

Who You Want Me To Be

Luke 4:1-13

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⁴Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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. ³The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone."' "

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

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

⁹ 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, ¹⁰for it is written,

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

¹¹and

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

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

My daughter Abby started her second semester at TCU this past week. She's loaded up with classes and labs related to her nursing major. But she has one class she just threw in for fun. This semester, she's taking Musical Theater.

One of the things Abby already knows but will learn again is that songs make the musical. In a musical, the songs play the role of advancing the plot and heightening the

dramatic tension. The emotions and the plans of the characters are often expressed through these songs.

The memorable songs of musicals are often at the beginning and the end. For example, the musical *Hamilton* begins with the celebrated biographical rap *Alexander Hamilton* and it ends with the indelible *Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story*. But in between those two songs are numerous other songs that catch your attention either for their melodic rhythm or for the story they tell.

This is true for other musicals as well. If you've ever watched the *Sound of Music*, you know that in between *The Hills are Alive*, *My Favorite Things*, and *Edelweiss*, there's the *Lonely Goatherd* and *Do-Re-Me*. Likewise, if you love *Frozen*, you know that along with the powerful choruses of *Let It Go* and *Love is an Open Door*, there's also *Do You Want to Build a Snowman*. This arrangement is also true for the wonderful musical, *Wicked*.

If you've seen *Wicked*, you know that it retells, or gives the backstory to, *The Wizard of Oz* from the perspective of its main villain, the Wicked Witch of the West, known as Elphaba. Much of *Wicked* focuses on the relationship between Elphaba and Galinda, who later becomes Glinda the Good Witch. Galinda and Elphaba, roommates at Shiz University, bond by sharing secrets with each other. And over time, as their relationship grows, Galinda decides to take on the task of trying to turn the emerald-green-faced Elphaba into somebody more palatable. She attempts to make someone who has been rejected for years, acceptable.

Similar to those other musicals, *Wicked* has a mid-act show-stealing piece that narrates Galinda's venture. It's the song titled *Popular*. In it, Galinda declares to Elphaba that she is her new project, singing:

*Whenever I see someone less fortunate than I
And let's face it, who isn't less fortunate than I?
My tender heart tends to start to bleed
And when someone needs a makeover*

*I simply have to take over!
I know, I know exactly what they need!
And even in your case
Though it's the toughest case I've yet to face
Don't worry, I'm determined to succeed!
Follow my lead
And yes indeed, you will be
Popular!
You're gonna be popular!
I'll teach you the proper poise
When you talk to boys
Little ways to flirt and flounce
I'll show you what shoes to wear!
How to fix your hair!
Everything that really counts to be
Popular!
I'll help you be popular!
You'll hang with the right cohorts
You'll be good at sports
Know the slang you've got to know
So let's start
'Cause you've got an awfully long way to go!*

We can relate. We know the challenge of trying to be popular. There's the way you look, there's the way you act, there's the way you dress, and there's the slang you've got to know. One false move or breach of "popular" etiquette and you are categorized as a dork or a grit or a motorhead or a geek. There's not enough time this morning to talk about all the things I did to try to be popular in junior high and high school. And your list is probably just as long.

Supposedly, when we become adults, we are less concerned and burdened by being popular. You know this to be true because you don't care about looking younger, having more confidence, being more secure, or acquiring more stuff. You know that nobody – including the person in the mirror - cares if you have a six-pack or a belly

that reflects too many six packs. If that's really you, than good for you. You can tune out for the next few minutes. But for the rest of us, we know the challenge of fulfilling someone else's expectations for us. And, in our quest to be popular – to have a particular status - we become who someone else wants us to be. That was the third temptation Jesus faced.

As you heard a moment ago, there's been a scene shift from the setting of the last two temptations. The climactic scene of Jesus' temptations occurs not in the wilderness but in Jerusalem. As we know, Jerusalem was the holy city, the center of Jewish power, identity, and worship. It was the home to the Temple, the seat of religious life. And it was to the pinnacle of the Temple that the devil takes Jesus – a spot thought to be the southeast corner of the Temple wall where it's at its highest point above the valley below.

“Jesus,” the devil says. “Why don't you try defying gravity? If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.”

But the devil didn't stop with just a tempting suggestion. He backed it up with reason. Having previously been rebuffed with citations from scripture when asking Jesus to speak stone into bread and to worship him, the devil tried the reverse. His new tactic was to support his temptation with scripture.

His choice of scripture was Psalm 91 – the text found in that familiar hymn, *On Eagles Wings*. “Jesus,” he implied, “You can take a header off this temple wall because it says right here that He (God) will bear you up on eagles wings. His angels will even protect you from dashing your foot against a stone.” The devil wasn't wrong. That's what Psalm 91 says.

It's here that we realize this temptation has two parts. Part of this temptation deals with the proper use of the Word of God. We've seen this part of temptation for ourselves. We know people who use scripture like the Devil in an attempt to

manipulate God. Rather than seeing God's Word as a promise, a gracious gift of God, it becomes an instrument of judgment. It's used to judge God and our own faithfulness.ⁱ

The other part of this temptation is about Jesus' confidence in God and in himself. The devil suggests on the basis of scripture that Jesus must believe and insist on divine protection.ⁱⁱ As the Son of God, surely he should expect safety and protection from his heavenly Father. Why not test that out? Why not use your power as the Son of God to prove this to be true?

