

Since Dad's side of the family is from Pittsburgh, I've been rooting for Pittsburgh teams all my life: the Steelers, the Penguins, and the Pirates.

When I was in seminary in the Chicago area, it was a straight shot down the red-line el-train from our apartment to Wrigley Field. I'd try to catch the Pirates when they were in town to play the Cubs.

And in those days, the leftfielder and one of the best players for the Pirates was Barry Bonds. A little later, Barry moved to San Francisco and played with the Giants for the remainder of his career. And several years later at the turn of the century, Bonds seemed to really bulk up. And then, Barry Bonds racked up some of the most impressive stats in the history of Major League Baseball, including the all-time home run record.

But then accusations surfaced that Bonds was using steroids. That has resulted in a huge asterisk being appended to Bond's name. And this year, Barry Bonds missed his last opportunity to be voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. If the accusations are true, then Bond's legacy is tainted. Yes, Barry Bonds was undoubtedly one of the greatest players of all time. But if he achieved that status by using forbidden performance enhancing drugs, then that status is tarnished.

It raises a question. Do the ends justify the means? Is it OK to take shortcuts to achieve success, even if those shortcuts are illegal or immoral?

We see folks struggling with such issues all the time. In fact, even Jesus had to wrestle with it. That's what our Gospel lesson is all about. Jesus is offered three temptations. At heart, Jesus is offered the opportunity to take a shortcut. He's offered the temptation of using bad means to achieve good ends.

When I was a kid, they'd show us pictures of this story. And those pictures would show Jesus very calm and collected. Jesus would often face the devil and have his hand up, as if to say, "It ain't no big thing. What you're saying is no big deal. Your temptations are easy to resist." But that's a false picture. Because temptations that are easy to resist are not really temptations. When the devil comes to Jesus, it's not pee-wee league tee-ball. This is a real major league contest.

And it's important for us to remember that Jesus is encountering these temptations as a real human being. Otherwise, it wouldn't do us much good to reflect on them this morning. If Jesus had magic power to easily resist temptation simply because he was also divine, then it wouldn't help us regular human beings at all. We have to remember that Jesus is fully tempted as a real human.

Jesus can help us precisely because not only was he like God, he was also like us. Fully human in addition to being fully divine. So Jesus was tempted. He was tested. Therefore, we can look to him for an example of how to remain faithful to God in the midst of the temptations we face.

Now let's look at those temptations specifically. Luke tells us that following his baptism, Jesus is being tempted in the Judean wilderness for 40 days.

The Judean wilderness is hilly and barren. It looks somewhat like the Texas Hill Country. But it's the Hill Country minus the wildflowers, and minus the trees, and minus the grass. Instead, the hills are covered with about a gazillion of these rocks. I brought back this representative sample when I visited there. This what the Judean wilderness is like. Rugged hills that are covered with nothing except for millions and millions of these rugged rocks as far as the eye can see.

And Jesus has been out there 40 days. And at the end of 40 days, when he's at his weakest point, that's when the devil steps up the attack. Luke says, "Jesus ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'"¹

Notice the challenge. "*If you are* the Son of God." That's a common tactic. Plant the seed of doubt. It's also rather in your face. "Are you *really* God's Son?" But the primary attack comes in the second part.

Turn these stones into bread. Satisfy your hunger instantly. Satisfy your desires just by speaking the word. But there's more to this temptation than just satisfying hunger.

The devil tempts Jesus with instant gratification. And, the devil tempts Jesus to use his power for his own personal gain. You can have exactly what you want when you want it. You've got the power. Use it.

I don't have to spend too long on the parallels for us. In our culture instant gratification, abusing power, and taking shortcuts for our own personal gain are very common temptations. As 21st century Americans, we are always being tempted with satisfying our physical needs in as quick and convenient a way as possible. So it's helpful to look at Jesus' response. Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"²

Notice two things here. #1: Jesus responds to the devil by quoting scripture, in this case Deuteronomy. "It is written." Jesus appeals to God's word in scripture for guidance.

#2: Notice what he quotes. "One does not live by bread alone." Bread is good. Food is a necessity for life. But there is something even more necessary. Being fed by right relationship with God is far more important than being fed with earthly food. Using your power the way God wants you to is more important than satisfying your needs for the moment. For the devil, this is Strike 1.

So the devil tries again. He offers Jesus political power. The devil shows Jesus a vision of all the kingdoms of the world. He says, "To you I will give their glory and all this

¹ Lk 4:2-3

² Lk 4:4

authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."³

Jesus is being offered total world domination. The ability to make everyone obey you. The power to make sure that everything is done your way. The ownership of all the riches of the world, if you just make one small compromise with the devil: "Fall down and worship me."

That's the temptation for us, too. You can gain power. But to do it you have to compromise your values. We probably won't be offered the world. But what about popularity at school? What about advancement at work? What about building up your portfolio? What kind of tactics, or whose kind of tactics will you use to gain these things?

What's Jesus' response? Unless you're doing things God's way, the price is way too high. Jesus quotes from scripture again,

"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"⁴

In other words, the ends don't justify the means. You can't pursue success if it means you have to pitch God's values out the window. For the devil, this is Strike 2.

So, the devil tries a third time. He takes Jesus to the top of the Temple wall. It was a high wall build on top of a cliff, and it was a long way down. The devil says, 'If you are the Son of God, jump off. Throw yourself down.' And then notice what else the devil does. The devil quotes from scripture:

"It is written, (God) will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"⁵

Imagine the spectacle. You jump off the wall, but angels come to your rescue, and they lower you safely to the ground, all in front of an astonished crowd. The public spectacle that proclaims you're something special; you're no ordinary person. The angels go out of their way to protect you.

Imagine what could happen if people could witness Jesus' power. If Jesus throws himself off of the Temple in Jerusalem but doesn't crash, if he's rescued by the angels of God right there in front of them, then all would know that Jesus is the Christ. All would know that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus is being offered a huge shortcut. He won't have to preach and teach. He won't have to heal the sick. And most importantly, he won't have to be crucified. Just one jump, the angels swoop in, and his public reputation is secure. No cross. No pain. No death.

So often, we're tempted with shortcuts. The will of God seems hard. Surely there's an easier way. "God, if you really love me, then you'll make things easy on me. God, if you're really good, remove all the pain from my life so I won't have to struggle."

³ Lk 4:5-7

⁴ Lk 4:8

⁵ Lk 4:9-11

But again, Jesus answers from scripture. "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"⁶

God is to be trusted, not tested. It's not our place to lay down the law and tell God how things are supposed to be. Strike 3, the devil is out, at least, for the time being.

Like Jesus, we will face temptations in life. Sometimes, they're very clear cut, black and white issues. But sometimes, we have to choose between lighter and darker shades of gray. Our choices are not always between bad and good, but between bad and worse, or good and better. So how do we respond?

If we want to be like Jesus, we need to keep two things in mind. #1: We can follow his example by looking to scripture for guidance. Jesus was so well versed in scripture, he was so immersed in it, that using it for guidance was second nature to him. Of course, this is more than knowledge. The devil had knowledge of scripture himself. He just didn't choose to obey it.

Which leads us to #2: We need to be attentive to God's will at all times. We need to be ready to make choices not based on what's easiest for us, but based on what God calls us to do.

Like Jesus we will encounter temptations. Temptations to put our needs above everyone else's. Temptations to use bad means to achieve good ends. Temptations to avoid suffering and sacrifice. Temptations to put our way in the place of God's way.

And like Jesus, we need to keep our priorities straight.

God comes first. God's will comes first.

Worship him and serve him alone.

⁶ Lk 4:12