

Jesus Tempted in the Wilderness: Exploring the Power of Truth Over Self Interest (Part 3)

Reading: Gospel of Mark 1:1-4; Matthew 4:5-7; Mark 1:14-15; John 3:5-6

Mk 1:1-4 *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, (2) as it has been written in the Prophets, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You; (3) the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight." Mal. 3:1; Isa. 40:3 (4) John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for remission of sins...*

Matt 4:5-7 *(5) Then the Devil takes Him (Jesus) to the holy city, and he set Him on the wing of the temple. (6) And he said to Him, If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it has been written: "He shall give His angels charge concerning You, and they shall bear You on their hands, lest You strike Your foot against a stone." LXX-Psa. 90:11, 12; MT-Psa. 91:11, 12 (7) Jesus said to him, Again it has been written: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Deut. 6:16*

Mk 1:14-15 *And after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, (15) and saying, The time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God draws near. Repent and believe in the gospel.*

Jn 3:5-6 *Jesus answered, Truly, truly, I say to you, If one is not generated out of water and Spirit, he is not able to enter into the kingdom of God. (6) That having been generated out of the flesh is flesh, and that having been generated out of the Spirit is spirit.*

We should have it clear in our minds now that these temptations of the Lord by the devil represent the essential nature of all the kinds of temptation a person can possibly undergo in their journey to make the Word a more central part of their life. If we are to apply the text to our own lives then we need to see what each aspect in it represents in the inner world of our affections and thoughts. When we see this then we can begin to work to have the inside of the cup, that is the motives and thoughts of our hearts, cleaned as the Lord commands. It's important to ensure that our external life is in order, but it is even more important to ensure that the motives and thoughts that underlie our external activity are also being worked with. There are two levels of repentance illustrated in the Gospels, the first is captured in the baptism of John which is a baptism of repentance, this has to do with getting our external life in order, and so the Gospel tells us that John preached a baptism of repentance – the Lord too, we are told preached repentance, but with a difference, for where John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the Lord we are told preached repentance for the kingdom of God was near.

How easy it is for us to pass over such differences as insignificant. We need to remind ourselves that ever dot and tittle of the law or Word is significant and vitally important to our eternal spiritual well being. For were we to think that the messages that John and Jesus preached were the same then we might fall into thinking that an ordered external life, a life of Church going, of good works, of compliance with moral, civil and social expectations is enough and all that is required as to the spiritual life. But such compliance, while important, is a natural life not necessarily a spiritual life. The good and the evil can live very similar external lives, the difference lies not in the external behaviour but in the motives that underlie the behaviour. Unless the inside of the cup is attended to all that is done externally is but ashes and dust.

Jesus himself declared that the kingdom of heaven is within you. And so when He says that we are to repent for the kingdom of God is near, He is saying that the kingdom or rule of Godly principles for our life is only a response away. To repent means to turn from habitual ways and modes of being and to allow the Word to govern our inner attitudes and thoughts. It's a word that expresses the need for action, for change, and when we do respond to the Word in acknowledging when our attitudes are not of a spiritual or heavenly quality, and at the same time look to the Lord, through resisting our tendencies to react unthinkingly from what is lower within us, He can then make available new affections that have the spiritual well being of all as their chief concern. The kingdom of God is in us when we are grounded in a genuine love for the Lord's Word. This is what heaven is, it is love to the Lord and love to our neighbour, no other states of life exist there, and so when these loves rule in our life, the kingdom of God is not only then near, but has come in power and glory of heaven.

So the Word's message is two fold in regard to repentance. It's more external sense is like John's message and instructs us concerning how we are to regulate our behaviour in the external world. Don't lie, or cheat, or steal, do good, love others etc. All things that are to be done and are important for maintaining a well ordered moral and civil society. So for those who first hear the Word the challenge is to change how they behave, to work to align their behaviour with their new found understanding of truths from the literal sense of the Word. But the Word doesn't just address external behaviour, it seeks to address our inner attitudes as well and this is the inner message of repentance, this is the message of interior or spiritual truths which is represented by the message of repentance that Jesus preaches. So where John represents the external meaning of the Word directed towards the external life of the natural man, Jesus represents its inner meaning which is instruction for strengthening the inner life of our

spiritual man.

Emphasis on external repentance is for the sake of the natural man and it often comes with fairly strong external supports. We can see this in any human community, where there are certain expectations in regard to acceptable behaviour. These external social constraints mould peoples' external behaviour into what is acceptable to the group. This is as true for a faith community as any other human community, where the constraints of belonging to the group are captured in a demand on its members to act in a certain way. Internal applications of repentance don't have these external pressures to conform, and so its practise is from an inner motivation, and as such it is a truly free act on the part of a person's will and it is this that makes it spiritual. No person or external conditions can get us to reflect on our motives or thought life. This is purely something between the Lord and the individual and it is this level that the inner meaning of the Word is directed. This is where the kingdom of heaven has to rule if we are to experience heavenly states of life after the death of the body. Jesus said that if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven we need to be born of both water and of the spirit.

The terms water and spirit, like the terms John and Jesus, both refer to these levels in the Word. Water and spirit are both described in the Word as cleansing agents, and so refer to the Word's cleansing function on the human mind and life. We can see this from John's own statement in regard to the Lord when he said in Lk 3:16...

