

The Third Temptation of Jesus -Worship the Lord and Him alone

IN HIS 1954 NOVEL, *The Year the Yankees Lost the Pennant*, Douglass Wallop tells a funny story about an overweight, out of shape, middle aged man who is an avid major league baseball fan. The team he roots for is the Washington Senators, who can't ever beat the New York Yankees for the American League pennant. One summer, when the Senators are again trailing the Yankees badly, a stranger offers him an incredible deal: he will be transformed into a major league baseball player and lead the Senators to victory over the Yankees.

Who is the stranger? None other than the devil himself. And what is the price for giving our fan what he wants? There's a lot of dodging and shuffling by the stranger, but eventually it becomes clear: he must trade his soul to the devil.

He agrees, of course. The rest of the book is a hilarious account of the experiences of our middle-aged man after he has been transformed into Joe Hardy, a 21-year-old baseball phenomenon. In two months, Joe hits 48 home runs, bats .545, and becomes a nationally known star. Every sports page in the United States follows his feats. He gets a fat contract from the Senators. Women chase him. As we might expect, he keeps bumping into his wife, who doesn't recognize him after his transformation.

Is Joe able to get out of his deal with the devil? I won't give it away – that's part of what makes the book funny. It is still available to buy online.

One of the amusing aspects of the book is that you discover many people who have made the same deal with the devil. Not to beat the Yankees, but to do what they want to do – be a beautiful woman, a millionaire, or a psychoanalyst. It's a deal the devil will make anytime with anybody. "You can do what you want," he will say. "And it can be something good, like beating the Yankees. Just sell me your soul."

THE DEVIL OFFERED THAT deal to Jesus, too. Jesus had demonstrated His commitment to be an obedient Son of God by His answers to the first two temptations. Then the devil shifted his strategy. The third temptation did not begin like the first two with the words, **"If you are the**

Son of God ...

” As we will see, the devil seems to have conceded for the moment that Jesus wanted to be obedient. So the thrust of the third temptation was this: What would Jesus the Son be willing to do to establish the kingdom of God on earth?

How kingly do you think Jesus looked after 40 days and nights of fasting in the wilderness? He was alone, tired, dirty, hungry, and thirsty. Being king over God’s kingdom must have seemed a long way off. The devil seized the opportunity. In essence, he said, “Let me show you a way to fulfil your heart’s desire.” He took Jesus to a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. That would have included Rome! At that moment their splendour and Jesus’ appearance would have been quite a contrast. “**“All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’**”

There are several things to note here.

A. **The appeal.** Consider the appeal of the offer from the devil’s viewpoint.

Jesus’ Condition

The Devil’s Offer

Deprived – tired, hungry

Splendor, not suffering

Alone with the wild animals

Significance, not obscurity

Waiting indefinitely

Instant results, not delayed

Nothing accomplished

Power to do what He wanted

To each condition of Jesus, the devil offered a solution. The last one is the key to this temptation. In answering the first two temptations, Jesus had already resisted the first three aspects of the devil's third temptation. He would not turn stones into bread to stop His suffering from hunger. He would not jump off the highest point of the temple to get instant notoriety. In neither temptation would He succumb to the lure of a shortcut to get instant results.

THE DEVIL THEN ADDED ANOTHER element to make up a new and enticing package: "You can have splendour, significance and instant results, AND you can serve God while you do it. That's what you want to do, isn't it? Serve God? What have you done with your life so far, Jesus? Been a carpenter's son, huh? Look, I'll give you the kingdoms, and you may do with them as you wish. You're a king, aren't you? Inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth, if that's what you want to do. Free Israel from Roman rule. Establish justice in the world. Take care of the poor. Bring about world peace. Wouldn't that please God? Do it without suffering! Do it successfully! Do it now! YOU CAN HAVE IT ALL!

B. **THE TRAP.** There is always a catch with an offer like that. What is the catch here? The devil also said, “If you will bow down and worship me”

THE ACT OF PROSTRATING oneself in worship is a symbolic gesture. It appears that the devil attempted to minimize the significance of that act. He did not ask that it be done in public. Apparently, the devil would have been satisfied if Jesus had bowed down to him privately on the mountain. There is also the suggestion that the devil presented it as a onetime event. And the devil did not ask that worship of him be exclusive. Knowing that Jesus wanted to establish a kingdom for God, he could scarcely have asked up front to be worshiped exclusively.

