

"BEYOND TEMPTATION"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
February 28, 1993

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### INTRODUCTION

There's a delightful story out of Jewish tradition about a rabbi who went on a journey with his servant whose name was Jacob. Their little cart was being drawn by a lively horse of which the rabbi was quite fond. Upon coming to a roadside inn, the rabbi went inside to rest, leaving his horse in Jacob's care. Soon a horse trader passed by and, seeing Jacob, soon made friends with him. He plied him with drink and before long Jacob was so intoxicated that it was quite easy for the horse trader to make a deal with Jacob for this lively horse for practically nothing.

Although drunk, Jacob was frightened by what he had done. After all, what would the rabbi say when he came out of the inn and saw that his horse was gone? An idea crossed his mind. He placed himself between the empty shafts of the cart and started to chew hay. Soon the rabbi came out and he was speechless by what he saw...Jacob in between the shafts chewing hay.

"What's the meaning of this?" he managed to stammer.  
"Where's my horse?" "The horse? That's me" replied Jacob, and he uttered a sound that horses make. "What on earth are you doing?" murmured the rabbi, somewhat puzzled and frightened by all of this. "Have you gone out of your mind?"

"Don't be angry with me, rabbi" pleaded his servant, Jacob.  
"You see...years ago a great misfortune happened to me. I was a young man back then...a little wild and a little foolish, and may God forgive me - I SINNED WITH A WOMAN. So to punish me, God turned me into a horse - your horse. And for twenty years...twenty long years...you have been my master, rabbi, little suspecting who I really was. It seems my punishment is now over. God has forgiven me. Praise God, I'm a man again!"

Now when the rabbi heard Jacob's story, he began to tremble and he prayed for God's mercy. However, there was a practical difficulty facing him. He could not continue with his journey without a horse. So he went into the market place to buy a horse and suddenly, he stood face to face with his old, lively horse. It was munching a wisp of hay at the horse trader's. As he up to it in alarm, the rabbi whispered in the horse's ear, "For goodness sake, Jacob! Again? So soon? Tempted? Sinned? Oh, dear God...what am I to do?"

### TEMPTATION

Our subject for this morning is temptation. You're familiar with it. At one time or another we have all been tempted. And yes, even Jesus was tempted. The Scripture passage for the First Sunday of Lent begins with these familiar words,

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil."

Jesus knew who was tempting Him. When we are tempted, it's important for us to realize the source of that temptation. God is not tempting us to do wrong and Jesus is not enticing us to sin, and the Spirit is not guiding us in to temptation.

Temptation never comes from God. I say that because it never fails to amaze me how people so easily can rationalize temptation. They even credit it to God. But they're only fooling themselves.

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil".

Let's consider for a few moments here this morning the nature of the temptations that Jesus faced and see if they touch our lives as well. Three temptations and we'll take them one by one.

#### STONES INTO BREAD

First of all, there was the temptation to turn stones into bread. The devil knew that Jesus was "famished" from fasting for forty days in the wilderness and so he said to Him,

"If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

People who have visited the desert area near the Jordan River where Jesus was tempted will tell you that small rocks cover the ground. The small rocks might look like bread to someone who has gone forty days without food.

I would like to believe that Jesus could have turned those stones into bread had He chosen to, but Jesus knew who was tempting Him and why! He quoted those lines of Scripture that He had learned in His early years in response to the devil's challenge.

"One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God".

In other words, Jesus is saying that there is more to life than having a full stomach. One of the great temptations we face is the old temptation to always want to have more...and more. Happiness, we feel, is just around the corner IF only we have more things, this or that - more wealth, more of the finer things of life. This is the message our society bombards us with. Who was it who said "less is more". And it can be! I like that. Remember it.

William Willimon, in his book, What's Right With the Church, tells about leading a Sunday School Class that was studying this temptation experience of Jesus in the wilderness. After careful study and explanation of each of the three temptations, he raised this question for the class to consider, "How are we tempted today?" A young salesman was the first to speak.

"Temptation is when your boss calls you in, as mine did on Friday and says, 'I'm going to give you a real opportunity. I'm going to give you a bigger sales territory. We believe you're going places, young man!'"

"But I don't want a bigger territory" this young salesman told his boss. "I'm already away from home four nights a week. It wouldn't be fair to my wife and my daughter."

"Look" replied his boss...."we're asking you to do this for your wife and daughter. Don't you want to be a good father? It takes money to support a family these days. Sure, your

little girl doesn't take much money now, but think of the future. Think of HER future. I'm only asking you to do this for them" said the boss to him. The young man told the class, "Now...to me...this is temptation!"

We are so concerned about "having it all", aren't we? Jesus overcame His first temptation by putting His complete trust in God and that's a good example for each of us. The wise person early on trusts that God will provide all that he or she will need. Trust, plus some hard work.

