

"The Slackitude Temptation"

Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. 2 For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry.

3 During that time the devil came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, 6 and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.'" 7 Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God.'"

8 Next the devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 "I will give it all to you," he said, "if you will kneel down and worship me." 10 "Get out of her, Satan," Jesus told him. "For the Scriptures say, 'You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'"

11 Then the devil went away and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Chris Gottbrath is no slacker. In spite of the fact that he wrote an academic treatise he fondly calls "The Slack Paper," this astronomer/computer engineer/swing music lover is no sluggard, at least intellectually. In this essay, Gottbrath unleashes a barrage of high-powered mathematical calculations to answer this timeless question: If you're running a long race, should you take the slow and steady approach, or chill at the back of the pack and then sprint from behind to win?

Aesop, of course, favored the methodical pace of the turtle over the rabbit's last minute energy spurt. Famous race car driving legend Richard Petty said once, "One of the first things my father said to me when I started racing was "Win the race as slow as you can." (Esquire, August 2001, 120). Chris Gottbrath mathematically calculated that a more successful strategy in problem solving begins with slacking off. That's right. Don't touch the project for a while. Go to the beach. Hit the mountains. Kick your feet up. Relax.

Gottbrath's research goes like this: According to "Moore's Law," the computational power available at a particular price doubles every 18 months in your local computer showroom. If the overall productivity of the newest computers overtakes older technology at this rate, one is better off "slacking," or waiting for some period of time, before purchasing a new computer and beginning the project. Waiting to purchase and work on the newest, fastest computer while your competitors plod along on soon-to-be obsolete machines means improved productivity.

The first step, then, if you want to beat the competition, is to achieve an attitude of slack: slackitude. Diligent laziness. Note that if your rope has slack, it doesn't mean that

you have let go, you are still holding on, but there is slack in the rope it's not tight. As Gottbrath coaches individuals to seek optimal slackitude, others in the world of time management advise other common sense strategies, helpful even to the mathematically challenged. Now please don't take this information and then tell your employer that Pastor Rick said to procrastinate, so I waited till the night before the project was due so I don't have it done. I did not say that it is good to procrastinate. I am saying that Chris Gottbrath's research and mathematics say that it is good to have an attitude of slack to allow your brain to digest the project which means making the time to actually think about it, and then work on it. That is nothing like procrastinating till the last minute so that you have to work all night long to finish. Gil Gordon writes in "Turn It Off" that our long-term effectiveness as employees or entrepreneurs is at risk if we don't occasionally turn off our computers, cell phones and brains. That means we need to unplug regularly to be our best.

Who doesn't answer the phone during dinner? Who doesn't sneak into the office on holidays or weekends? Check e-mail on vacation? Gordon, like Gottbrath, advises us to slack off a little. We need to rest. **[NOTE 1]**

The spiritually challenged (**all of us**) require periods of diligent laziness. The excitement people once exuded over their new technological toys has been replaced by resentment over being "on duty" all the time. Without refueling and re-energizing, both our personal lives and our work lives suffer.

The slow and steady discipline of following Commandment #4 just hasn't caught on in our culture. One of the things that our denomination, The Alliance of Reformed Churches has discovered as it works at ordaining pastors by inventory and interview is that many Pastors are not practicing a regular Sabbath. This whole resting-on-the-seventh-day-plan hasn't captured our 21st century sensibilities. But it needs too.

But Jesus did not venture into the wilderness to lower his fat intake or curb caffeine consumption. He "was led" into the wilderness by the Spirit to develop a slackitude attitude. Along the way, it turned into a war with hunger, wild beasts and the devil himself.

You'd think that after his media debut at the Jordan with John the Baptist, Jesus would've launched into a flurry of power healing and miracle making. Without delay, Jesus could have multitasked his way through Galilee turning the world upside down, wowing the masses. But Jesus did not rise from the baptismal waters of the Jordan to burst immediately onto the temple scene. Jesus didn't move directly from under the parted heavens to the top of the ministerial world, frantically moving from the blind to the lame to the bleeding, all the while charting out his goals for optimal career growth.