Luk 3:16 John answered all, saying, I indeed baptize you with water; but He stronger than I comes, of whom I am not fit to loosen the thong of His sandals. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire,

All baptisms are cleansings, and spiritual cleansing takes place by means of the Word as we bath our minds in its truths.

First in a more external way as we take the Word and look to clean up our external life, speech and behaviour, this is using natural truths of the Word as water. But to be baptised in the Holy Spirit and fire is a more internal cleansing by the spirit of truth and refers to the application of spiritual truths with a view to having our inner life cleansed.

So let's now return to our text for today and draw out its application in regard to our inner life...

Mat 4:5-7 Then the Devil takes Him to the holy city, and he set Him on the wing of the temple. (6) And he said to Him, If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it has been written: "He shall give His angels charge concerning You, and they shall bear You on their hands, lest You strike Your foot against a stone." LXX-Psa. 90:11, 12; MT-Psa. 91:11, 12 (7) Jesus said to him, Again it has been written: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Deut. 6:16

The devil manifests within our minds as desires that flow from the love of self and the world, he is everything in us that is grounded in selfishness or self interest. The Lord on the other hand is everything in us that is grounded in a genuine concern for the spiritual well being of others which flows from a love for his Word. So, given that we have both the Lord or the Word and the Devil or self interest within the natural level of our minds, we are open to the experience of temptation, for temptation is the experience of an inner conflict between the false ideas and perspectives of our self interest and the true ideas and perspectives the Lord offers us through His Word. This is a battle we are constantly engaged with if we are committed to the inner spiritual life. The Scripture presents the dynamics of this inner conflict through the Lord's life as a conversation, a toing and froing of words between Himself as a representation of the activity of truth in our minds and the Devil as a representation of those desires that give rise to false ideas.

All speech is a product of thought and so corresponds to it. So where we see conversations going on in the Word we are being presented with something to do with our own thought processes. We read then that, "the Devil takes Him to the holy city, and set Him on the wing or pinnacle of the temple." What's going on here...well the devil is self interest and what this is saying spiritually is that there is a tendency in us all for self interest to take hold of the Word or its truths and exalt them by placing them on the highest point of the temple. Now the temple is God's dwelling place, and as such must represent the human mind or spirit for this is the true dwelling place of the Lord. When self interest takes hold of truth it seeks to use it for its own ends, so what is being described here is our struggle against a tendency to use the Lord's Word or truth to promote ourselves over others.

When self interest takes truth and lifts it up it does so from evil motives. It's a condition that manifests as a kind of hardness towards those we see as different to us. Often it comes to the fore as high-mindedness, arrogance, and self-righteousness clothed in religious or spiritual garments. Such attitudes are a short step away from a dangerous form of hypocrisy we need to guard our spirits against. Inherent in this tendency is a complete disregard for, or wilful blindness to the fact that spiritual teachings point out that such attitudes have no place in the kingdom of heaven. The temptation to cast himself down can be seen being played out on a large scale today in the clash of major religious fundamentalist ideologies, where all kinds of atrocities can and are and have been justified in the name of God.

The temptation is to take truths, "If you are the Son of God" and use them to build a case for promoting ones own interests, which is what is captured in the words, "throw yourself down," which is a temptation to bring down truths to serve self, which is justified in the mistaken belief that because the name of God has be evoked to justify ungodly actions, this

somehow makes them ok in God's sight, that, "He shall give his angels charge over you, and they shall bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone." Such is the reasoning of self interest or the Devil in its handling of spiritual truths, whatever the religious persuasion.

While it is easy to see this kind of behaviour in events on the world stage, it is not so easy to see that its seeds lie within all our hearts, that the condition is not exclusive but is rather a general human condition. We all have these tendencies within our unregenerate nature. What the external events should do is motivate us to find the root causes within ourselves. The larger scale can serve us as a mirror for the smaller scale of our own lives, a harsh word, engaging in gossip, holding grudges, freezing people out, all work to bring hardship into the lives of others. What we fail to see is that, while such behaviour may affect the person at whom it is directed, it actually has a destructive impact on our own spiritual welfare. We can't engage in such behaviour on the one hand and welcome the kingdom of God into our lives on the other for the two are incompatible. To try and do so is what it means to tempt the Lord God. Once we take truths into our lives we are given a responsibility to examine our own lives in their light, seeking out those inner attitudes that cause us to use them to judge others and justify our negative behaviours. See if you can take this responsibility on in a more conscious way over this week and make an effort to look to the Lord to transform any inner attitude you may be carrying that looks to tempt the Lord your God.

Amen.

AC 8966 Temptations lead to confirmation of true beliefs, implanting them, and making them voluntary, so that they become the good qualities related to love for others. For a person uses true beliefs to fight against bad inclinations and misconceptions, and his mind is aligned with truths, so when he wins, he is confirmed in them and implants them. And the

bad inclinations and misconceptions he has confronted, these he regards as the enemy, and he rejects them. Temptations also subdue self-indulgent impulses that come from self interest and worldliness, and they make someone humble. This makes him able to accept heavenly life from the Lord, which is new life, the life of a regenerated person. **From the work Arcana Coelestia by Emanuel Swedenborg**