TO THE PINNACLE OF THE TEMPLE

Just as soon as Jesus refused the devil's temptation to turn stones into bread, He was tempted again. This time the devil takes Him to the pinnacle of the temple and says to Him,

"IF You are the Son of God...." (as if there was some question about the identity of Jesus)...."IF You are the Son of God...." The devil wanted Jesus to throw Himself off of the temple. And to make the temptation even more appealing, the devil quotes Scripture...."He will command His angels concerning You and on their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not dash Your foot against a stone."

Again, as Jesus goes "eyeball to eyeball with the devil", He resorts to Scripture and says, "Do not put the Lord, your God, to the test."

The Scriptures would have us believe that Jesus could have jumped from the "pinnacle of the Temple" and angels would have rescued Him. And He would have won an instant following. People from all over would want to see Him jump from the temple again and again. But pretty soon, however, they would begin to tire of seeing Him jump from the temple and would want Him to jump from higher places.

Jesus resisted the devil's second temptation because He knew that faith could not be built on the sensational or on any kind of gimmickery.

Bruce Larson writes about a friend of his who is an avid eagler watcher. His friend, Rick, takes his family to remote places where they can watch this great bird. On a recent trip, he witnessed a strange incident which he shares with us. He apparently had his binoculars fixed on a large old eagle to whom he had given the name BOSS because he seemed to be the biggest bird in the valley. Boss was doing lazy rolls, catching the thermals and wheeling effortlessly in the sun. Suddenly, the bird dove straight down, his eyes on a target invisible to Rick. But when the eagle reached the floor of the valley and began to ascend once more, it was obvious that he had gained the prize he was after.

A large animal was gripped in his talons. Rick continued to watch, first with fascination, then with growing apprehension. Boss began to fly crazily and erratically...still gripping his prize. Finally, he wheeled abruptly, and crashed headlong into a nearby cliff and plummeted to the valley floor.

Rick was stunned by this strange turn of events and was determined to find out what had happened. And so he marked the place where he had last seen Boss fall and then slowly began to climb down into the valley to see if he could possibly find him. He searched for over an hour before he came upon the stricken

eagle with his dead prey still in his grip. The strange events were immediately explained. Boss's prize was a badger - one of the meanest and most ferocious animals alive. The scenario was obvious. Boss had gotten his prize, but the badger was no easy victim. He retaliated by gnawing away the eagle's stomach and so it turned out that Boss's prize was his undoing.

Jesus could have jumped off the pinnacle of the temple, but it would have eventually led to His undoing. Oh, He would have won a large following, but the people who would follow Jesus because He could leap from high places were not the people Jesus wanted to attract. They would "ooh" and they would "aah", but they would not be the kind of people who would stick around for the long haul, the kind who would advance His Kingdom. They would be here today and gone tomorrow. As William Barclay has so eloquently put it,

"A Gospel found on sensation-mongering is foredoomed to failure!"

And that's good advice for us to consider. God, after all, is not to be found in the sensational, but in His everyday faithfulness.

COMPROMISE HIS MISSION AND MINISTRY

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Jesus resisted the devil's second temptation and thus, the devil con-

"All these I will give You, if You will  
fall down and worship me."

All Jesus had to do at this point was to compromise His mission and His ministry. The devil was handing Jesus the whole world IF ONLY He would worship him. This would enable Him to bypass the suffering and the death on the cross. It would be a short-cut for Him and it would be much more pleasant since it involved no pain. Jesus could have the whole world without having to suffer and die for it. Think of it. What a temptation! Jesus, though, would not compromise. And again, He turned to Scripture: "Worship the Lord, Your God and serve only Him."

Remember the time the Pope was approached by an American baker who offered the Vatican one million dollars if the Pope would make one minor change in the Lord's Prayer? The generous gift was his if he would simply insert the six letter word "wonder" in to the Lord's Prayer. "Wonder". "Give us this day our daily "WONDER" bread.... Speaking of temptation. The Holy Father turned him down.

A few years ago a news story came out of Russia that is a challenge to each of us. One Sunday at a "house church" the believers arrived inconspicuously in small groups throughout the day so as not to arouse the suspicion of KGB informers. By dusk they were all safely inside...windows closed, doors locked. They began the service singing a hymn quietly, but with deep emotion when suddenly the door was pushed open and in walked two soldiers with loaded automatic weapons. One shouted,

"All right....everybody line up against the wall. If you wish to renounce your commitment to Christ - leave now!"  
Two or three quickly left, then another and after a few more seconds, a few more. "This is your last chance..."