No, instead He took off for the hills above Jericho, to a stony, desolate place where he accepted the spiritual discipline of fasting for 40 days and 40 nights all alone. Well, almost alone. **[NOTE 2]**

The problem with slackitude is that one is particularly vulnerable to temptation while kicking back. Without every minute scheduled, temptations present themselves and fill the empty spaces. The truth is, that most of us work hard to avoid being alone in

our heads. Yet good things happen when we are alone in our heads, and they are things we can't live without: contemplation, reflection, focus. As consumers of wireless gadgets, we will need to insist on a Disconnect button. -James Gleich, "The wireless age," The New York Times Magazine, April 22, 2001, 66. Listen to this very wise saying: It is not what we eat, but what we digest that makes us strong, Not what we gain, but what we save that makes us rich, Not what we read, but what we remember that makes us learned, Not what we preach or pray, but what we practice that makes us disciples. Good Stuff!

This passage of Scripture from Matthew is, of course, about the temptation of Jesus. This is a key passage of Scripture because every one of us has dealt with temptation and will continue to deal with it until our life on earth is done. As Christ-followers we should want to pay attention to how Jesus deals with temptation so we will be better equipped to deal with it. I have often thought that life would be so much better if we didn't have to deal with temptation. Sometimes I pray that God would just take away the option to sin, to give in to temptation. But until I was doing the research for today's message I had never thought of Satan or the devil as a help. The idea that the devil serves some purpose, that it is within God's will that Satan test the loyalty of humanity, is not an idea begun in the New Testament. The Old Testament book of Job presents God striking a type of gentleman's agreement whereby Satan is allowed to test Job (Job 1-2). In fact, throughout the Old Testament, Satan is not an evil force who moves on his own initiative to maliciously toy with humanity. Rather, Satan works as part of God's plan. In fact, in the Old Testament, "satan" is more often a job description rather than a proper name (see Numbers 22:22-35; Zechariah 3:1-7; Job 1-2; 1 Chronicles 21:1-22:1). The title means "adversary," or "accuser." It was the job of Satan to call humanity to account for their failure to uphold their end of God's covenant law. Using a courtroom analogy, Satan is the prosecuting attorney. It is his job to read the charges and to hold humanity accountable for them.

While the portrait of Satan is somewhat different in the New Testament, still in the story of the temptation we see the same relationship between Satan and the Spirit of God. The Spirit, in a sense, sends Jesus to Satan, confident (as God is of Job), that he will resist the temptations offered him and be proved worthy of his calling. It is as if the ancients felt that without the test of temptation, loyalty was cheap and not to be trusted. What was required was steadfastness of purpose, which can only be demonstrated in the face of testing. The devil, in Greek, is the diabolos, "the one who separates" you from your purpose, who distracts you, who singles you out, either for failing in faithfulness or to tempt you into failure.

For Jesus, temptation meant flirting with more than illusions of grandeur. Problem was the plan involved humble service, not awesome political dominance. If Jesus did not think of these enticements himself, a tempter was on hand to remind him.

While in the throes of his spiritual retreat up there in the Judean wilderness with

little to do and nothing to eat, the devil reminds him, "You know, you could turn these stones into loaves of bread. Crusty, chewy, extraordinarily tasty bread."

Of course he could. Water into wine. Stones into bread. What's the difference? But Jesus was up in some down time. Wilderness time meant personal time, spiritual time. He could turn stones into bread, sure, but bread is not everything. One does not live by bread alone.

The devil flatters him. "You could fling yourself off the pinnacle of the temple, and armies of angels will swoop down and save you at the click of a finger. How cool is that?" But Jesus knew better than to test God with such games. **[NOTE 3]**

The devil tempts him: "You're the man. You have the power. You could take control of the world." With an arm casually tossed around his shoulder, the tempter eggs him on saying, "One day all this could be yours," as if the devil were the one who could bequeath it. Jesus could have trumped The Donald, out-monopolized Bill Gates, crushed the power of the world's most sophisticated armies, richest treasuries and smartest think tanks. But instead, he waved Satan off like a pesky fly, remembering the commandment: "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." At every turn Jesus rebuffed the temptation with the Word of God. And let me remind you, that for Jesus, the Word of God was the Old Testament. That is why I preach from the Old Testament a fair amount. Because if it was good enough for Jesus, as a Christ-follower, it better be good enough for me. **[NOTE 4]**

Jesus' example of retreating to the wilderness reminds us of the importance of being tethered to God - the one who ultimately feeds us, protects us, owns us. Optimal slackitude involves a freedom that comes when we realize that the world can go on without us, and no longer are we afraid to admit that reality. In fact, we delight in it. That is definitely a different attitude than the norm in our society. We can talk on the phone as we eat fast food while using the ATM. Not only are we better at multi-tasking and becoming more productive and efficient, along with the increased pace, more is required of us. And so we hurtle through life faster and faster, becoming busier and busier. The result is that in our busyness we are becoming increasingly efficient at leading meaningless lives. -Seminary professor Don Whitney, quoted in Ministry ToolBox, April 4, 2001.

