

# By Any Means Necessary

*Luke 4:1-13*

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<sup>4</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' "

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,  
and serve only him.' "

<sup>9</sup> Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you,  
to protect you",

<sup>11</sup>and

"On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.' "

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' " <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

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It's that season – that season in which our inboxes and mailboxes are filled with recaps of our activity for the previous year. Many of you are already receiving W-2s and 1099s detailing your income last year. Others of you have credit cards that provide you with categorized summaries of your expenditures during the last calendar year. And, hopefully all of you are receiving statements detailing your charitable giving in 2020. All of these recaps are designed to give a snapshot of how you stewarded your resources.

However, this past week, I received a recap email I wasn't expecting. It came from the NTTA – the North Texas Transit Authority. The header of the email said: "Congrats! You're a TEXpress Lanes Top Driver!" Then below that, they listed several categories ranging from *Missed the Wagon* to *Middle of the Pack* to *The Maverick*. Scrolling down further, I found a red box detailing my rank. I was in The Maverick category because in 2020 I had taken 75 TEXpress Lane trips totaling 571 miles. Or more accurately, the cars registered to my Tolltag account been in the express lanes 75 times. I'm pretty sure Jodi and Abby accounted for the bulk of those trips.

I thought about pulling out the calculator to make an educated guess about how much those express lane trips had cost me in 2020, but I decided I really didn't want to know. Plus, if I really thought about it, this was probably a light year. Jodi didn't travel to Dallas nearly as much as usual during this pandemic year. And, as Jodi would be quick to tell me, time is money. Spending less time sitting in traffic means more time for billable hours. At least that's one way to justify hundreds of miles and hundreds of dollars in the express lanes.

There is something in all of us that loves the express lane. We all love to get where we want to go faster. Plus, it is so cool to cruise by all of the other cars at 75 mph. We feel so special when we are moving along while they are sitting still. We pat ourselves on the back for making such a smart decision.

The fact is we wish there was an express lane option for every avenue of life. Wouldn't it be great to make a four-course gourmet meal in 20 minutes? Wouldn't it be awesome if you could learn to speak Italian in a week? Wouldn't it be great to drop 20 pounds without putting forth any effort?

We are always on the lookout for shortcuts. It's in our nature. But shortcuts aren't always advantageous. Probably all of us know someone who tried to take a shortcut in love, only to realize they didn't know the other person as well as they thought. Chances are, we also know someone who tried to take a shortcut with money, falling for a get-rich-

quick scheme, a risky investment, or a lottery ticket purchase. (How many of you purchased a Powerball or MegaMillions ticket this week thinking \$500 million might change your financial future?) And probably all of us know someone who tried to take a shortcut to the corner office by risking more, backstabbing more, or schmoozing more.

Shortcuts almost always come at a cost. Trying to get where you want to be by any means necessary will cost you financially or relationally or emotionally. And if you aren't careful, your shortcut will leave damaged relationships, destroyed trust, or compromised integrity in your wake. That was what was listed in the fine print of the second temptation the devil offered to Jesus in the wilderness.

As you remember from last week, just after Jesus' baptism, he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he spent 40 days without food. While his ministry is about to start in earnest, at this point, Jesus had not yet preached a sermon, cast out a demon, or healed a sick person. He is alone and hungry in the desert.<sup>1</sup>

The second temptation begins in verse 5 with five words: *The devil led him up*. And here is a universal truth about temptations. Temptations are always up – always an offer not to fall but to rise. Nobody is tempted by a demotion. Nobody is tempted by less clout. Nobody wants to be less popular. Temptations always offer better and greater and higher. So it was when the devil led Jesus up and offered him a deal.

*[In an instant the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world.] And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this 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." (4:6)*

All of us are familiar with the phrase: making a deal with the devil. The idea was made popular by the classic legend of Faust, a scholar who made a bargain with a demon named Mephistopheles. Many similar stories have been told around the same theme. The *Phantom of the Opera* centers on the character Erik Destler, who makes a deal to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for the world to love him for his music. Likewise, in the

movie, *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, the trio of chain gang escapees encounter a young man named Tommy Johnson who claims to have sold his soul to the devil in exchange for being able to play the guitar. And given their recent history of futility, there are tons of guys on Dallas sports radio that are convinced Jerry Jones made a deal with the devil to win those three Super Bowls in the 1990s.

Whatever it looks like, the deal almost always has the hook: “All this can be yours if...” The promotion can be yours if you can make the multimillion-dollar ethics violation go away. The relationship with the woman in Accounting can be yours if you just tell your wife you are working late. A 200% return on your investment can be yours if you just cash out your other investments and hand it to me. We even see our children make deals like this: “I’ll be your best friend if you let me stay up past bedtime.” If you worship me, the devil said, all this can be yours. All Jesus had to do to gain this power was to compromise.

The interesting thing about this deal the Devil was offering was what he was offering. The Devil claimed authority over the kingdoms and the prerogative to give that authority to whomever he chooses.<sup>ii</sup> Yet, in this case, we know better. Smart people know that this was something the Devil didn’t really have authority to give. But he thought he did, and he was willing to share his toxic delusion of grandeur.

