

## **“Remember Grace, Resist Evil” based on Luke 4:1-13**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 6, 2022, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Can you for a moment imagine – going 40 days without food? As you can probably tell, I like my groceries, so maybe it’s just me, but I cannot imagine dealing with any kind of temptation during a fast like that.

Friends, I think it is safe to say that if we were in that position, who could blame us if we got a little ‘hangry?’ Who would blame us if we fought back, lashing out at the one tempting us? Who would blame us if we gave in to our human needs and accepted one of those offers? Either way, the story would be very different and then God’s big picture plan would have been derailed.

Hunger induced anger is real. In 2018 the word ‘Hangry’ was added to the Oxford Dictionary. Studies of willpower show that perhaps the single most important factor, in a person’s ability to make good decisions, especially in resisting temptation, is the amount of glucose processed in their body for available energy. This is the reason many of us will crave sweet foods, especially when working under pressure or when stressed. When we are hungry, and we need energy, our mood suffers, and our resolve suffers.

In their groundbreaking 2011 book “Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength,” acclaimed research scientist Roy Baumeister and journalist John Tierney, told the story of an Israeli prison parole board and patterns in their decisions. These were serious crimes, some were violent, and others were fraud, and the people before them were both Arab Palestinians and Jewish Israelis in ethnicity. Yet it seemed the single most consistent factor for leniency, was not the crime or ethnicity, but the time of day when the parole case was heard.

If it was in the morning after breakfast, or immediately after the board’s lunch, then the decisions of the parole board were significantly more likely to recommend release based on the merits of a case. But when the case was heard just before lunch or right before the end of the day, then the board was more likely to just pick the safest, easiest option – denying a person parole, keeping them locked away a little longer. This puts off the decision, but the decision to grant parole is a difficult one, and stressful, because you are trying to predict the future – will this person violate again.

The research in the book consistently connects general decision making to willpower. The more decisions you have to make, the more your willpower will be depleted. In this COVID time we have all had some measure of decision fatigue regarding which even to go to, whether to wear a mask, enforce a mask, and more. The brain requires significant amounts of energy, of glucose, in order to operate. So, the concept of decision fatigue is real and it can sap our strength. I couldn’t help but think of this book and its research this week, when I read the passage from Luke’s gospel.

Like the parole board judges, Jesus had options for a ‘safety’ decision in today’s reading. He’s hungry. It’s at the end of the 40 days, he’s made his point, he could eat, and who would blame him? Food, after all, will help him to in making the bigger decisions that come next. And surely,

he would be justified to fortify himself with a little food. Yet Jesus answers with a portion of scripture from Deuteronomy, in which the hunger of the Israelites as they escaped Egypt is portrayed as a gift, since then the Lord fed them and they were able to see that they do not live on bread alone, but on every utterance or Word of God.

Next, there is an offer of the inhabited world, for Jesus to be in charge of right then and there like Caesar. You see, the word here is not 'cosmos' for the whole world and its order, but the world is 'oikomenes' the world of human creation, especially the empire. The devil offers to betray, or hand over this world to Jesus, if Jesus betrays himself.

However, Jesus resists, again quoting Deuteronomy, from a caution against disobedience, in which the defeat of human empires is given as the reason to trust in the Lord. You see the whole plan was for Jesus to rule, and here it was available at no cost, but expediency – remaining in sin by making excuses for it, including by 'seeking worldly power to free others from worse powers,' or even, the concept of enforcing peace through violence – would not defeat sin and death, but only give in to it. And so, Jesus resists the second temptation.

Lastly, the devil, which is a Greek word that means, 'the one who divides,' tries to conquer God, by dividing the eternal Son who shared in our humanity from the Father and the Spirit. Again, expediently, Jesus could perform the task and prove who he is to the devil by just jumping off the temple, but that would divide the will of God, with the Son separating himself out on his own mission. And so, again, he quotes Deuteronomy, to say not to tempt God, asserting his identity as one with the Father and the Spirit, and his identity with the people of Israel. The people of Israel were told not to rebel, but to observe God's commandments to seek God's will.

So then, a hungry Jesus passes the tests, but how? It's easy to point to his divinity, and say, well, of course, he passed because he's God. Except that his divinity is God in our limits, so we must dig deeper. Now, Baumeister and Tierney offer ways to boost our willpower besides good nutrition. These include 'community accountability,' the impulses of honor and shame in front of others, 'bright lines,' or clearly defined avoidance boundaries to stay away, and then 'implementation methods' for tracking, rewards, and deferred rewards.

For Jesus, in the wilderness, he goes 40 days without food, so there is not good nutrition. He has no one around him for support. He has no boundaries. He has let the Spirit drive him into the wilderness with the devil to tempt him. Certainly, there is no system of reward either, to celebrate each small success.