Okay, back to Jesus, for Him temptation in the throes of slackitude meant one thing – depending on God and His Word. For us perhaps the temptation is to fill every minute for fear that empty moments will find us haunted by something we'd rather not face. For us perhaps the temptation is to work night and day to prove we are worth having around, terrified that somebody will not value us if we stop even for a moment. For us perhaps the temptation involves clinging to keep control of our lives, while ironically, the technology that keeps us in touch with each other winds up controlling us and keeping us out of touch with what is really important.

Let me ask you a question. Have you ever thought of temptation as something necessary? A guy named Gary Zukav proposes that temptation may even be seen as a

gift. On the surface it sounds like the guy is one soda short of a six pack, but stay with me for a moment. How many times have you been tempted today by food? Alcohol? Shopping? Gary Zukav says behind every temptation is the same dynamic. It's easy to think of a temptation as a trap, but Gary says it's just the opposite. He says temptation is a gift. Zukav even takes it one step further and says temptation is a compassionate gift: an opportunity to learn without creating negative consequences. Temptation is like a magnet. It brings negative things to the surface - and it allows you to do something about it. Temptation is an invitation to get to know yourself. [NOTE 5]

You can think of temptation as providing you with a "dress rehearsal." When you're tempted, you can play out in your mind what would happen if you indulge. Once you visualize what would happen if you snack on some chips, smoke a cigarette, buy those shoes, you can make a choice to resist or act out. The benefit of playing this out in your mind is that you don't create any negative consequences if you choose to resist. Only if you act on your temptation, have you created negative consequences for yourself and others.

Gary says to challenge a temptation, you can ask yourself a series of questions: a) Does this bring me genuine power? b) Will this make me more loving? and c) Will this make me more whole? Each time you challenge a temptation successfully, you empower yourself [NOTE 6]

Fall is my favorite time of year, mainly because it is when I force myself to unplug by spending, over the course of two months, at least two full weeks of time in the woods, unplugged, just watching nature. The truth we discover, as we unplug and unwind, lies in the fact that the Spirit continues to lead human beings to a place of spiritual rest so that we might prepare for what lies ahead. Tethered only to God, we realize what truly nourishes and feeds us in lonely places. The Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. So now, what are you going to do about it? Let me summarize what I have proposed. Slackitude or diligent planned laziness for a time is needed for us to be at our best. We need sleep, we need time unplugged, we need rest to be at our best. When we are at our best we can respond the same way that Jesus did, to temptation and learn from it and grow, rather than give in and sin. Jesus stayed connected to God and His Word. Please make the time to write down in your bulletin, type on your phone, or write down somewhere, one thing that you can do to create some space to rest. Then write down a plan for what you will do the next time you are tempted. Let's Pray ... AMEN

Source: Gordon, Gil E. Turn It Off: How to Unplug from the Anytime-Anywhere Office without Disconnecting Your Career. (Three Rivers Press, 2001).

Sermon Notes for “The Slackitude Temptation” based on Matthew 4: 1-11
Given at Doster Community Church on October 22, 2023

- I. The spiritually challenged (all of us), require periods of diligent laziness. Without refueling and re-energizing, both our personal lives and work lives suffer. God gave us Commandment #4 for a reason. “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy (set apart for God).
- II. The problem with slackitude is that one is particularly vulnerable to temptation while kicking back. Without every minute scheduled, temptations present themselves and fill the empty spaces.
- III. Jesus' example of retreating to the wilderness reminds us of the importance of being tethered to God - the one who ultimately feeds us, protects us, owns us. We must get it through our thick skulls that the world will go on without us.
- IV. Jesus' response to every temptation was to go to the Word of God. Work at becoming a better Jesus-follower.
- V. Temptation is a gift: an opportunity to learn without creating negative consequences. To challenge a temptation ask these questions before you give in: a) Does this bring me genuine power? b) Will this make me more loving? C) Will this make me more whole?
- VI. What are you going to do about it? Write one thing down that you can do to create space to “kick back” and rest? Write down a plan for what you will do the next time you are tempted? Think about Jesus and how He handled temptation.

