

Jesus' Opening Battle

Luke 4:1-14

Preached at 8.15, C@10 and CC on 13th March 2016

Intro

Can I tempt you with another piece of cake rector?

...supposedly the occupational hazard of the life of ministry!

With my sweet tooth it never takes much to tempt me to have another piece of cake or a biscuit.

Some temptations are harder to resist than others.

The advertising industry like to play around with temptation to advertise everything from chocolate to cars.

They play on that little voice that says 'go on – you deserve it'... 'you'll feel great if you give in and do it...'

Is temptation serious?

What are the consequences?

What can we do when we're tempted?

What help is the 'best good news story ever' – the gospel – when we're tempted?

In today's passage we're looking at Jesus' opening battle – the battle with temptation.

This battle takes place before Jesus begins his public ministry.

How does it help us to understand how we can deal with temptation when it comes our way?

Temptation and Jesus' Response

Let's start by looking at what Jesus does.

Some of us like tracing our ancestry out of interest, but that's never why genealogies are included in the Bible. There's always a purpose for them.

In 3:22 the voice of God from heaven at Jesus' baptism declares that Jesus is the beloved Son of God, with whom God is well pleased.

Now Jesus could have reacted by just doing it, to prove he really is the Son of God... and to satisfy his hunger.

But he has a greater hunger to be obedient to the will of his Father – so he refuses.

And his answer is the word of God from Deuteronomy 8:3 – the word that reminded Israel about God’s faithfulness in providing for all their needs in the desert and therefore exhorting them to obedience.

Israel was to recognise that it’s God who sustains them – not even the basics of life like bread.

Unless God has decreed that we live, we don’t.

Israel proved faithless when it came to believing that. Jesus didn’t.

He knows that life – not only for himself – but for all people depends on his faith in and obedience to God’s will.

Second, the devil tempts Jesus with a vision of all the glory of the kingdoms of the earth, telling him that it can all be his if he’ll stop worshiping God and bow down to him instead.

What he’s really offering Jesus is an easier way to have what’s going to be his anyway – authority and rule over the whole world.

If he’ll do it the devil’s way it avoids the necessity of the cross.

And again Jesus refuses, quoting again from Deuteronomy – this time 6:13 – where God’s word to his people is that He alone is God and that they will bow down to no one and nothing else.

The devil holds sway over this world for the time being, but it doesn’t belong to him and he can’t give it, or any good thing that belongs to it.

Again, at this point Israel failed and worshiped the gods of other nations that are all creations of the devil, thinking they could do better that way.

Jesus remains faithful... believes and obeys the word of God.

Finally in 4:9-12 the devil catches on and starts quoting (actually misquoting) Scripture from Psalm 91:11-12 back at Jesus to try and get him to perform a spectacular miracle just to make sure God's promise of protection is trustworthy.

Again Jesus refuses and correctly applies Deuteronomy 6:16 in saying that it's wrong to put God to the test.

To jump off the highest point of the temple would have been an act of unbelief because it would imply that God's promise of protection couldn't be trusted.

Three times Jesus was tempted to mistrust the word of God.

Three times he refused... and he did so by trusting and obeying the very word he was being tempted to mistrust and disobey.

And at the end of this episode, the devil leaves Jesus till an opportune time.

Although we don't read another direct encounter like this between Jesus and the devil, we do see the devil opposing Jesus throughout his ministry, and especially in the evil days leading up to his arrest, trial and crucifixion.

And throughout those three years, Jesus never succumbs to the temptation to mistrust anything God has said or promised.

Temptation and Jesus' Ministry

When we face temptation, there are consequences if we give in to it.

If I'm tempted to have that extra piece of cake and I give in, so what? It might mean an extra ten-minute walk to exercise it off. Does it matter that much? Probably not.

But what if I'm tempted to have one more drink than I know I should? If giving in means I lose that bit too much self-control and embarrass myself, or I can't get in the car to attend to an emergency?

What if I'm tempted towards an illicit sexual encounter?

There are much greater consequences.

And sometimes, in the moment, we'll give in... and sometimes with awful consequences.

In this episode in Luke 4 Jesus doesn't give in.

And the fact that he didn't, and that we so often do could leave us in despair.

But in fact it gives us great hope.

There's a reason that Jesus' battle with the devil takes place right here, right after he's been revealed to be the Son with whom God is well-pleased, and before he begins his ministry.