If all of these are off the table, then there is another factor discussed in the book that seems to fit. It is the concept of a higher power, or more accurately, a higher order thinking, and an overarching clear goal. Ironically, Baumeister and Tierney in their attempt to downplay God's intervention, actually present us a framework to see Jesus's resistance not as a miracle, but of his faithfulness to a higher purpose, especially one for others.

You see, a great source of willpower is a commitment to a cause, especially when that cause benefits others. Often when we see our decisions affecting others, or believe our actions will benefit others, it empowers us to keep going.

Jesus in the desert could choose the easy way out, but this would not benefit us. The story of the Garden of Eden is meant to show us the root of our sinful nature, and if we think about willpower research, it is interesting to consider, that it portrays people in a world with plenty of food and no hard labor to get it, where people have all that they need, and still make bad choices. And so, we live today in a world with plenty of food, relatively light labor to get it and we still make bad choices.

There is decision made before a tree, then and now. In the Garden of Eden, it was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and they wanted to choose their own ability to decide good and evil, right from wrong. Today, our decision before a tree is our decision before the cross. Yet still, it's almost as if we want to make the bad choices and it's as if the biblical writers knew this truth – that we are incapable of perfection.

The truth is that in our Western World, comfort is often an impediment to our faith. We are far closer to the comforts of the garden than we are to the wilderness into which Jesus was driven by the Holy Spirit, and so, even in our comfort, with plenty of food, we still make bad choices. But let us compare us today to Jesus, who is for us God in our form, fully God, yet emptied, to share in our human limits, in the wilderness without food for 40 days.

Jesus does something we cannot – he resists the greatest temptations, even when all defenses are compromised. Jesus knows his purpose is the salvation of humankind, something that is not necessary, at least not for a triune God, who doesn't need an object to love, or need to be loved by an object, but creates from an outpouring or overflow of love from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so, Jesus, the Son humbled to be born in our human limits, does for us what we cannot do on our own – he resists evil – not just here in the wilderness, but throughout his life, ultimately, letting sin and death do their worst to him, being hanged on a cross, where he died, was buried three days and still rose again. He is the firstborn of a new creation, offering us new life both now and eternally in him.

This is what we have to strengthen us – solidarity with the Lord who shared in our life in order to have us share in God's life, as well as an example. He is the One who paid it all, so that by grace, we can be empowered to share in the work of reconciliation, and not have to worry about accomplishing this. We merely contribute by letting the Spirit of God work in and among us, taking the love the Spirit pours in our hearts, and pouring it out to the benefit of others.

We struggle with sin. We struggle with the temptation to resist evil in this world. This is especially of the evil in our worldly standards, those of the world betrayed by the divider, which seem to give us comfort. They seem make us feel important or desired. They make us selfish.

Willpower research shows that inner discipline leads to outward kindness. You see, exercising the alignment of our will to God's is our calling, so it makes sense that managing our will is a

religious virtue, one that is higher among people who attend church, and which begets kindness and love for others, just as Jesus commanded us to do.

Friends, it's easy to look at Jesus and assume, saying, "Well, he was God in our flesh. He had the Holy Spirit in full force, and he knew the plan from the beginning," and then dismiss what this 40 days in the wilderness means and why it has relevance for us. This is why it is so important to recognize the depth of God's humility: Because in Christ, the Creator of all things shared fully in our limits. Paul says that he emptied himself and became obedient, and I believe this means obedient not only to God, but obedient to our limited human experience, taking the form of a servant to die for us.

As we look out on a world where we see war in Ukraine, political division in our government at home, where we see violence in the streets, mental illness, cancer and so much more, along with the overwhelming nature of personal, direct and systemic evil and sin, it is easy also to get disheartened. Yet, this is the world God entered. The Eternal Son did not shy away from us because of our sin, but as Paul said, he became sin so we could become righteous.

This is grace. This is the unmerited gift of Jesus for us. What this means is that because Jesus shared in our life and resisted evil, so we too are called to resist evil not on our own abilities, but because of him. We resist because the one who shared in our life, has by grace, shared with us his life, which is abundant and eternal. By the Holy Spirit we are empowered to share in God's work and will, the ultimate in will power, grounded in the history of God. Our strength is in God's action in this world, both in Israel's story, and in the Church founded by Christ Jesus, and led by the Spirit.

This is our strength when so much else points us toward despair. Our strength is that our God has shared in our life and gone out ahead of us so we can share in God's life, transforming this world with him, as he calls us to do. Remember the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember grace. Remember that our God acts in this world and as awful as things can be, this is the world in which God the Son shared in our life for us. See that humility and recognize that you too can be a part of God's work in this world, resisting evil and spreading God's love to all we meet. Amen.