"Either turn against your faith in Christ" he ordered,  
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Another left. Finally, two more in embarrassed silence with their faces covered got up and slipped out into the night. No one else moved. Parents with small children trembling beside them looked down reassuringly. They fully expected to be gunned down, or, at best - imprisoned.

After a few moments of complete silence, the other soldier closed the door and looked back at those who stood up against the wall and said,

"Keep your hands up - but this time IN PRAISE to our Lord, Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters. For we, too, are Christians. We were sent to another house several weeks ago to arrest a group of believers...." The other soldier interrupted...."but, instead, we were converted! We have learned by experience, however, that unless people are willing to die for their faith, they cannot be fully trusted."

CLOSING            There is no compromise on the Gospel of Christ. Jesus resisted the devil's third temptation. "Away with you, Satan" was His word.

Three temptations - to use His gifts for His own selfish purposes, to base His witness on the sensational, and to compromise His mission and ministry. And as you reflect on these three temptations, you have the feeling that a church faces them, too. We could use our gifts for our own satisfaction. Some churches never seem to get beyond that. We could make our service into something of a sideshow and seek to win people with a superficial witness to the Gospel. And we could compromise our ministry and mission. BUT we are the Church of Christ. As He resisted those temptations, so, too, must we and we shall. After being tempted by the devil, Jesus was then ready for His ministry and what a ministry it was. His time in the wilderness was a time of testing and the account of that time ends with these beautiful words,

"Then the devil left Him...and behold,  
angels came and ministered to Him."

PRAYER            Make us sensitive, O God, to Your nearness and Your presence in these moments at the end of this service. Wrestle with each of us in the deep corners of our lives where temptation is lurking. Be with us in our times of testing and make this season of Lent a period of growth in our own understanding of ourselves and in our usefulness to others. In His name we now pray. Amen.

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PRAYER

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ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 28, 1993

TWO ROSES

- A. Please note the two roses on the altar...celebrating new life in our midst.
- B. One is there in honor of the birth of William Hunter Matthews, infant son of Marsha and Mark Matthews, born January 29<sup>th</sup>, Lenox Hill Hospital. William Hunter would like to be called HUNTER.
- C. Second rose: in honor of Thomas Tobin Giardina, infant son of Cathy and Paul Giardina, brother to Charles...born February the 8<sup>th</sup>, NYU Medical Center. Thomas was with us last Sunday...again today.

TODAY AFTER CHURCH

- A. Babies make me think of baptisms...you would want to know that today, around 1:15 we are going to be baptizing the seven year old son, Robbie, of Mary Ellen and Mark Kris. Robert Edward Kris...seven years of age...he and I have a similar hobby...collecting baseball cards...and later this week...Sacramento, Calif. Saturday at 6 pm. St. John's Lutheran, Suzanne Lesley Miner, Tom DeBow

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We take this moment to greet the visitors in our congregation. Pleased you're here...look forward to greeting you personally following the service...door or time permitting - downstairs... Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out, sign a book. Join us on other Sunday in worship. Work with us, too.
- B. Roots of this church are deep in the soil of this city. 1837. Two weeks from today we shall celebrate our 156<sup>th</sup> birthday. Special day...minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit. Members, wear tags...friends, interested in knowing more about the good things that go on around here, chancel steps.

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns in bulletin...review them....noting the spiritual growth and study opportunities....and please note - Thursday evening gathering for those who enjoy reading good fiction.... Thursday evening...."Hounds". Aldersgate.
- B. Meetings: Goals of the Decade or Vision 2000. Tonight. Trustees on Monday. Membership Committee Meeting on Thursday evening. Supper...

OFFERING

- A. Love Leaves available for adults...downstairs on the table....also pick up a copy of The Sanctuary...for your Lenten reading.
- B. Jesus said:

"IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE  
THAN IT IS TO RECEIVE..."

REFLECTING...

- A. Reflecting for a moment or two on the explosion at the World Trade Center on Friday afternoon...and in keeping with President Clinton's word of Saturday to hold in our prayers the loved ones of those killed in the explosion, as well as the thousand people hospitalized...and injured...all are, certainly in our thoughts and prayers... and all who faced this terrible disaster with courage and heroism... and with extraordinary care for others....
- B. Truly a magnificent response on the part of so many.... police, firemen, medical personal....so many .... were any of you caught in that terrible
- C. All of us are thankful that more weren't killed...it could have been much worse...at least that's the impression I have gained from watching the television coverage and reading the accounts of it... once again,
- D. We're reminded that we live in a world of bombs and of violence, and we have been spared so much of this in this beloved country of ours...and as it comes closer to home it intensifies for me the imperatives of our Faith in terms of following Jesus...His word and His way...."It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh ...it involves a spiritual recrudence...."