And that is because his ministry is all focussed on what he would do three years later at the cross.

When Jesus came to the pivotal point of his work on earth it was essential that he would trust and obey the word of his Father.

That's the essence of what we're continually tempted not to do.

When we give into temptation it's not just that we have a temporary brain-snap and do something silly.

Because of our sinfulness, our whole orientation is to not trust that God is for us, and therefore not do what he says.

The central lie that the devil wants us to believe is that we can't trust, or don't have to trust, the words God speaks.

It's the lie that Adam and Eve believed in the Garden.

It's the lie that Israel believed in the desert.

But if Jesus mistrusted the word of his Father and believed the lies of the devil, he would not have gone to the cross.

And the consequences of that for the world are that we would be lost to God forever.

But here, before his ministry begins, Jesus proves that he will not fall for the lies of the devil.

His trust is in every word God has spoken.

The devil wants to convince Jesus that he can have all glory and authority over creation, and avoid the agony of the cross by worshipping him, while mistrusting his Father.

But Jesus refutes his lies with the very words of God that convince him to trust that what God says happens...

He will have all glory, power and authority over the nations; and it will come as he takes the path of suffering and death that God has set before him.

Jesus' faithfulness in trusting God's words all the way to the cross means the devil with all his lies has been defeated once for all.

So Jesus' faithfulness in the face of temptation is not a source of despair for us who are tempted and fail.

It's our hope.

Jesus' faithful belief in and obedience to the word of God means forgiveness for all our mistrust and disobedience... no matter how great or small the consequences may have been.

Temptation, Jesus and Us

What does that mean for us day by day?

Temptation is a real thing for us. Christians aren't immune. We shouldn't pretend that we are.

We're tempted every day to not trust in the word of God in lots of different ways.

The devil and our own sinfulness lead us to doubt in the goodness of God's word, and believe the lies and half-truths that life could be better by disobeying or ignoring him.

But every temptation is an opportunity to trust the goodness of God's word in the face of those lies and half-truths.

God's word to us in the gospel is that the devil has been defeated through Christ's death on the cross.

Therefore the devil has nothing of eternal value to offer us.

And our own sinfulness has been defeated too.

Through the cross we know that our futile attempts to make a good life for ourselves apart from God have no eternal future.

So, when we're tempted, we have a word from God to refute the lies of the devil and our own sinful nature.

That word is the gospel.

The gospel is the ultimate expression of the truth in Deuteronomy 8:3, that we don't live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God...

Whether we have even the basics of life like bread is irrelevant. Unless God decrees that we live, we don't even exist. What he doesn't say, doesn't happen.

The gospel is the ultimate expression of Deuteronomy 6:13.

In the gospel God has decreed that everyone who believes in Jesus and worships him as Lord and God will live forever with him and share his rule in his glorious eternal kingdom... long after all the splendour of the kingdoms of this world has faded.

And the gospel is the ultimate expression of Deuteronomy 6:16.

Because the gospel assures us that God does not need to be put to the test to see if his word is trustworthy.

It proves through the death of God's Son that God is faithful to his promise to save us from the death that our sins deserve by forgiving us every sin.

It proves through Christ's resurrection that God is faithful to his promise to give new life...

When we're tempted in whatever way, the answer isn't to put God to the test in some way.

It's to go back again to the gospel and see that God in Jesus doesn't need to be put to any feeble test of his faithfulness that we might come up with.

Those of us who have been through life experiences where we've been tempted to mistrust God can testify to the fact that he's proven himself faithful time and time again when we refuse to give in to that temptation.

And in those times when we have failed and given in to temptation – sometimes with serious consequences – the gospel assures us that God is still faithful and forgives us when we fail, because Jesus didn't.

We need to be wise in putting safeguards in place in those areas of our lives where we're most vulnerable to give in to temptation – like being accountable to each other and keeping ourselves away from the path of temptation.

But standing against temptation ultimately isn't just a matter of practical steps we can take.

It's a matter of faith.

The way to stand against the temptation of the lies and half-truths of the devil is to believe, and keep believing, the word of the gospel.

As we keep holding on to its truth, we have the power of God's Spirit at work in us, just as he was at work in Jesus in the desert, and ultimately on the cross, convincing us that faith in what God has promised is always better than what we can have today.