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The Only One Who Can Lie to You  
Better than the Devil Is You

a sermon on Luke 4.1-13  
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Can you lie better than the devil? I think I can, and I'll bet you can too. Not generally speaking, not overall, not in any situation or to anyone. Only in one specific instance can you lie better than the devil. That's when you lie to yourself.

What's that? You think you don't lie to yourself? Why would you? How can you? Oh, it's really very simple. You just swallow some very dangerous lie and you keep repeating it to yourself over and over until you really believe it and it begins to shape who you are. I know three very powerful lies that I suspect most everyone in this room believes. So sneaky are these lies that when I haul them out into the light of day, you will be tempted to deny them. "Oh, of course I don't believe *that!*" But in the dark places of your soul, you really do. You can tell that you do because you act as if they are true. What are they? I'll expose them momentarily.

In our scripture reading Jesus is tempted by the devil. You know the story: forty days in the wilderness, prayer and fasting, he's weak and hungry and vulnerable. Here comes the devil. Most Christians assume this was the big test and once Jesus passed it he was ready to begin his ministry. Not so! This was the little test, a preparatory test, and once he passed it, he was ready to take the big test that *was* his ministry.

The three temptations he faces are all about who he is and what he has to do. They are about being the Messiah. If you read the gospels carefully, you will notice that the crowds tempt Jesus *in these same ways* over and over. In fact, on occasion his own disciples drop a big rock of temptation in his path. You remember the time he called Simon Peter "Satan"? That's why. These are the temptations Jesus will face again and again, the temptations inherent in his calling. Later, as we look at the temptations one by one, I'll point out how they kept coming up.

As I said, these temptations are about being the Messiah. You and I are not the Messiah. So what relevance do these temptations have for us? Quite a lot, and I want you to recognize two of them: (1) Jesus set an example for us by refusing the devil's shortcut, the easy way. Sometimes we are tempted to pursue God's goals by using the devil's tools. Think before you do that! What does it profit if you do all kinds of good, but you lose your soul? The devil's short cuts always turn out to be dead ends. (2) We

are not the Messiah, but we are similarly tempted. We are attacked at the same point Jesus was: Who am I, and what do I have to do?

Last July when I was at Beeson, we had a spiritual retreat over the weekend between our two weeks of class. One of our leaders talked about this passage and how we are tempted as Jesus was. We are taught three lies – the three lies I mentioned earlier. Where do they come from? The devil? Our culture? Our own insecurities? Yes, yes, and yes. That's why they are so believable and dangerous. What are the three lies? (1) I am what I do. (2) I am what I have. (3) I am who people say that I am. ...

Let's look at Jesus. The first temptation he faced was this, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." When I was a kid, I always wondered why at this point Jesus didn't simply turn the devil into a loaf of bread. Sorry, that's how kids think. Now I see the reason why. That would not have eliminated the temptation. Jesus would have only put off answering the question: Who am I and what do I have to do? This temptation is all about his identity. The people were looking for a prophet like Moses, and Moses gave them manna in the wilderness. Actually, God gave them manna, but they wanted a leader like Moses who could deliver the bread.

In John 6 this temptation explodes in a firestorm after Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. This was exactly what they wanted. And so they try to seize Jesus by force and make him king! Jesus has to run away. Eventually he tries to explain: he fed the multitudes in order to show them who he is; he is the Bread of Life. They should have seen the sign and recognized God's presence among them. Instead they saw the chance for more bread. "C'mon, Jesus, be who we want you to be. We will follow you if you will just be who we want you to be." Have you ever said that to Jesus? Don't! He hates that. You take him as he is or not at all.

Against this temptation, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy. You probably don't read Deuteronomy much, but Jesus quotes from it to answer all three temptations. If the devil thought he had caught Jesus at a vulnerable moment, he was wrong. Jesus had just spent forty days in prayer and close communion with God. He was ready to face temptation. If you want to face temptation and overcome the lies that so subtly shape your soul, scripture, prayer, and worship are a good place to start. I also recommend fellowship and an accountability group – Christian friends you can trust who will listen and offer encouragement. You'd be surprised how much difference it makes!

The temptation to prove himself by turning a stone to bread corresponds to our temptation to believe the first lie: I am what I do. Who is the Messiah? He is the one who feeds the crowds. Who am I? Ask any man in America today, "Who are you?" and he will answer by telling you what he does for a living. Women are this way too, but probably men are worse. We tend to invest our identity in our work. What happens when a man loses his job? Often he becomes depressed. He has lost more

than his income; he has lost himself. I have known men who lose their jobs to become so depressed that they can't get up off the couch for six months or longer. Their depression is so deep it affects their ability to function normally. Why? Their work gave them an identity; it made them somebody. They thought that was the whole of who they are. They bought the lie. They lived it.