PASTORAL PRAYER: February 28, 1993

For reasons that we do not altogether understand, O God, it's easier for some of us to find fault than it is to give thanks. Our grievances rest on the tip of our tongues, while blessings that ought to excite us to praise and thanksgiving are often lost from our sight.

And so we thank you, Lord, in these moments of quiet prayer for the blessings that meet the eye:

The glow of health.  
The welcome sight of a friend's face  
in the crowded subway.  
The carefree laughter of children playing  
in the park.  
The taste of well-cooked food.  
The beauty and color of trees in the Fall.

But we thank you, Lord, even more for those blessings that are felt, but never seen:

Your grace at work in our lives.  
Those invisible ties of faith that bind our lives together in this Church family.  
The courage that courses through our being when danger confronts us.  
The stamina that keeps us at it even when we don't like what we're doing.  
The confidence in Your way...that saves us from prolonged doubt and shields us from despair.  
The memory of kindnesses done us by friends.

Move us, Lord, to speak the thanks we feel in our better moments, and forgive us for our much complaining - our grumbling, our griping, our pettiness, our fault-finding - yes, our failure to see how truly blessed we are!

You are busy, Lord, with every person - believing in each of us more fully than we dare believe in ourselves. Grant us now what we need to be more like Jesus:

A quiet mind...a forgiving spirit...an indifferent attitude to wealth and status...a humble estimate of self...a readiness to pray...a clear vision of Your purpose for our lives...the courage to stand for the right...and to do it.

Command us.

Comfort us. We desperately need both direction and consolation.

Confirm what is strong in us. Fill what is empty.

Let your love so possess our spirits that whatever we are called to do in Word or Deed, we may do in your strength and Your name.

In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord, we pray our prayers.

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The taste of well-cooked food.  
The beauty and color of trees in the Fall.

But we thank you, Lord, even more for those blessings that are felt, but never seen:

Your grace and peace at work in our lives.  
Those invisible ties of faith that bind our lives together in this Church family.  
The courage that courses through our being when danger confronts us.  
The stamina that keeps us at it even when we don't like what we're doing.  
The confidence in Your way...that saves us from prolonged doubt and shields us from despair.  
The memory of kindnesses done us by friends.

Move us, Lord, to speak the thanks we feel in our better moments, and forgive us for our much complaining - our grumbling, our griping, our pettiness, our fault-finding - yes, our failure to see how truly blessed we are!

You are busy, Lord, with every person - believing in each of us more fully than we dare believe in ourselves. Grant us now what we need to be more like Jesus:

A quiet mind...a forgiving spirit...an indifferent attitude to wealth and status...a humble estimate of self...a readiness to pray...a clear vision of Your purpose for our lives...the courage to stand for the right...and to do it.

Command us.

Comfort us. We desperately need both direction and consolation.

Confirm what is strong in us. Fill what is empty.

Let your love so possess our spirits that whatever we are called to do in Word or Deed, we may do in your strength and Your name.

In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord, we pray our prayers.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, February 28, 1993

TWO ROSES

- A. Please note the two roses on the altar...celebrating new life in our midst.
- B. One is there in honor of the birth of William Hunter Matthews, infant son of Marsha and Mark Matthews, born January 29<sup>th</sup>, Lenox Hill Hospital. William Hunter would like to be called HUNTER.
- C. Second rose: in honor of Thomas Tobin Giardina, infant son of Cathy and Paul Giardina, brother to Charles...born February the 8th, NYU Medical Center. Thomas was with us last Sunday...again today.

TODAY AFTER CHURCH

- A. Babies make me think of baptisms...you would want to know that today, around 1:15 we are going to be baptizing the seven year old son, Robbie, of Mary Ellen and Mark Kris. Robert Edward Kris...seven years of age...he and I have a similar hobby... collecting baseball cards...

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. We take this moment to greet the visitors in our congregation. Pleased you're here...look forward to greeting you personally following the service...door or time permitting - downstairs... Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out, sign a book. Join us on other Sunday in worship. Work with us, too.
- B. Roots of this church are deep in the soil of this city. 1837. Two weeks from today we shall celebrate our 156th birthday. Special day...minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit. Members, wear tags...friends, interested in knowing more about the good things that go on around here, chancel steps.

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns in bulletin...review them...noting the spiritual growth and study opportunities...and please note - Thursday evening gathering for those who enjoy reading good fiction... Thursday evening..."Hounds". Aldersgate.
- B. Meetings: Goals of the Decade or Vision 2000. Tonight. Trustees on Monday. Membership Committee Meeting on Thursday evening. Supper...

( over )

OFFERING

A. Love Loaves available for adults...downstairs on the table....also pick up a copy of The Sanctuary...for your Lenten reading.

B. Jesus said:

"IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE  
THAN IT IS TO RECEIVE..."