



March 13, 2016

Larry DeLong

**Gifts of the Dark Wood V: The Gift of Temptation** -2 Corinthians  
5:16-19

We may think in our hard-earned wisdom that we know all about temptation – we’ve dealt with it for so long, and learned years ago what we can and can’t resist. We make jokes about it – “lead me not into temptation, I can find it myself!” My wife has a plaque that says, “I just say ‘no’ to desserts – but they won’t listen!” And some of us even practice the ancient discipline of giving up something that particularly tempts us for Lent: chocolate, or TV, or even social media.

But that is not the temptation that waits in the Dark Wood. Tempting like this is far too obvious for clever folks like us. What we’re going to examine today is much more subtle and seductive.

This sort of temptation is not to do evil, or even naughty or self-indulgent, but good. And *just* good; as it happens, the *wrong* good – what we think is good, not the good God intended us to do.

There’s a famous engraving by the great English poet and artist William Blake of the Second Temptation of Christ. That’s the one where Satan offers Jesus control of the world. What catches the eye at

first glance is that it doesn't look much like a picture about temptation. Satan looks remarkably like Moses or one of the patriarchs, even has a nimbus or halo around his head – remember, he is a fallen angel according to legend, at least a member of the heavenly court according to the book of Job. In Blake's picture, Satan and Jesus are each pointing to heaven with one hand and people on earth with the other. And if you think of the temptation Satan offers Jesus, this makes sense.

Why? First, Satan looks so ordinary – well, maybe a bit buff, but ordinary. And that reminds us that temptation seems so often simple, so, well, ordinary. Then, remember what Jesus was tempted to do: make stones into bread, take control of the entire world, jump off the highest point of the temple. Well, those things would be great. In fact, they could be better! Bread for one could be bread for the world; proof of God's saving hand on Jesus could lead thousands to his cause; and then, the icing on the cake, control of the world – who wouldn't want to make the world a much better place right now? Who better to do that than Jesus? Pointing, both of them, to the masses of people on the earth with one hand and to heaven with the other – how better to bring heaven and earth together than Jesus taking control over all that chaos?

All those things are good for Jesus, great for humanity, yet still not the particular good that God intended by bringing Jesus into the world. Both Satan and Jesus are pointing to the same things – but Satan's goal

is not the best good, just the most easily attainable. Subtle; almost, but not quite right.

So, is doing the best you can good enough? If not, then what is? Why shouldn't we be spurred higher? And what about the guilt that accompanies doing "what we can" instead of what we are capable of doing?

Tempted to do Good instead of Right – now *that's* a temptation. Among other things, it can make you unwilling to make a change, because you're doing enough good right now.

Being tempted to do the easy, obvious good has been likened by one author to kicking back after doing something worthwhile, letting yourself feel like you've accomplished something – without considering that there might be something else that God has in mind for you. It feels good, you've done *something*, but you still haven't done what God needs you to do, you've just made yourself feel better. Your intentions are good, but have you done what God called *you* to do?

There are many ways of being people, of how you can be a person, but there's only one way to be you. That's what God made you to be. How do you find your place, God's place for you, in the world, that sweet spot where you are best being you, and not someone else's idea – or even your idea – of who you should be? That would be finding the right good for you, and you alone. Like Jesus choosing his path, God's

path, rather than Satan's, no matter how good Satan's looked. This is one subtle temptation.

What might finding your "right good" look like for you? What is your best self? Tough questions at our age and stage, but I really don't think any of us has given up living, and this is a fundamental part of life.

This might sound like new age gobbledygook, but it's not, really; even as Jesus was tempted to be what would be expedient, what would bring the *quickest* bang for the buck, so, too, are we tempted to settle for good that's not the good we are called to. And our model, Jesus Christ, stayed the course to the proper good, the good he was meant to do.

It may not be the highest good that we are called to – we are called to avoid the temptation to do the wrong good, the good that isn't in line with God's purpose for our lives.

The problem is, this isn't an easy thing to winkle out. Well, of course. If it were, then we wouldn't need to talk about it. A writer tells the story of writing a book before a national tour on the subject – he completely ruined his family's summer vacation so that he could focus on getting this book done. He was convinced that the good he had to do was create this work to present a great new concept that he was really excited about to the world.

As it turned out, what he wrote wasn't the right book. He got too wrapped up in trying to explain everything, instead of clearly setting out

the foundation, and he had to completely rewrite it. But this time the process was much easier and faster, because having done it wrong, now he knew what it was he was *supposed* to write, and the inspiration was there.

For those of us gathered here, the primary question about the condition of our faith is not “are you saved?” but “are you used?” Are you willing to let God’s spirit lead you into the most important calling of your life, not what seems to be the best or the most fruitful?

At the risk of telling another clergy story, I can tell you that there are plenty of pastors who could lead large congregations well and to the glory of God, but are in small churches, where they will stay for their entire career. Not because they aren’t talented or spiritual or gifted enough to do something greater, but that the good they were meant to achieve is answering their call – God’s call – to be with the fifty or sixty people who are the church they serve.

You’ve probably heard of stories like this in other contexts. The doctor who’s a fantastic researcher who devotes her time to working with refugees in abject poverty, for example. The person with so many skills who finds his call in serving at a soup kitchen. The retired coach who could be honing the skills of the best players who instead spends time working with disadvantaged kids. The ones doing what they feel

called to do, sometimes just changing lives one at a time, rather than trying to save the world all at once.

But these are big-time examples, and we're just ordinary folks, mostly. How do we do the good that we're called to do and not be tempted to do the good that it seems we could do?

This has to do with how Satan gets to us. It's not necessarily by slipping little evil thoughts into otherwise good people, although that happens, but by tempting us to mistake the greatest good for the right good, because people are just people, broken and imperfect.

How Satan operates is by making things easy – by making choices obvious and not too bad, but at the same time short-circuiting our chance to become the true human being, the real you that God created you to be. We are, according to Paul, reconciled to God, which should mean that we are capable of being God's instruments, letting our lives be conduits for God's love and grace.

The way that Satan messes with this is by feeding us the lies of pride and shame – that, in the case of pride, that we know better than God what is best for us and for others (sounds like the wrong good, doesn't it?). And shame? Shame is when we manage to become convinced that we are unworthy of God's loving compassion and reconciliation and reject it. We feel guilt that we didn't choose another, seemingly greater path.

Both paths lead the same way – the wrong way.

So, the gift of temptation is both to call out your best self, the self God meant you to be, and at the same time to let go of the “I could have done that,” or “I should’ve done the other.” While those things left undone may look so beguiling in retrospect, in truth they were not the gift of the path you followed.

As Paul said in our Scripture, “From now on we don’t recognize people by human standards... So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

“All these things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ...”

But, you may be thinking, what about the time factor? Just as two weeks ago when we talked about finding your calling in life – something that seems a bit of a stretch for people at our age – now I’m talking about finding who it is you really were meant to be. And that matters, whether you’ve got eighty years or eighty days left of this life.

If you’ve been a gracious, giving, caring person, you may not be far from home already. But you may be in the woods, still, too – because even though the path you’ve followed may be a good one, fulfilling and useful, it may not be *your* path from today.

One of the gifts of the dark wood that comes out of this gift of temptation is the gift of not feeling quite right, that there's still something missing: that something missing is God speaking to your heart, whispering that God still knows who you were meant to be, and still waits to make that happen when you surrender yourself to God's will. For God to bless the path you took, whatever the reasons you took it.

Because every life is of worth to God, and whether you lived it well by your standards or are feeling like you missed something by God's plan, God loves you and wants you to know the freedom of his love and forgiveness: reconciling the world to himself.