



Pausing on the Road to Jerusalem

SESSION 1

| Bible focus: Luke 4:1–13

Goal for the Session

The goals of this session are to welcome participants and encourage them to affirm their central identity in Christ as they discuss the temptations Jesus faced.

Preparing for the Session

- Pray that your time with the group will be fruitful. Pray that those who attend will feel welcome and will be encouraged to grow in faithfulness to God.
- Search on the Internet for images that depict Christ in the wilderness. Print copies of these images to bring to the group. (Hint: Google Image Search is a powerful engine for finding images grouped around a theme. Once you are in Image Search, type in “Christ” and “wilderness.” Scan through to find images from several genres and eras.)
- To lead this session you will need the following:
 - A copy of the Participant Handout for each person or, if you e-mailed it to them beforehand, a few extra copies for newcomers or those who left them at home
 - Paper and pencils or pens for each participant
 - Blackboard and chalk or newsprint and markers
 - Name tags (optional)
 - Hymnals or the text of a hymn if you choose to use it
- Mark your copy of the Participant Handout, highlighting the passages quoted in this guide so you can point them out to participants.
- Set up the room. Make sure there are enough tables and chairs for participants. If possible, arrange chairs in a circle or semicircle rather than rows so that people are facing one another. This encourages relationships and dialogue.
- Decide how you want to provide Participant Handouts to the group and do that consistently throughout this study. If you are e-mailing them as attachments, you might decide whether to send them all at once or each week to send the handout for the following week. If you distribute hard copies of the handouts, decide when you will hand them out at each session and let people know this in the first session. It is recommended that you distribute the following session's Participant Handout at the end of the current session so that members will concentrate on the current week's topic and not begin browsing the material for the following session.
- This Leader's Guide assumes that members will arrive at the first session having read the first Participant Handout. If this is *not* the case, you will need to adjust some of the activities so that they have time to read it during the session. We suggest you begin with activities 1–5, allow ten minutes for participants to read the materials, and skip activities 6, 7, and 11. You should be able to do the other activities and complete the session in fifty minutes.

Teaching Tip

If your group includes any new members, take time to welcome them and allow them to connect with one another. The first meeting of any group provokes anxiety for most people, so as the leader, set a calm, warm tone and express enthusiasm for this study and for members' participation. You will want to be more directive than usual in this first session so that people do not feel worried about how the group will function. You might note to the group that you are open to feedback after this first meeting so that all the meetings can be helpful.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Welcome

As participants arrive, welcome them and hand out name tags. Sit together around a table. When all have arrived, introduce yourself as the leader and express enthusiasm for the coming weeks of study with the group.

2. Introductions

Ask the group members to say their names and to add one thing they enjoy doing that feels like a central part of who they are.

3. Prayer

Ask the group to join you in prayer. Say this prayer or one of your own:

God, we gather here today to enjoy your presence and learn from you and one another. Help us to enter into this season of Lent with thoughtfulness and openness, trusting that you are our Guide and Teacher. Give us ears to hear your word, eyes to see your face, and courage to follow the path you set before us. Through Christ we pray. **Amen.**

4. Introducing the Study

Explain to the group the structure of each of the sessions: welcome and prayer, discussion of the material, exploration of responses to the material, and closing activity. Encourage the group to be timely and to read the material in advance.

Note that this is a Lenten study. Lent is the season that leads up to Easter. Read this description of Lent to the class:

Lent has long been essentially penitential, that is, a time set aside for making sacrifices, for giving things up for rigorous self-examination, for honest confession. In recent years, however, many Christians have focused their Lenten preparation more on study and prayer.

Explain that this study will provide opportunities for introspection, discussion, and discernment. It will serve as a source of preparation as Easter approaches.

5. Transition

Note that when the group did introductions, everyone said something they enjoy doing that feels central to their identity. Today's session is about the temptation that Jesus faced to betray his true identity and the similar temptations that Jesus' followers face today.

Exploring (25 minutes)

6. Art Engagement

If you brought them, pass around several artists' renditions of Christ in the wilderness. Ask: How would you describe the expression on Jesus' face in the picture you are looking at?

7. Bible Reading and Discussion

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Luke 4:1–13. Direct the group to follow along in the Bible and to write down any key words or phrases that stand out to them. Go around the table and share which key words or phrases stood out and, briefly, why they stood out. As the group shares, write their words or phrases on the blackboard or newsprint.

