the government to the communist party.
- 3) The third temptation was religious. Will Jesus win over Judaism by forcing faith induced by a display of supernatural power? (The people would long for definite proof of God's power. None of this faith stuff!)

But Jesus saw things differently. For him, this battle for power, domination and control was all wrong. The true battle was to be for human beings who had **not** sold their consciences and whose consciences were therefor free. In fact, the battle was not for a world sovereignty at all, but a battle for the human heart as to Whom, we would serve. It was a battle for a free heart- the only place where love can really dwell.

In Jesus ministry, a woman was brought before Him. She had been taken in adultery and adultery was punishable by stoning a person to death- usually the woman. What would Jesus do? Everybody's conscience knew what the right thing to do was. Adultery was wrong. She should be stoned to death.

But Jesus does something amazing. He says, appealing directly to the accuser's consciences: " Let the person who is without sin, cast the first stone." And the crowd melts away. What then does the woman do? She responds in love to Jesus. In fact, he has her heart and its full of gratitude for saving her life.

What would the law have had? Her dead body!

What made the difference to set the woman free? It was the **consciences** of her accusers that freed her.

Always Christ appealed to the consciences of his hearers whether he was healing on the Sabbath, whether he was talking about the difference between the spirit of the law and the letter, which still trips up the church today,, whether he was talking about taxes or even when he was before Pilate, where Pilate's response was to try to clear his own conscience by washing his hands in public.

The temptation to sort out the world in terms of pronouncements and black and white thinking has never worked. These are the tools of tyranny.

I don't think it is God's way. Instead of single-issue politics and single issues in religion, we must ask Christ's question in every situation that we confront, however hard it may be to follow: **What is the most loving thing to do, all things considered, in this particular situation?** and then to try our level best to do it.

We have homelessness now all over the world. Its here in London and we have just got a Federal grant to try to help with this challenge. What is the most loving thing to do on a case by case basis?

We have a record of discrimination against the GLBT community in the Church. What is the most loving thing to do? This London Presbytery has very recently decided to recommend that the GLBTQ community be able to marry whoever they wish. It has also sent to General Assembly the opinion that the GLBTQ folks should be eligible for ordination. What is the most loving thing to do when we act on a case by case basis?

We have enormous economic disparities between people. How are we to go about handling the gap between rich and poor and the growing gap? What is the most loving thing to do, all things considered?

If we are following the way of Jesus and resisting the temptations of power that we experience everyday, then we have to realize that all these things can only be dealt with properly by appeals

to our human consciences. **And in all these things freedom of conscience must remain.** By the way this is a cardinal Presbyterian doctrine that the conscience must remain free.

And there are good reasons for that. Because if we surrender our consciences to the herd instinct or to church doctrine whether good or bad doctrine, just because it is church doctrine, we can lose love as the most important value. Why?

Because, unlike the world's current crop of Dictators, or the Satan in Scripture, or the Taliban or ISIS, or the totalitarian states...God, unlike them, **is not interested in the compelled service of human beings.**

God is only interested in one thing, one highest of all values...LOVE. This is the only value that can release us into the greatest of all the commandments; **To love the lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength and our neighbours as ourselves, and that includes the enemy.** If we are able to do this and resist the temptation to power as the drug we get addicted to, we could move into a better, kinder more whole world, where cooperation was more important than competition, where compassion was more important than the letter of the law, where circumstances would alter cases and where freedom would reign from every mountaintop.

In the book Dimensions of Job Archibald McLeish, the author of the play J.B. (a modern story of Job) writes:

“Man depends upon God for all things; God depend upon man for one. Without the love of human beings, God does not exist as God, only as Creator, and love is the one thing no one, not even God Himself, can command. **It is a free gift, or it is nothing.** And it is most free when that love is offered in spite of suffering, or in the face of injustice and death.”

Why is it important to preserve our conscience?

Let's suppose that you are a news reporter. Do you follow your conscience and report that story, that your boss does not think will increase ratings?