The devil would have liked for Jesus to believe that after bowing down before him, He would be finished with him. WORSHIP SIGNIFIES SEVERAL THINGS, however:

- allegiance to the one who is worshiped (there is a duty of loyalty);
- the superiority of the one who is worshiped (worship flows from inferior to superior);
- dependence of the worshiper on the one who is worshiped (the worshiper acknowledges that he is not sufficient without the one who is worshiped).

Jesus realized that the symbolic act of bowing down and worshiping the devil would also carry with it a continuing obligation.

C. **COULD THE DEVIL DELIVER ON HIS OFFER?** Some think that the devil was lying about being able to give the kingdoms to Jesus. After all, we know that God ultimately rules over all things. And we know that the devil is a liar – Jesus called him a murderer and a liar (John 8:44).

Just because the devil is a liar, however, does not mean that he cannot make true statements. To say that the devil must lie at all times makes him a caricature, almost a cartoon character. He is in business. You cannot do business if you lie all of the time. While the devil is not committed to the truth, he will make a true statement if it suits his purposes. That seems to be the case here. In Luke’s account of the temptations, the devil claimed that God had given him the kingdoms, and that he could in turn give them to whomever he wished (Luke 4:6). Jesus seemed to accept this. Later on, in John 12:31 and in John 16:11, Jesus called the devil “**the prince of this world**”

.” Therefore, I take the devil’s statement to be true,
as far as it goes

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Furthermore, if the devil’s claim had not been true, would not Jesus have just said so? That would have been the easy answer: “Come on, Satan, you know you can’t deliver the kingdoms to me!” Significantly, Jesus did not answer the devil that way.

JESUS’ ANSWER TO the devil was simple and to the point. As he did in answering the first two temptations, Jesus referred to the Book of Deuteronomy. He said, “**Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only**” (Matthew 4:10). (The quotation, at least in part, is from Deuteronomy 6:13)

It is easy to get caught up in the details and implications of the third temptation and miss the central issue. Jesus did not miss it: GOD ALONE IS WORTHY OF OUR WORSHIP.

As we have already observed, the devil did not ask Jesus to worship him exclusively. That was his tactic with Israel, too.

We read in 2 Kings 17:35-40a:

WHEN THE LORD MADE A covenant with the Israelites, he commanded them: “Do not worship any other gods or bow down to them, serve them or sacrifice to them. But the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt with mighty power and outstretched arm, is the one you must worship... .” They would not listen, however, but persisted in their former practices.□ Even while these people were worshiping the Lord, they were serving their idols (emphasis added).

For that reason, the northern kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians and scattered among the nations.

WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR CONCEPT of God when we worship Him other than as He has commanded? Adding another god, or worshiping an image of God, makes Him in our minds something other than He is – sovereign, one, transcendent. So even if we continue to worship God at the same time as we worship something else, really we are not worshiping the true God. We may still call Him God, but we have reduced God in our minds so that He is just like the idols – a creature of our own imaginations.

Other gods need not be idols in the form of images. Money can be an object of worship, as can our families, our jobs, and our nation. Although Israel by the time of Christ had ceased worshiping idols in the form of images, it had not stopped worshiping money. JESUS SAID IN MATTHEW 6:24, *“You cannot serve both God and Money.”*

As the last quote indicates, Jesus also recognized that worship includes service. The devil did not use the word **“serve.”** But it is important that Jesus did. Whatever we revere, or to whatever we attribute the power to accomplish what we want, will be served by us. And while we may persist in worshiping God and other things for a while, eventually there will be a conflict. We have to make a choice.

Lessons for us

1. DON'T BE DECEIVED BY THE APPEAL OF THE OFFER

The third temptation will include things such as control, self-interest, pride, glory and power, to name a few. But they may appear cloaked in the context of ministry, as they did to Jesus. In an article, J.I. Packer said, “Satan seeks to trap God’s servants into doing evil, thinking it to be good... .” The third temptation is one to which those who have demonstrated the desire to do God’s will may be especially vulnerable. The devil tried to disguise the temptation to Jesus by appealing to His desire to establish God’s kingdom. He may disguise the temptation to us by appealing to our ministry or life dreams. Perhaps it will come in the form of an opportunity for service we have longed for, or the chance to see our spiritual gift have terrific results. The devil will tell us that all we need to do is compromise a little bit. We must always be watchful that we do not unwittingly bow the knee to Satan thinking that we are ministering for God.

