

Luke 4:1-13
March 9, 2025

Testing

In the Garden of Eden, there were two trees, The Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The latter was forbidden because it represented divine concerns and status, and thus was not the concern of the people in the garden, except to obey.

One might question why it was there. If it was not only unnecessary for Adam and Eve to partake, but also dangerous, would not the whole created order have been safer and healthier without it?

The presence of the tree, of course, marks an aspect of creation that is crucial, and could have been denied to people only at the expense of love. That aspect is freedom, for love can only exist in freedom; the freedom to *affirm* God's place as Creator and author of the Moral Demand, and of Salvation, and the place in the scheme of things that God has given to people.

Without that freedom, men and women, would be soul-less. They would not be fully what God intended. They would be like a computer that has been programmed or an unthinking machine, able only to do as instructed, with no capacity for the affirmation that was needed to complete them, turn them into a person, make them whole.

The tree was described in three ways; it was good for food, pleasing to the eye, and desirable for gaining wisdom. It was able to satisfy the need for

sustenance, the desire for pleasure, and the pursuit of divinity. Because it was desirable it was tempting. Because it was forbidden yet available, it was a test.

One of the features of modern life is education, and I mean by that formal education. It has only been in the last century and a half or so that most of the world's children have attended school. In previous times, only those whose birth marked them for the higher echelons of the social order and thus for leadership went to school or received tutoring. Now, an education is desired for every person.

One of the features of both education and life, is testing. We give exams. We take exams. To my knowledge it is an almost universal method of teaching. Every now and again we have to try things out and see where we are, what has been learned.

In the gospel reading for the day, Jesus, after his baptism, is taken out into the wilderness where he himself is tested. There were three tests mentioned, and they may be said to represent three categories of testing that have a broad reach into our lives.

The first test is about the bread and it was encountered because he hadn't eaten and thus was hungry. "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread," the devil said. In other words Jesus was tempted to believe that life consists in the meeting of our most basic needs; for food, and it may be expanded to include the human need for clothing and shelter, and for money and things; and he was

being asked to see them as the highest good, and at a time of great vulnerability.

His answer is that there is more to life than all that, more than food, clothing, shelter, money and things. He set forth the conviction that to excessively focus on these things will leave a person unsatisfied, empty. “Human beings do not live on bread alone.”

We say it over and over. I have heard it all my life, but we are tested nonetheless. It is hard not to be focused in some way on these basic needs because we deal with them everyday and are always threatened with their lack. We are tempted to obsess over them though countless witnesses testify to the failure of such things to result in fulfillment. “If you seek your life,” Jesus said, “you *will* lose it.”

The next test happened when the Devil went out and offered Jesus the world. Here we move into a category of testing that *affirms* that there is more to life than food and clothing. There is power and wealth. I am not sure how realistic it was for a poor Galilean artisan to aspire or maybe even be tempted by wealth and power in the world of Tiberius and Herod; but I am also not sure how realistic it is for any one of us to believe we have much opportunity for such attainments, but I am sure that at some level we are all attracted by the idea of power, at least in terms of control over our own lives.

One should be warned against the lesser more subtle ways of satisfying this urge to be in control. “Worship

the Lord your God and serve God only,” is the reply, which comes from the 91st psalm and is a variation on the first commandment. The example we are offered here and the instruction given by Jesus is that the meaning of life is not found in the satisfaction of basic needs or chasing after the world.

The final crisis is interesting because it involves the idea that God exists to serve people instead of the other way around; the idea that the source of life and meaning is a test we make of God rather than a test God makes of us.

Every time I hear people speak of their unbelief on the grounds that believers are hypocrites, or because they point in one way or another to the failure of the Christian church to transform the world; or when I hear people complain that they choose not to believe in God because of the presence of pain and suffering and evil in the world and how they just can't reconcile the idea of a *good* God making *this* world; I am aware that there is a *strong* temptation to *put God* to the test, when the reality is that God has put *us* to the test, and it is *we that have failed*.

One must come to a way of understanding life with all its demands, all of its contradictions, all its beauty and pleasure and pain, with an unrelenting faith, and that is what Jesus has exhibited here. Read the psalms and see in them the depth of pain and sometimes even doubt, and judge for yourself whether they are given in faith or unbelief, and I believe you will conclude that they are faithful, even though they sometimes ask bold

questions. Faith asks God bold questions, but it never puts God to the *test*. “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Life is an examination. Human beings are the takers, not the givers. Everyone has failed the test, which is a truth about life. Only when people compare themselves to the others around them is it possible to be deluded into the conclusion that some are better, some worse than others, and that some have passed, are among the good. It is a dangerous illusion.

For in the comparison to the demand itself, and to the giver of the demand, *everyone* falls short. This conclusion is no surprise. It is clearly stated in the biblical accounts, and has been a strong feature of biblical theology from the start. In the acknowledgment of this truth one can make sense of the principle rules given in scripture: Do not judge; do to others what you would have them do to you; love your neighbor as yourself.

But there *is* an exception, and that is the testing of Jesus, which has been passed with flying colors, though it led to his rejection by the authorities, and his trial and conviction, and his execution. It demanded of him his all, and his wrestling match with the devil, and with God, ran deep.

He passed the test *for us*. He kept on passing the test throughout the course of his life, each time he was followed by a crowd, or praised by people, or

questioned by the authorities, or abandoned by his friends, or tried and convicted.

In this triumph life retains its beauty and meaning. Christ’s victory is counted as our victory, so that the failures that have become normative for us, do not lead to the destruction of our lives, but, are rather instructive, dare I say, educational. God redeems human failures by using them to mold our character and shape our behavior and heal the damage done and create in us a goodness and a love worthy of heaven itself. By the mercy of God, human failure does not lead to death, but to love and life. This is the gospel news for us today, may it be on our minds and in our hearts.

Romans 12:1-3

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

God's mercy

Sacrifice - the doing of good as sacrificial living

Holy and Pleasing

Reasonable Service, Spiritual Worship

Mind Renewal

Self-esteem

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