

“There Are No Spiritual Shortcuts”

- I. **Introduction: Taking the Shortcut.** Last week I shared my belief that we sometimes have to take the long way around to reach our spiritual destinations. Today I'd like to consider with you what might happen when we try to take spiritual shortcuts. When I was in grade school, we had exactly one hour to walk home, eat lunch, and get back to school before the bell rang. You really had to be back before the bell rang. It took 15 minutes to walk each way, so we developed a shortcut that took us up and down alleys, over fences, through backyards, and face to face with fierce wild animals like bulldogs and poodles which lived in those backyards. What a great adventure it was to take the shortcut and brave the loud knocks on the windows by neighbors who tried to shoo us off! The shortcut is often more fun, even when it takes as long as the correct or true path, because we feel like we're getting away with something. For many of us, there's exhilaration when we think that we have been clever and daring and "beaten the rules of the game." Life is full of such potential exhilarating shortcuts. The temptation to take shortcuts is a part of our human nature – in our relationships, in our work, and even in our faith.
- II. **And Satan Likes To Offer Shortcuts.** Because Jesus was fully human, he, like us, was tempted in every way. These temptations particularly came upon him during periods of vulnerability and exhaustion, such as when he experienced the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness. The wilderness that Jesus entered at the beginning of his ministry is one of the most desolate, arid landscapes in all the world. On my trip to Israel several years ago, I spent a day along the edge of the Dead Sea where rocky cliffs come right up to the edge of the water. The mountains there differ from our mountains. They are not lush and beautiful; instead, they are sharp-edged, forbidding, and eerie. These are the mountains where Satan came to tempt Jesus.
Satan's motive was to derail Jesus from his mission. The way Satan did this was to offer Jesus three shortcuts. First, Satan offered him the option of turning rocks into bread to ease his hunger. Then Satan took Jesus to the highest point of the Jerusalem temple and tempted him to jump off and let the angels rescue him. In the third and final temptation, Satan offered Jesus power over all the kingdoms of the world if he would worship him. Jesus refused, quoting from Deuteronomy: "Away with you, Satan . . . Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." Jesus had gone into the wilderness in order to receive God's guidance. He had met Satan there, and Jesus had prevailed. But responding to Satan was very depleting. Jesus was so weary that angels came to care for him when Satan left.

III. Many Christian writers have emphasized that this Temptation Story is a significant turning point in the life of Jesus. It was here that Jesus was going to have to first choose how he would use his power. Would he use it like magic to impress and control others for immediate effect or would he use it instead to create a bridge between human beings and God? Would he use his power to advance himself or to express God's love? He already knew that if he relied upon truth and love the world would see him as a threat and try to neutralize him. He would be, and did in fact become, quite vulnerable.

In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey, a modern Christian writer, emphasizes the point that Jesus' power is so different from the power of the world. He does so by re-telling the famous Temptation Story from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov, an agnostic character in the book, wrote a poem entitled "The Grand Inquisitor." The poem was set in 16th century Seville, Spain, during the Inquisition when heretics were regularly being burned at the stake by the church. In the poem, Jesus came in disguised form, but was recognized and imprisoned by the Cardinal of the church who was the Grand Inquisitor. This Inquisitor went to Jesus' cell and, like Satan, tried to corrupt him. The Inquisitor's main criticism of Jesus was that he blew his opportunity for real power when he rejected Satan's three temptations. By saying no to Satan, Jesus had lost the three powers of "miracle, mystery, and authority." The Inquisitor believed that if Jesus had taken the shortcut to power by saying yes to these temptations, he could have manipulated people into seeing him as the Messiah. Through the miracle of turning stones to bread, the mystery of defying the laws of nature and being saved by the angels, and winning the power and authority of all the kingdoms of the world, the Inquisitor believed that Jesus could have mesmerized human beings into following him. He believed that Jesus was offered the shortcut to the kingdom without the cross, and that he had blown it. This, said the Grand Inquisitor, is what the medieval church had done, used miracles, mysteries, and authority to further its own interests. The Grand Inquisitor could not let Jesus interfere with the church's power, so in the poem he ultimately sent him away into the night. Philip Yancey saw what he called "a poignancy" in this scene because at the time it was being written by Dostoevsky, Communist groups were organizing to take over the state in Russia, using the same techniques of promising miracles, mystery, and claiming authority as did the medieval church to achieve their power. But ultimately, both the Communists and the medieval church would fail, just as Satan failed, for one key reason.

IV. This key reason is that power that is built upon external control and deception will always ultimately collapse. In contrast, power that is based upon a genuine freedom to choose will succeed. This second kind of power emanates from people's interior commitment and free choices. This is the kind of power or authority that Jesus sought from his original disciples and seeks from us now: to follow him freely out of love. Yancey believes that Jesus used great restraint in his use of power in his ministry. He

gave people opportunities to follow him, but he never tried to control them. To the young ruler, Jesus said that he must give up everything to follow him. Then he watched sadly as the young man walked away. Jesus did not try to control him. He also had the power to stop Judas from betraying him, but he did not do so. Both Judas and the young ruler had to have the freedom to choose for themselves.

“Well,” you might ask, “is all this choice a good thing? Would it not be better for God just to take the shortcut, take over, and straighten everything out down here?” Here’s Yancey’s answer to that question, and I believe Yancey is correct. God is restrained because grand displays of omnipotence will not achieve the response he desires. Yancey states that, “Although power can force obedience, only love can summon a response of love which is the one thing God wants from us and the reason he created us” (p. 78). God’s miracles, mysteries, and authority can encourage us. But they are given to us out of God’s love, not to manipulate us.

- V. Conclusion: Choices. During this Lent, I’d like to ask that we ponder in a systematic way the choices that Jesus Christ made for us, particularly the choices he made repeatedly not to take the shortcut. He made these choices knowingly and willingly. Let’s also think about the choices we are making in our spiritual journeys. Are we taking shortcuts? Do we pray daily, and are we faithful in reading Scripture? Are we contributing to the Christian education of our children and youth and are we learning ourselves? Have we identified and are we pursuing or preparing for our ministries? Do others know that we follow Jesus Christ?

Or are we taking the shortcut on our journey home? Are we living as lukewarm Christians who use our faith as a kind of insurance policy in case we get caught in a tight spot? Taking shortcuts in our spiritual journeys tends to lead either to dead ends or circular paths. Ultimately, when we take shortcuts in our faith we cease to grow and our practices can become routine and superficial. But in contrast, if we stay on the disciple’s path, avoid the tempting shortcuts, and walk our spiritual journeys with conviction, as Jesus did, God will remain faithfully present and transformative in our lives. There are no shortcuts to the exciting kind of joy and peace that Jesus Christ can give us. Thanks be to God. Amen.