Women especially face this temptation as they balance work, motherhood, and family. Once a woman who had a great career shared with me her concern, "Am I spending enough time with my kids?" Not two days later, a woman who had given up her career for family expressed the opposite worry, "What am I doing to my career?" I'm not going to tell anyone how to balance that. Each woman has to figure out her circumstances. But I do believe that women in America today put an awful lot of pressure on themselves. "I have to be the perfect Mom. I have to be the best in my career field. I have to take care of a million things, and do them all well. Otherwise, I am a failure." Identity and worth become dependent on performance. That's dangerous. It sucks the joy out of life. Parenting is work, but it should be enjoyable. A career is work, but ideally it should be enjoyable. Life is hard, but it should be full of joy. Why all the self-inflicted pressure? Just because our culture tells you so does not mean it is true. Ask yourself: "What does God want for me at this season of my life?" And do that the best you can, and enjoy it as fully as you can, whatever it is.

The second temptation Jesus faced was, "I will give you authority over the whole world if you worship me." This was the devil's shortcut. Jesus' destiny was to rule over the whole world. Jesus is the Messiah. Who is the Messiah? What does he do? Psalm 2 is one text of scripture that answers that question. It pictures the Son of David ruling over the nations. God says to his anointed king (*Messiah* is the Hebrew word for "anointed"): "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession" [v. 8]. Authority and dominion belong to the Messiah. If Jesus is the Messiah, he should have them. But ... his authority and power have to come from God. They cannot be won by worshiping that which is not God. Jesus did come into his inheritance. At the end of Matthew's gospel, he told his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

Before Jesus came into his glory, he had to endure the cross. The devil, with this second temptation, was offering him an easier way. "You can have the world without dying for it." But of course, this was a lie. You see, although the Messiah has all authority in heaven and on earth, possessing heaven and earth is not what makes him the Messiah. His relationship to God the Father does. His obedience. His love. The shortcut was a dead end, and Jesus knew it. He had to walk the path laid before him, including the cross. That's who he was and what he had to do. Simply having the world was not enough.

We face a similar temptation to believe a similar lie: I am what I have. Our culture tells us to measure people by the degrees they hang on their wall, the house they live in, the car they drive, the clothes they wear, and the size of their portfolio. Some people have got to have the latest gadget, because that's who they are. They have to eat at certain places and shop at certain stores, because that's who they are. Companies play on this. Maybe our whole society is based on it now. Take ads for apartments for example: "The kind of life you deserve." "This is the place for discriminating people like you." Ads play on our vanity. They play on our insecurities. We don't know who we are, and corporations are always happy to offer answers: "You are the right kind of person because you wear, use, or own *brand X*."

My point is not to criticize marketing techniques. Those folks are good at what they do. And what they do is use human nature and the values of our culture to sell us stuff. That's what I'm criticizing, the values. We catch these values the way we catch a cold. They are just there, and we come in contact with them, and soon we are infected. I am what I own. Do you believe that? I'll bet you do.

I knew a guy once, I'll call him Biff for easy reference. Biff had no friends, and this lie was the reason why. Biff believed deep down in his soul, whether he ever consciously reflected on it or not, that "I am what I own." Consequently, when he was around people with more money than he had, he felt inferior. He was transparently jealous. He would talk about how so-and-so was a snob because he had money. I knew the other guy Biff was talking about, and yes he had nice things, but I had never once detected a hint of snobbery. The guy made good money. He had a car with leather seats and a big screen TV. So what? He was a nice guy and in no way hung up on possessions. It was Biff who was hung up on possessions. And it was the same story every time Biff met someone better off than he was. He felt intimidated and didn't want anything to do with them. But, at the same time, because possessions mattered so much to him, Biff also looked down on people who had less. So he didn't want anything to do with them either. They were not his kind of people, his class. You can see why he had no friends. He didn't like people who had more or less than he did, so his pool of potential friends was small. He bought the lie, and he suffered for it.

The third temptation Jesus faced was: "Jump off the temple in front of everyone, and when the angels come to rescue you, everyone will believe in you." I wonder if this was the temptation that plagued Jesus most. One problem he had was: Almost no one understood his mission, and very few believed in him. His family didn't, except Mary, until after the resurrection. Crowds flocked to him, but once they understood what he was trying to say, they melted away. The gospels show us exemplary figures, such as the rich young man and Zaccaheus. I wonder what percentage went away sad rather than found life. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. So if there was one thing he really wanted and didn't get, it was belief. Imagine converting not just the crowds but the Pharisees and temple authorities all at one stroke!

