

**Gifts of the Dark Wood**  
**Part 4: The Gift of Temptation**  
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Scripture: Luke 4:1-15

## **I. Our Greatest Temptation**

I'm guessing you have not often heard a sermon about temptation being a gift. Yet, even when we fall for certain temptations – particularly ones that don't cause irreparable damage to us or others – we can learn important lessons that help us become the Children of God we are intended to be.

Do you remember the old nursery rhyme about Tommy Tinker? “Little Tommy Tinker sat on a clinker and he began to cry, ‘Ma! Ma!’ Poor little innocent guy.” Guess what poor Tommy learned not to ever do again? Wisdom is more often taught by the School of Hard Knocks than when cruising down Easy Street.

Speaking of school, I once heard an interview with a highly successful high school principal who was asked what he considered to be the greatest challenge to providing a proper education for his students. The principal did not hesitate: “My biggest challenge is helicopter parents.” As he described “helicopter parents,” these are parents who hover like helicopters overhead, constantly overseeing every aspect of their child's life. They are overprotective and overbearing, taking excessive interest in the safety and success of their child, often to the point of micromanaging their affairs.

The principal observed that this kind of parenting, though stemming from a desire for the child's welfare and safety, often leads to the exact opposite result. Children of “helicopter parents” rarely develop proper problem-solving skills. They tend to have lower self-confidence, increased anxiety, and an unhealthy degree of dependence on their parents. Why? Because they are never given the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them.

In response to helicoptering, the principal encourages parents to allow their children to make as many mistakes as possible – and even be glad when they do make mistakes while they are still in their parents' care. When children grow up and leave the comfort and safety of home, the “real world” will not be nearly as kind, gracious, or generous toward them when they make mistakes. Far better to learn from mistakes while the consequences are relatively low than when they are high, or even irreparable.

I think God is like that high school principal. One of the reasons God doesn't hover over us like a helicopter parent – even though we keep expecting God to – is because God has created this realm as a place to make mistakes in and learn from. How will we ever become mature Children of God in any more than name if we have never learned first-hand why certain forms of behavior benefit us and our community, while other forms do not?

One of the lessons our mistakes should teach us, if we're paying attention, is that we are tempted to do the "wrong good" far more than we are tempted to do something overtly evil. We may fantasize about evil acts, like throwing our power-hungry boss out the window, or setting our self-righteous neighbor's car ablaze, but for most of us, these are no more than passing fantasies. What really entices us is the temptation to do something we perceive as entirely good, but later come to regret.

Today's passage about Jesus's temptation in the wilderness shows us a clear example of a time when Jesus himself was tempted to do the "wrong good," and why it is so important to learn how to discern the difference between the "right good" and the "wrong good."

Immediately after Jesus's baptism, the Holy Spirit is said to have led Jesus into the wilderness, where he fasts and prays for 40 days. Jesus is there to discern his marching orders as God's anointed Messiah. What will his core mission be? How will he carry it out? And how can he trust that his conclusions are trustworthy?

The scriptures tell us that Satan shows up to tempt Jesus, seeking to divert him from his path. Yet, despite Satan's best efforts, the temptations serve as a gift, not a curse. Jesus emerges from the wilderness quite confident about what his mission is, and what it is not, as a result of facing these temptations and overcoming them.

Did you know that Satan chose to tempt Jesus with good things, not intrinsically evil things, as his best way to divert Jesus from his path? Certainly, William Blake knew this. Look how he depicts the scene of Jesus's temptations.



In this painting, Satan doesn't look evil. In fact, he appears much like an Old Testament prophet. He's pointing up to the heavens, not down to the pits of hell. This is Blake's way of indicating that the only kind of temptation that would truly tempt someone as spiritually advanced as Jesus is the temptation to do something good – but the wrong good.

A good thing can be the wrong good thing when, for instance, it is done in the wrong measure or proportion – like when a helicopter parent over-protects a child. Nothing wrong with protecting one's child! But over-protecting leads to the opposite result.

Another way a good thing can become the wrong good thing is when you are tempted to do something that is perfectly good and right *for someone else to do*, not you. This time of year, I am especially cognizant of the special

gift of tax accountants. While my accountant – who is superb, honest, and joyful in his work – is clearly doing the right good thing, for him, I would sooner hang myself than be an accountant.

That's okay. He would probably sooner hang himself than be a minister! We're both doing the right good thing – for us – which would be the wrong good thing for the other.

Still another way that a good thing can be a wrong good thing is when we do something that is good and right for us to do, only at the wrong time. As most anyone in a long-term relationship can tell you, there is a right time to offer a small critique of your partner, and a wrong time – a whole lot of very wrong times!

The three temptations Jesus faces in the wilderness mostly have to do with proportionality and proper fit for his particular calling. The temptation to turn stone into bread is not simply about Jesus breaking his fast. It's about feeding the world. Is feeding hungry people a good thing? Yes! Does Jesus ever feed the hungry during his ministry? Yes! But clearly if Jesus understood his highest calling to be feeding the world's hungry, the hungry would have been comforted – at least temporarily – but what of all the world's starving souls?

The second temptation, to exercise dominion over all the kingdoms of the world, was similarly booby-trapped. Is political power intrinsically bad? No! Did Jesus wield political power during his ministry? Yes! But if Jesus had understood his highest calling to be defeating his enemies and becoming the emperor of the world, he never would have shown us the way to defeating our true enemy: the enemy within.

