

**Conditional Love:
February 22, 2026**

This is the first [weekend] Sunday in Lent...
And it always begins the same way... **[1 Temptation]**
With the Temptation of Jesus.
Two things I want to say... about the Temptation.

First and you probably already know this...
But the season of Lent...
Is 40 days.

From Ash Wednesday...
Until Holy Saturday...
But you don't count the Sundays...
During that period of time.

It's really 46 days...
But Sundays... are not a part of Lent...
Because Sundays for us...
Are ALWAYS a celebration...
Of the resurrection of Jesus. Happy Easter!

We ALWAYS focus on the gift...
Of new life... won for us...
By the love and commitment...
Of Jesus.

He did that.
And by his grace...
We are saved.
Period. That's the good news...
Therefore...
Every Sunday.
We celebrate new life!

And yet... in the story today...
It says very clearly...
That Jesus fasted... **[2 Forty]**
For 40 days and 40 nights.

It's interesting how many times...
That number comes up in the Bible.

When Noah built the Ark...
And had his family... and all those stinky animals...
Floating around... on the flooded waters...
How long did it rain?
40 days and 40 nights.

When Moses went up to the mountain...
To meet God... and receive the 10 Commandments...
He had to hang out...

And wait around... for how long?
For 40 days and 40 nights.

When Elijah wandered in the wilderness...
And the angel kept making him eat... and drink...
So that he would have the strength to keep going...
You already know the answer... for how long?
40 days and 40 nights.

Until he found the cave...
Where God spoke to him.
In that still small voice.

And of course...
You know... it's not exactly the same...
But still the number is important...
The children of Israel...
Wandered in the wilderness...
For 40 years.

Over and over again...
The number 40 is used in God's word.
But I don't think we're supposed to get hung up...
On the actual number.

It's not supposed to be something...
That we take too literally...
But instead it means something to God.

One commentary I read... said... **[3 Significant]**
40 days and 40 nights... is a...
Significant but limited amount of time.
To learn reliance on God.

It was a specific period of time.
When it rained on Noah...
It didn't rain forever.

When Moses went up the mountain...
He didn't stay up there forever.

When Elijah was trying to find his mission...
And hear God's voice...
He didn't tromp around forever.

When Israel wandered in the wilderness...
It didn't last forever.

But it was just enough time.
Just the amount of time... they needed.
To learn how to rely on God.
To break the stubborn will of the people.
To cause them to return to the Lord their God.

And ultimately...
To do what God wanted them... to do.

A significant but limited amount time.

So goes Lent. So it is for us.
We have begun...
Our 40 days and 40 nights.
A significant but limited amount of time.

But why... why should these 40 days... and 40 nights...
Have significance and weight... in our lives?
I'll get to that later.
At the end of the sermon.

The second thing about...
The Temptation of Jesus...
Is a little tiny word...
That has the power...
To mess up... everything. **[4 IF]**

IF.

Let me explain.
I've told you many times before...
That I had an evil step-father.
I don't know if he was really evil...
But he wasn't nice.

Anyway.
Every day he would come home from work...
Which was an hour drive both ways...
He would come home... at night...
And plop into a chair...
In the living room.

Then he would...
Open the local newspaper...
And in complete silence...
And a general vibe...
That told you...
You better stay away...

He would read the newspaper...
From the first page...
To the last. **[5 Newspaper]**

I was kid... specifically a boy...
And my mom was great and all...
But I also needed a strong male role model...
To help me navigate...
The complexities...
Of being a pre-teen.

I just wanted to be acknowledged and noticed.
But it wasn't happening.

I remember one time...
Telling my mom...
Who was my safe person...
I told her... you just watch...
Someday... you will read my name...
In the newspaper.

And she did.
You know how?...

Well... if you get all A's...
You get on the honor roll...
And in our small town...
You get your name in the newspaper.

If you run track and cross country...
And run really fast...
You get a medal...
And a photo...
And your name in the newspaper...

And if you are in a school play...
And you get a good part...
The newspaper came to rehearsal...
Took a photo...
And ran a story...
And bada bing... bada boom...
There it was again.
Your name in the newspaper.

You get the idea.
And so... as a child... an adolescent...
I tried as hard as I could.
I worked... and played...
Just as hard as I could.

And do you think...
He noticed?
Who knows?

But at least...
There was a possibility.

Now I'm not telling you that story...
To garner any kind of sympathy...
I'm too old... for all that nonsense.
That is water over or under the dam.
Never quite sure how that works.

No. I'm telling you that story...
To illustrate what we do... to ourselves.

How we burden ourselves... with conditions...
How we let other people define and limit us...
So that we might have a sense of value...

It happens all the time. **[6 IF]**

If you want my money.
If you really loved me.
If you were a good person.

If you were a good father.
If you were a good pastor.