That kind of thinking is known as self-aggrandizement. It’s when you promote yourself as being powerful or important. It’s when you act in ways that seemingly inflate your own power, wealth, position, or reputation. And we fall victim to it when someone plays on our ambitious desires.

But Jesus wasn’t fooled. When the Devil offered him authority over all the kingdoms of the world and all the glory he could ever want, Jesus had an answer for him: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.” Jesus’ response to the Devil’s deal was to quote Deuteronomy 6:13. And while the “worship God only” statement seems to be straightforward, there are actually layers to this response.

When Jesus said “Worship God only,” this statement is part of a larger narrative – a narrative in which Moses reminded the people how they God what they were about to get came to be. Moses told the Israelites who were about to move into the Promised Land:

*When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you...*

What Moses told the Israelites is that good things are coming, but this are good things you did not build, that you did not fill, that you did not plant. Don’t forget who made that possible. Serve the Lord your God only. Do not follow any other gods. And paralleling that promise, Jesus seemingly knew that good things were to come. The Son of God will be glorified but not if he follows the “little-g” god in front of him – the Devil himself.

What Jesus knew is that he would indeed have authority over the kingdoms of earth, but his authority would come from God. The authority of God is superior to any authority the Devil could give. But what the Devil was temptingly offering was the opportunity to speed up the timeline. All it required was a shift from God’s purposes.

The second temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness is one we all wrestle with: ambition. Ambition is not a bad thing. Having the drive and determination to achieve something is a good trait. We all know someone who has this trait – someone who gets things done and makes things happen. And we want them on our team, whether it is a group project at school or closing the big deal at work. That is, until the take all the credit or throw you under the bus. That’s when helpful ambition changes to harmful arrogance (excess), and you are willing to get to a justified means by any means necessary.

Last week, we remembered the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau, and how Esau had issues of appetite. He was willing to give away everything he had to satisfy himself.

And that worked out well for his brother Jacob, who had issues of ambition. Jacob's offer of stew to his hungry brother in exchange for his birthright might ethically fall into a gray area, but there is no gray area when it came to garnering his father's blessing. Ambitious Jacob was willing to deceive his father with lies and costuming just to get to what he wanted.

Issues of ambition revolve around strength and weakness. We want to win. We want to be seen as strong. Yet, we don't have it all. Not every characteristic about us is a strength. So to deal with our weakness, we cut corners. We "work" things out. Or we do the opposite. If we can't win, we choose not to play. The truth is, both workaholism and apathy are ambition issues. We use both to account for our weaknesses.

The root of our struggle with ambition comes from thinking we can do everything all the time. It's the temptation to live like we have unlimited capacity – like we can do it all. Yet, God is the only one with unlimited capacities. God is the only one without limits. That's why we worship God and serve God only. It's a recognition that I'm not God. I have limitations. I have strengths and weaknesses. And that's okay.

What the devil offered Jesus was a way to skip the whole "Cross" thing and still be exalted. The temptation was to get the kingdom without the cross. Jesus could opt for political power and success, or he could choose the path that may lead to suffering, humiliation, and death. If you and I were given this option, it would be hard not to choose the first. But imagine if Jesus had settled for a shortcut to His exaltation. Where would we be?

This second temptation actually reveals a truth about Jesus' time in the wilderness. The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is not about sinfulness or divine strength. Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is about our human relationship with God.<sup>iii</sup> What Jesus resisted in the wilderness is what made abundant life possible for you and me. And the fact of the matter is it was at the cross that Jesus became weak so that we could become strong. What seemed to all the world at that time to be failure was actually a win

– a win for you and me. Jesus became weak so that we might have strength. The Apostle Paul later said, “I can boast in my weakness, for when I am weak, I’ve been made strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:9). He who knew no sin became sin so that we could become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:21). Going God’s way was costly, but there would be no compromise here no matter the cost. You and I matter that much to God.

As a follower of Christ, there is a cost to discipleship. There are no shortcuts to being a disciple of Jesus Christ. There are no express lanes to deeper spiritual growth. Instead, we are asked to set aside our ambition for God’s desires. We’re to set aside our agendas for God’s timetable. We’re to set aside our glory for God’s glory.

I suspect that before we are together again next Sunday, you’re going to face a temptation to choose success and achievement – a temptation to make something else the Lord of your life. Someone will offer you an opportunity you can’t refuse. Someone will offer you an investment of time or money you must make. Someone will suggest you can get where you want to go faster if you just skip a step. And it will take everything in you not to succumb to temptation.

But imagine if you do; if you resist; if you stay on the narrow path of God’s purposes. It may feel to all the world that you’re fragile and powerless. But in reality, you’ll have all the strength you need.

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<sup>i</sup> Craddock, Fred. *Interpretation: Luke*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990

<sup>ii</sup> Culpepper, R. Alan. “Luke” in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

<sup>iii</sup> Girata, Christopher. *The Good Choice*. Sermon preached February 14, 2016. [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003dd0/the\\_good\\_choice](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003dd0/the_good_choice)