This third temptation was an attempt to make Jesus' religious identity self-serving. Not only was it about offering Jesus an opportunity to prove his distinctiveness. It was also about categorizing Jesus. It was an attempt to lump Jesus in with the "wonder workers." These flashy miracle workers were mighty in the Hellenistic world. They would attract big crowds with their abilities to do phenomenal feats. And who doesn't like a thrill. Even today, entertainment is fueled by our need for illusions that will be the quick fix to the agony of reality we face daily.ⁱⁱⁱ If you've ever "numbed out" to Netflix, you know what this means. The devil was presenting Jesus with a quick way to gain influence and followers with flashy shows of power; to more than triple his number of followers on the first century versions of Instagram and Twitter. "I'll help you be popular," he offered.

This temptation to be self-serving was one of identity for the Son of God. For us, this temptation to be self-serving is also about identity – the identity of who we are to others. This temptation highlights our need for approval, and where our sense of approval comes from. One end of the approval spectrum is acceptance while the other end is rejection. We know what it's like to be rejected. Your crush says no when you ask them out. You're not chosen for the job. Your proposal was shot down. And, we also know acceptance. The feeling that comes when we are one of the cool kids. When

we have access to the VIP lounge. When you were singled-out for promotion. We like acceptance a whole-lot more than rejection and so if there is any way to ensure we're on the inside looking out, it's tempting to take the shortcut to get there.

Jesus could have showed off. He could have demonstrated his unlimited divine abilities. But instead, Jesus responds to the devil's offer with a rooted reply – a response rooted in an underlying narrative that he is dependent on God rather than self: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

Those ten words of Jesus' response come from Deuteronomy 6. Similar to the previous two responses, his scripture is a subsection of a larger text and narrative. And just like last week, there's more to the story. Deuteronomy 6:16 begins:

Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. You must diligently keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and his decrees, and his statutes that he has commanded you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may go in and occupy the good land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give you...

Massah is in the story of Exodus 17. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert, they complained to Moses that they needed water. Moses response was to ask them why they were quarrelling with him and testing the Lord? But their grumbling grew even more intense. They accused Moses of bringing them out of Egypt only to let them die of thirst in the desert. Then, at God's direction, Moses went ahead of the people, struck a rock with his staff, and water burst forth. Exodus 17:7 says *Moses called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord, saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not?'*

Is the Lord among us or not? That was actually the question Jesus was answering with his reply. Could he keep God's commands and trust God's provision? Or did he

need to serve himself – to make sure he was who he was born to be? Jesus’ confident reply indicated he trusted what God had in store for him.

Is the Lord is among us? is also the question we face. And how do we know for sure? Here’s a start. We know the Lord is among us by believing God’s word that God promises to be with us. Like in a marriage, as soon as one starts wondering or asking, “If you really love me, then…” then one is no longer living by the marriage promise, but using it to manipulate the other. When we start looking for miracles to prove God’s presence, we are not living by God’s word.^{iv}

Jesus was tempted to put God’s promises to the test. Specifically, Jesus was tempted to call upon God to deliver him from death in Jerusalem. Ironically, Jesus would eventually face death in Jerusalem, and when he did he would choose not his own deliverance (take this cup from me) but faithfulness to God (yet not my will, but yours be done) (22:42). Jesus’ response to the devil is the counterpart to his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. And what happened in the hours that follow is that Jesus isn’t taken to the top of the Temple but to the top of a cross. There, it isn’t the devil who tempts him to jump down, but the people who cry out, “If you are the Son of God, jump down from the cross. Save yourself and then we will believe in you.” Jesus did not come down. The angels did not save him from hurting his feet. They did not save him from an agonizing death.^v Jesus would fulfill his role as the Son of God not by escaping death but by accepting death and defeating it.^{vi} Both at the top of the temple and on the cross, Jesus refused to put God on trial directly.

And that fact is huge for you and me. It was at the cross that Jesus dealt fully with this temptation - with our need for approval. At the cross, Jesus was rejected. And it is in his rejection, we find our acceptance. Because of Jesus, Hebrews 4:16 says, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence.

Because of this, our lives have to be about more than our own pursuits. Our lives have to be about more than our own self-interests. Far too often, the voice of evil sounds a lot like the voice of good: “Take care of yourself.” “Save the world.” “Prove your faith.” While none of those things sound particularly self-destructive on the surface, what you and I know is that temptations don’t look like temptations until we see them in the rearview mirror.^{vii}

That’s why our lives have to be about obedience – obedience to God. A willingness to submit to God again and again and again. Blind, radical obedience. And this obedience is about more than just knowing scripture. What we were reminded of today is that the devil also knows scripture. Our lives must be rooted in God’s narrative of deliverance and in faithful obedience to God rather than in self-reliance, which is the devil’s story.^{viii}

2,000 years ago, Jesus made us his project. He took on a makeover project. It wasn’t a popularity project. It wasn’t a reputation project. It was a redemption project. And what he taught us is everything that really counts to be obediently faithful. So let’s get started because, perhaps, we have an awfully long way to go.

ⁱ Stoffregen, Brian P. “Luke 4:1-13” in *CrossMarks*. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke4x1.htm>

ⁱⁱ Tashjian, Jirair. “Luke 4:1-13” in *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*. March 10, 2019. www.crivoice.org/lectionary/YearC/Clent1nt.html

ⁱⁱⁱ Woods, Peter. “The Biggest Temptation of All” in *I Am Listening*. February 15, 2010. <https://thelisteninghermit.com/2010/02/15/the-biggest-temptation-of-all/>

^{iv} Stoffregen

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Culpepper, R. Alan. “Luke” in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. IX. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

^{vii} Erickson, Brian. *Dress Rehearsal in the Desert*. Sermon preached February 17, 2013. https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20033fa/dress_rehearsal_in_the_desert

^{viii} Reese, Ruth Ann. “Commentary on Luke 4:1-13” in *Working Preacher*. February 14, 2016.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/first-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-41-13>