ERIC GRAHAM EXPRESSES it like this:

There can be no divided allegiance in spiritual things; so our Lord teaches us. We cannot serve God and Mammon, or God and Satan, or God and any principle independent of him and therefore contrary to his will. Only too often ecclesiastical authorities have failed here; trying to combine the service of the secular power or of their own temporalities or ecclesiastical politics with their service of God. They have employed even against fellow-Christians these methods of force and diplomacy which our Lord in his third temptation set aside so definitely; they have thought that the devil's weapons could be used on behalf of God; they have even failed to distinguish between God's ways and the devil's. They have not been content to serve God alone; it seemed too slow and uncertain a method of achieving results which they were sure – often quite mistakenly – were according to his will. Yet all the time they professed, and indeed believed themselves, to be serving him.

2. BEWARE OF OFFERS THAT PROMISE things that God has not promised.

- Super results. “Follow these methods,” a youth leader is told, “and the size of your youth group will triple.” “Raise your family this way,” parents are told, “and your children will be obedient and follow Christ.” “Use our fundraising plan,” church leaders are told, “and you will raise so much money that your building fund goal will be exceeded.”
- Instant results. “Your ministry doesn’t have to take years to develop,” a seminary graduate is told. “Get a successful ministry now! Not later!”
- Recognition and importance. “Be significant for God,” we are told. “Be a leader in your church. Have impact for Christ. That’s what successful Christians do.”
- No suffering. “God wants you to be blessed,” Christians everywhere are being told. “Expect happiness and prosperity.” Perhaps the most popular form this message takes in our circles today is fulfillment. “Enter this ministry,” we are told, “and find fulfillment like you’ve never had before.” Anytime you are offered a fulfilling ministry in this church or anywhere else, watch out! Somebody is trying to sell you something.

TEMPTATION MAY COME FROM a source that we do not expect. Look how Satan presented himself to Jesus. He accepted Jesus as God’s Son. He believed Jesus could do miracles. He quoted Scripture with approval. He came to Jesus in His time of trial. He seemed to encourage faith in God (although it was really testing God that he encouraged). He offered Jesus a way to fulfil His ministry. He appeared orthodox in his beliefs and very helpful.

That looks like a good Christian friend, does it not? Or a religious leader who can be trusted. In the church, sadly, those are the two likeliest sources of temptation. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Satan will appear as an angel of light, not as a hairy demon with a pitchfork tail. He is a false friend and a false teacher.

1. THE END DOES NOT JUSTIFY THE MEANS. Recently we have seen more corporate scandals than we have in many years. Transactions have been accounted for in a way that inflated profits. The justification has been that increasing stock prices are good for the shareholders. But once the knee was bowed to financial success and honesty was ignored, there was no turning back. The demand of stockholders for ever increasing stock prices had to be satisfied. When the fraud was discovered, the financial house of cards crumbled and many innocent people got hurt.

As our church and other churches face financial shortfalls, there will be pressure to cut biblical corners to meet the budget requirements. Be on guard that we do not value successful ministry as a church over obedience to God and thus yield to the third temptation.

1. WORSHIP IS NOT ABOUT WHAT we receive in return. Worship is the latest “hot button” of the Christian church in the Western world. In many churches, it is a “celebration” with lively songs and staged excitement. People have based their decisions about whether to attend the worship services on what they will get out of it.

The devil tried to make worship a purchase and sale transaction. "Worship me," he said to Jesus, "and then I will give you the kingdoms of the world." That is not how we are to approach worship.

Worship of God alone is our highest privilege and our highest duty. We should worship Him because of what He has already done for us. Israel was to worship God because He had delivered the nation from captivity in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:6-7). In the same manner, we are to worship God because of the blessings of salvation that we have in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3-14).

We come to worship to give honour and glory to God.

THE STORY IS TOLD OF A PASTOR of a large church who had a dream one night that really opened his eyes. He dreamed that he could see his own church worship service on Sunday morning. But there was something very strange happening.

The choir was singing. The mouths of the choir members were open.....but no sound was heard.

The people in the congregation were singing. But there was nothing from their mouths, either. The preacher himself got up to preach his typical Sunday sermon. He opened his mouth to preach.....but nothing came out.

There was absolutely no sound at all in the entire worship centre. Then, the pastor saw a little girl up in the balcony and heard her little voice singing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

The pastor was confused and suddenly woke up. “Lord, what was I dreaming? It doesn’t make sense to me.” He asked.

The Lord spoke to his heart and said, “Pastor, you just saw a picture of what I see in your ministry and in your church every Sunday morning. People are singing and you are preaching.....but I hear nothing. Your heart is not focused on me. You are focused on yourself. The only one I heard in your church last Sunday was the little girl in the balcony who matters to very few people in your church.

But she matters to me.....because she came to church today with the right motive: to love me with all of her heart!”

What if Jesus showed you a dream of our church? What would He hear? Whose heart is truly focused on the Lord?