Begin a basic discussion by asking observation questions. Ask: Where is this story set? What is the climax of the action in this episode?

Biblical texts elicit questions. Ask: What questions arise for you when you read this text? What is uncomfortable for you when you read it, and what is comforting?

The Gospel writer Luke did not record everything about Jesus' life—just those things he found central and formative for Jesus' followers. Michael Lindvall, the author of this study, suggests that the temptation episode is important for our understanding of Jesus and of ourselves. Ask: How are these temptations important

for our understanding of Jesus? How is this episode important for our understanding of ourselves?

8. Small-Group Sharing

Read this quotation from the Participant Handout:

The one who throws things all over the place is forever tempting us to make up our own lines, make them up for success with the crowd. All we can do in order to resist such temptation is to reach into the tradition and remember who we are, remember our lines, as it were.

Lines like: "One does not live by bread alone." "The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear." "Do justice and . . . love kindness, and . . . walk humbly with your God." (pp. 3–4)

Say: Michael Lindvall notes those lines from the Bible, and he also tells of something he always says to his children: "Remember who you are."

Ask the group members to turn to one or two others and answer these questions: When you have been tempted by the need to succeed and forget who you are, what words have strengthened you and reminded you of your true identity? (The words could be lines from Scripture, from someone wise, or from something you have read.) What words have you shared with others to remind them of who they are?

Responding (10 minutes)

9. Our Christian Identity

Read this quotation from page 4 of the handout:

When we wear the name "Christian," we do no less than assume our core identity. . . . You might be a mom or a music teacher who is a Christian. You might be a Christian investment banker. You can be a follower of Jesus Christ who is also a lawyer. In these dual roles, however, it is your faith that guides your music teaching, your mothering, and your banking, not the other way around.

Ask the group members to draw a circle on paper and label it with their name and these words: "Follower of Jesus Christ." Then ask them to draw and label other circles that represent parts of their identity, such as "parent," "deacon," "teacher," or "community volunteer." They should draw the circles in relation to the first circle to show how various aspect of their lives relate to their core identity as a follower of Christ. The circles might

overlap the original circle, might sit inside it, or might be placed far from it. Then ask them to turn to the same small groups of two or three people once more and share their drawings.

10. Silent Reflection

Draw the group's attention once more to the images of Christ in the wilderness that you brought. Ask them to silently look at the images and think of one thing they want to do in the season of Lent in order to let their core identity as a follower of Christ shape their lives. Allow thirty seconds of silence.

Closing (5 minutes)

11. Hymn

Sing or read the text of "It Is Well with My Soul," a hymn that affirms God's strengthening presence in times of trial.

12. Prayer

Use this prayer or one of your own:

Holy God, we thank you for your word to us. Remind us daily of who we are and whose we are. God, in this silence we pray that you would strengthen the person on our right (leave ten seconds of silence). And now we pray silently for the person on our left (leave ten seconds of silence). Help us trust that you go with us wherever we go, whether wandering in the wilderness or safely at home. These things we pray through Christ, who knows all our temptations and has shown us a better way to live. **Amen.**

13. Preparing for the Next Session

Distribute copies of the next session's Participant Handout, and agree with members that they will come to the next session having read it.

Teaching Alternatives

- Michael Lindvall refers in the study guide to the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis. Bring in a clip from the film that depicts some portion of Jesus' last temptation and use it as an opening discussion starter. Consider bringing in another Jesus film that depicts the temptation in the wilderness.
- The Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote a chapter in his book *The Brothers Karamazov* about the

temptations of Christ. It is called “The Grand Inquisitor” and suggests that Jesus was tempted to control people rather than setting them free to make their own decisions. Bring the book or copies of that chapter and read portions as part of the “Exploring” section.

- Ask participants to read a favorite paragraph from the session in the handout and to remark on what they learned or a question it raised. Allow for others to respond.
- If you did not bring any art that depicts Christ in the wilderness, ask the participants to close their eyes for a few moments and imagine a wilderness. Then ask them to share what they saw.
- The idea of wilderness has many connotations. As an opening activity, ask the participants to write “Wilderness” at the top of a sheet of paper and to divide the paper into two columns. In the left column, they can write all the negative things that come to mind about wilderness. In the right column, they can write the positive things that come to mind. Ask them to summarize their thoughts and present them to a neighbor.

For More Information

Films

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), directed by Martin Scorsese.

The Passion of the Christ (2004), directed by Mel Gibson.