Or when you are working for a politician, do you suppress a story, that if it gets out, will ruin the chances of your political candidate?

Perhaps you are selling a product, but you know that the competition has a superior product at a lower price than the one you can offer. What does your conscience tell you?

Or you are a real estate person. Do you leave out the asbestos possibility in the attic? Do you put in a token fix and then plead ignorance about the greater challenge because you wanted the sale?

We can always resist temptation even although we frequently do not.

Christ's way out of temptation was to serve God, to follow his conscience...He was tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin...that was his experience. The temptations were real for Christ. His humanity was real.

If we follow St. Paul, we must try with all our might to put Love first in every situation. In terms of the exercise of power, love is the only way to resist the desire to control.

In fact, although rare, love is the hall mark of great politicians, the great leaders, the compassionate business leaders, the wonderful news journalists, the great police persons, the best teachers and professors, the outstanding lawyers, the really wonderful physicians, garbage collectors and pastors. Why because love is the hall mark of the true Kingdom of this world and the next, where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. It is also the way of perfect freedom because God's service is perfect freedom. And it is profoundly humble.

If the Dark side of things are the masters of this world it is because we have given away our power. Perhaps it is time to go for love?

Robert Ball a well-known International speaker and author graduated from Princeton with numerous honors in public speaking.

He arrived in a small-town church in Oklahoma where he delivered what he thought were great sermons.

However, the congregation, although appreciative, did not catch on fire the way he had hoped, particularly the deacons, who seemed unmoved by his sermons except for one man, Vilas Copple.

Copple was an oil field worker who seemed to have been educated by experience and hard work. Vilas cared deeply about his church, singing in the choir working in the Sunday school and working with Ball to light a fire under the deacons.

One Monday evening, after the deacons meeting, Ball and Vilas stopped to talk about how to motivate the deacons. They talked for about an hour and then they went home.

But no sooner had Ball got into the house than the phone rang. It was Vilas. He's arrived home to discover that his beloved wife lay dead on the kitchen floor. They had had dinner together and she seemed perfectly fine. But now this. Would Ball come over?

Ball agreed...after all it was his job.

On the way over, walking, Ball was very unsure about what to do. This wasn't like preaching a good sermon at all. He felt weak... powerless.

You see he always had time to do a sermon, lots of books for reference, there was no desperate urgency attached to a sermon, but this was different. **This was the real thing a man's wife, his loved companion, the mother of his children, was dead. This was a real as it gets, yet Ball had nothing to say.**

When he got there, Ball said almost nothing. After the coroner had gone and the body had been draped and taken away, Vilas and Ball sat there in Vilas living room for hours, mostly in silence, both of them. There were a few barely audible prayers, just whispered fragmented sentences. Vilas had not been educated in the way of words and Ball confronted for the first time with a human being in critical need, had nothing to say. Again, Ball felt utterly powerless.

In the early morning Ball went home and stood in front of his bathroom mirror and asked himself *'What the hell are you doing in this business?'* Ball went to bed thinking about what else he could do with his life.

Two years later Ball received a call to another congregation. He was excited to go but he also felt sad, because this congregation that he had served, had been so understanding of their young pastor.

Then came the last Sunday...the last sermon. Even the choir who were always quick to leave, stayed to shake his hand and to share a hug.

Suddenly Ball looked up and there was Vilas, big tears rolling down his rugged face. Vilas took Ball's hands in his and looked him straight in the eye and said: " Bob, I could never have made it through that night without you!"

Where did the real power lie? Was it in great sermons, raising a budget, filling the pews?

Bob Ball had to discover what all of us need to find out in this world. The power lies not in success, in riches, in domination or in control. It lies in compassion, in being loving, and in kindness.

And kindness, love and compassion are not three temptations. They are three joys that can lead us on through life's challenges, until the day comes when we stand before The Master himself and hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into My Kind of JOY!"