The final temptation – leaping from the roof of the Temple to have angels save Jesus in full view of onlookers – wasn't about the mere performance of miracles. Are miracles bad? No! Did Jesus perform miracles during his ministry? Yes! But if Jesus understood his highest calling to be the performance of miracles alone, then while he may have convinced people beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was the Messiah, he would have eliminated the need for faith. If you think it's worth trading faith for certainty, just consider the people in this world who are absolutely certain about all their beliefs. Such certainty fuels Muslim terrorists and radical Zionists alike. It fuels Christian Nationalists who seek to recreate our nation in their image, not that of God's diverse children. No, had Jesus created absolute certainty about himself or God, would he have created God's heaven on earth or a living hell? Satan was pretty sure he knew the answer!

Before moving on, I invite you to take a few minutes to consider where you may have succumbed to the temptation of doing the wrong good – either because you carried a good thing too far, or did the right thing at the wrong time, or because you were the wrong person to be doing the right thing. Don't be ashamed to make an honest assessment. Remember that such temptations are so enormous, and subtle, that they are the only temptations Satan thought could stand a chance against Jesus himself.

## **II. The Gift of Temptation**

Dr. Woo-kyoung Ahn, is a Professor of Psychology at Yale University and author of the book, *Thinking 101: How to Reason Better to Live Better*. It's a book for grown-ups. You'd think that, as adults, we would have mastered "101" classes on Thinking and graduated to higher levels long ago. As it turns out, a whole lot of "wrong good" things can result from reasoning that isn't as "right" as we assume it is. Professor Ahn's book is meant to help us run a slightly tighter ship when it comes to our use of reason and logic, so that the resulting actions are responses to real conditions rather than false assumptions.

To this end, Professor Ahn devotes an entire chapter to over-easy assumptions we tend to make regarding the motivations of others. She asks, “[Can we] recognize what others think or feel simply by trying to imagine ourselves in their situations? It feels like the answer should be yes. Precisely because we believe that it is possible, we often complain to those who are impervious to our needs, ‘Why can’t you try to see this from my point of view?’ When we are tortured by a boss who expects too much from us, we wonder how they could have forgotten what it was like when they were at the entry level. It doesn’t feel like it’s too much to ask for a little understanding! But, *our intuitions here are wrong, or at least not supported by the evidence.*” (emphasis mine)

Professor Ahn notes that a few years ago, a team of researchers demonstrated, through 24 out of 25 experiments, “that our ability to understand what others are thinking or feeling cannot be improved merely by perspective-taking. That is, putting ourselves in another’s shoes and imagining how or why they acted in a way that we don’t understand or agree with.”

In other words, when we assume that we know why certain people behave the way they do – what thoughts or assumptions guide their actions – 24 out of 25 studies show that we are most likely wrong. If we respond to these people’s actions based on mistaken assumptions about their motivations, we will likely respond in ways that do more harm than good.

Did you ever hear about the farmer whose axe went missing one day? At the very time he noticed his axe was not in its usual place, one of his neighbors started acting suspicious. Alarmed, the farmer carefully eyed his neighbor’s behavior for a full week. Certain peculiarities raised his alarm still further. He noted how his neighbor seemed to be avoiding him. He noted how his neighbor averted his gaze on those occasions he couldn’t avoid the farmer.

“This thief is a very poor actor!” the farmer said to himself. He later repeated his thought out loud to his friends, warning them to beware of his thieving neighbor. His friends went and warned other people in the village to beware of this man.

Then one day, the farmer found his axe in the orchard, right where he’d last been chopping wood. After finding his axe, the farmer was amazed at how swiftly his neighbor stopped acting so suspiciously.

The farmer was not a bad person. If his axe had truly been stolen by his neighbor, no one would have faulted him for being upset, and the gratitude he received from his friends for warning them about his neighbor would have been deserved. Yet, instead of preventing his friends from becoming victims of theft, the farmer inadvertently made his neighbor a victim. When good people do the “wrong good” thing, all kinds of unintended consequences may result.

According to Professor Ahn, and the 24 out of 25 studies that demonstrate how often we misperceive other peoples’ motivations, there is a tried-and-true way to avoid doing the “wrong good”: Don’t just assume you know why others act the way they do. Have a conversation with them! If they engage in behavior that you find inappropriate, allow them the dignity of telling you in their own words why they did what they did, or do what they do.

By the way, Jesus had a similar solution to this problem of misperceived motivations. He said, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Who among us would want other people naming what motivates our behaviors – especially behind our backs – without at least offering us a chance to speak for ourselves?

According to professor Ahn, when we actually invite others to speak for themselves, more often than not we change our mind about their motivations. This discovery may or may not lead to any greater agreement between two people. Yet, it makes the struggle less about good versus evil than about one form of good versus another.

Imagine how the world would change if we all assumed that the people we disagree with are, like us, sincerely trying to do good, not evil? Imagine how our world might change if we further assumed that when evil results from other people’s actions, it is a result of succumbing to a temptation that only Jesus was able to consistently avoid – the temptation to do the wrong good?

How would these assumptions change the nature of our response to the sins of others? How would they change people’s response to our own sins? And how might this approach change how we respond to our own sin? I think we would be less hard on ourselves (and others), and more compassionate. We would deal more effectively, and humanely, with the issues that divide us.

Well, the big lesson I’ve learned from the Gift of Temptation is that hell will probably freeze over before everyone in the world starts looking for the good that other people are seeking, rather than the evil, when their behaviors seem inappropriate. Yet, the bigger lesson this gift has taught me is that we don’t have to wait for hell to freeze over before we can change our world. Our world changes as soon as we start treating people this way ourselves.

I have the feeling that Jesus would want us to start here, anyway.