Throughout his ministry the crowds kept demanding signs. “Give us a sign, so that we can believe.” Ironically, they missed the point of every single sign he performed. Yet they wanted more. We can be like that toward God. We ignore all the signs he has given us, and yet we want something more.

Jesus resisted this temptation also. He knew he could never win them with a flashy miracle and then get them to follow him to the cross. Their opinion of him did not make him the Messiah. He is the Messiah, regardless of their opinion. And what he came to do was not win their approval. He came to die for them.

We face a similar temptation. We believe the lie: I am who people say that I am. I need to be careful now, because a good reputation is important. A person who does not care at all what other people think is probably too arrogant. “I know better than everyone else.” That attitude can lead you into some *big* mistakes. No, there is nothing wrong with trying to have a good reputation. We ought to want that. You get into trouble, however, when what other people think matters so much that they can manipulate you.

We saw how this tempted Jesus. The crowds told him over and over, basically, “If you will be who we want you to be, we will follow you.” He wanted them to follow. If he could just compromise his identity a little, change his mission a little, how much more success he could have! You are not the Messiah, but you face a similar pressure to conform. “Be like us. Be who we want you to be. Then we will accept you. Then we will like you.”

Christian young people – in Middle School, High School, College – feel the pull of this demand. I don’t know how they handle it. I honestly don’t. When I was that age, I was a Christian first. That cut me out of certain circles. So what? No great loss to me. How do you run in those circles and still be a Christian first? Can you? What about the workplace? Christian professors can tell you stories about the pressure to conform. So could Christian truck drivers, bankers, and salespersons. What about the business world when doing the things you have to do to attract clients stretches your conscience? It is not easy. The less Christian our culture becomes, the harder this becomes. “Be who we want you to be, and we will accept you.” It works because we all feel the need for affirmation. We believe that I am who people say that I am.

OK, then, one final question. We have exposed the three lies to the light of day. I am what I do. I am what I own. I am who people say that I am. We recognize them as lies. But, if I am not what I do, what I own, or who people say that I am ... *then who am I?*

Against the three lies, I offer you the three truths: (1) I am who God says I am. (2) My sacred vows make me who I am. (3) My relationships make me who I am.

I am who God says I am. This was Jesus’ answer. He knew he was the Son of God. He didn’t need to prove it. At his baptism, the Father spoke from heaven, “This is my

beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” With that kind of affirmation, you don’t need anything else. And here’s the wonderful thing: Each of us can have that same affirmation!

Who does God say you are? First, you are loved by God. He made you because he wanted to. Second, you are a sinner, because you rejected God and tried to be your own god. But, third, Christ died for you, so your sins can be forgiven. And, fourth, “as many as received Christ, who believed on his name, he gave the power to become children of God” – John 1.12. When you come to God by faith in Christ, he accepts you and restores you to your rightful place. You are a child of God. That’s powerful. That’s the foundation for your whole identity. Strip away everything else. Take away your job, your home, your nationality, your language, your skin color – all the accidental things – what’s there at the core? God’s love. You are his child. Can you believe the devil tried to get Jesus to trade *that* for something else? Why in the world would Jesus do that? Why would *you*?

God is the only legitimate source of your identity and purpose in life, and yet a couple of other things God uses to make us who we are. One of these is the sacred vows we take. The vows you took at confirmation or baptism make you a Christian. The vows you took if you got married make you a husband or wife. The vows you took at your children’s baptism, if you have children, gave you a mission as a Christian parent. Ordination vows, if you are a deacon, elder, or pastor, make you who you are. Professional vows, such as doctors or lawyers might take, make you who you are. You make sacred vows before God and witnesses in response to God’s calling. These vows help make you who you are, and they help you navigate life. Shakespeare’s famous line: “This above all, to think own self be true,” right? But who is my true self? The vows will tell you.

The other source of your identity is your relationships. You are someone’s child, maybe someone’s sibling, maybe someone’s spouse, maybe someone’s parent. Whatever your circumstances, you live in a web of relationships with others. You are part of the church, the body of Christ. Our culture is so individualistic; it teaches us to think of ourselves only as individuals. But we are not mere individuals. We live in relationships. We can’t ignore that.

In conclusion, what would I have you do with this sermon? Root out those lies! Find where they are shaping your thoughts, attitudes, and actions, and root them out. Find your identity in the grace of God. Then you will be tough and strong, and so many temptations that come at you like fiery arrows will bounce right off. ... You can lie better than the devil, but don’t do it.