If you will be what I want you to be...
Then I will accept you. I will love you.

Can you feel the evil inherent...
In conditional love and acceptance?
If you do what I want... then and only then... you are ok.

Now... don't get me wrong...
There are times when we need to set boundaries.
We need to be clear with other people.
I'm not going to let you hurt me again.
I'm not going to accept your current behavior.

I am going to expect you to do...
What you're supposed to do.
Act the way you're supposed to act.
And hold you accountable...
To being a respectful human being.

That's one thing.

But when we say...
Your value... as a person...
Is conditional on my acceptance of you.
Your goodness... is dependent...
On doing what I tell you to do.

Then that is wrong.
And hurtful.
And manipulative.
And well... we just might as well... go the whole way... Evil.

That's not how love works. Love is not conditional.
But... too many times... the temptation for us...
Is to see our identity...
Our goodness...
Our value...

Relying on how we meet...
The expectations of other people...

And win the affirmation... or admiration...
From them.

That was the temptation that Jesus was facing. **[7 Son of God]**
The devil came to him...
And confronted him...
With that little word...
IF... three times.

IF you are the Son of God...
Turn these stones into bread.

IF you are the Son of God...
Throw yourself down...
From the pinnacle...
Of the temple.

IF you fall down and worship me...
I will give you everything.
All the kingdoms of the world.

The devil wanted Jesus to believe.
That his identity... as the Son of God...
His value... his meaning... his purpose...
In the world... was somehow dependent...
Of the devil's validation.

But Jesus... did not give him...
That power... over his life.

He knew who he was.
When he was baptized by John.
God said it... loud and clear.
You are my Son.
You are my beloved.
With whom I am well pleased.

AND that's how Jesus began his ministry.
He had nothing to prove to God...
In order to be loved by God.
He was loved.
He was God's son.
He was everything...
That God had said... he was.

His identity was in God's hands.
No one else could define him.
No one else could add or detract...
From his identity.

He was... and is...
And always will be...
The Son of God.

And so are you. **[8 Child of God]**
Sons of God.
Daughters of God.

You have been washed...
In the waters of your baptism.

You have been marked...
With the cross of Christ forever.

You have been sealed...
By the power of the Holy Spirit.

You are an eternal child of God...
And so am I.

That is our identity.
And we cannot allow...
Anything or anyone...
In this world...
To sway us...
From our God-given identity.

We cannot allow the world...
Or the princes of this world...
Or the troubles of this world...
Convince us...

That we are less...
Than what God has already said...
We are.

So... when you find yourself... in that position.
When someone makes you doubt...
Who you are...

When someone makes you afraid...
That you are wrong.

When someone tries to manipulate you...
And make you believe...
That your faith...
Or your value...
Or your meaning...
Is somehow incomplete...

And IF you just listen to them.
IF you just do what they want.
IF you worship them.
Then you will be ok.

Don't give them power.

Tell them. **[9 No Power]**

You have no power.
You have no power... over me.
You have no power... to determine...

How I live my life.
How I understand the world.
How I choose to live... in love and hope...
Even in the face of death.

You have no power... over me.

Eleanor Roosevelt said... **[10 Eleanor]**
No one can make you feel inferior...
Without your consent.

The same is true with power.
No one can have power over you...
Unless you give them permission.

Now don't get me wrong...
There can be a cost...
For being secure in your identity.

Like there was for Jesus.
You can be rejected.
You can be punished.
You can be hurt.

But that's a choice...
We need to make... for ourselves.

We need to choose...
Who we allow... to have power in our lives? **[11 God Alone]**

The answer for Jesus was... God alone.
God is the one to whom I answer.
God is the one who gives my life meaning.
God is the only one in whom I hope.

Everything... absolutely everything...
Depends...
On God.

So. Satan.
Politicians. Influencers. News anchors.
Peer pressure people. Popular people.

Nay sayers.
Hurtful people. Hateful people.

You have no power.

You have no power...
In my life. In my decisions.
You have no power over me.

So. Be gone.
Go away. In the name of Christ.

Ok. Back to 40 days and 40 nights. **[12 Lent]**
This is the season of Lent.

LENT is the time...
When we confess...
And repent...
And come back to God...

Who is gracious and merciful...
Slow to anger... and...
Abounding in steadfast love.

It's the time... when we come back to God...
And actually choose...
To live in our identity...
As God's children.

It's the time... we say...
Listen here... you tired old world...
I belong to God.

I will do my best...
To turn away from you...
And back to God...

To find my value.
My meaning.
My purpose.

The best thing about Lent is...
It's an intentional invitation...
To remember God loves us.
And then... in humility...
To come back to God.
And start again.

So. For the next 40 days... and 40 nights.
Remember who you are.
Remember who God said... you are.
Remember the promises that have been made to you.

And come back... to the Lord your God.

Thanks be to God.
Amen!