Books

Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, trans. P. A. Bien (1951; repr. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960).

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880.

Key Scriptures

Exodus 20:15 (“You shall not steal.”)

Deuteronomy 6:5 (“Love the LORD your God with all your heart.”)

Deuteronomy 6:13 (“The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.”)

Deuteronomy 6:16 (“Do not put the LORD your God to the test.”)

Deuteronomy 8:2–3 (“One does not live by bread alone.”)

Micah 6:8 (“Do justice, and . . . love kindness, and . . . walk humbly with your God.”)

Matthew 4:1–11 (Parallel to Luke 4:1–13)

Mark 1:12–13 (Parallel to Luke 4:1–13)

Luke 6:35 (“Love your enemies.”)

Luke 22:39–46 (Jesus in Gethsemane).

John 15:12 (“Love one another as I have loved you.”)

Romans 12:9 (“Let love be genuine” and “Hold fast to what is good.”)

1 Peter 2:17 (“Honor everyone.”)

About the Writer

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Introduction

The first three Gospels, the so-called Synoptics (from the Greek for “to see together”), each tell the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness just before he begins his active years of ministry. These three Gospels tell us that after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days. Mark tells the tale in a few lean verses. Mathew and Luke add details. John never mentions it.

There are several events in the Bible that are forty days or forty years in duration, most famously Noah’s flood and Israel’s exodus from Egypt. It may be that “forty” is not to be taken literally but was a way to say “a very long time,” just as we say a “million” when we want to emphasize the immensity of a number even though we don’t mean it literally. Both the desert and the number forty recall Israel’s exodus sojourn. But more generally, the desert has always been that place of material privation, free of distraction and austere, where people go to encounter God.

The tempter is named “the devil” by Matthew and Luke. Devil is not a proper name, and the Bible nowhere offers a clear picture of this illusive evil “being.” The word *devil* is the English corruption of a Greek word *diabolos*, meaning “the one who throws things around.”

Luke lists three specific temptations: to turn desert stones into bread, to leap from the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem to be caught by God’s angels on the way down, and to be granted “all the kingdoms of the world” if only Jesus would fall down before Satan. In each case, Jesus resists the temptation by quoting a pas-



sage of Scripture in response. The devil responds at one point by quoting Scripture back at Jesus, the source of the quip that “even the devil can quote Scripture.”

The three temptations are both illusive and illustrative. Bread would have obviously satisfied Jesus’ hunger, but such a trick might have also enabled him to win the loyalty of the masses with free bread much in the way Rome kept the restless population of its capital at ease with free bread every day. Jumping from the conspicuous “pinnacle” of the Temple only to be caught by angels would have certainly wowed the crowds. The third offer of “all the kingdoms of the world” would have granted Jesus the earthly, even violent, power that could *demand* faith by edict or threat of sword. But Jesus is persistently clear, here and throughout his ministry, that this is not the kind of faith he seeks. Alone among the three Gospels that tell the story of the temptation, Luke ends his telling with the foreboding words of verse 13, “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

Serious Temptation

There are, as noted, several themes hidden in the story of Jesus' temptation. There's a theme about the temptation of materialism represented appropriately by "bread"—bread made from desert stones. There's the theme of power and what power can do to people. Power is represented by the "kingdoms of the world" that the devil offers to Jesus. There's the theme of the manipulation of faith by outward miracle. In this story, the devil tempts Jesus to offer a "miracle show" in Jerusalem. He could leap from the top of the Temple to be caught by angels and win over the city by a magic act. But it's the enigmatic last words of Luke's story that really fascinate me. "When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him. . . ." And then those last four words: "until an opportune time." That "opportune time" doesn't come for eighteen chapters. For eighteen chapters, *diabolos* seems to go underground; the devil bides his time until the moment comes and only then presents Jesus with one last temptation.

Nearly twenty years ago, a Jesus movie caused a cultural stir every bit as upsetting as Mel Gibson's more recent *The Passion of the Christ* (albeit for very different reasons). This earlier film suggested the temptation that comes to Jesus at Luke's "opportune time." This controversy swirled around Martin Scorsese's filmed version of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Both the novelist and the filmmaker fictionalized the story as told in the Gospels with creatively reckless abandon. But for all the fantasy, the "last temptation" they speculate about is fundamentally congruous—though altogether speculative—with the biblical "last temptation" that comes at the "opportune time."

It comes in chapter 22 of Luke, the final night of Jesus' life, just after the Last Supper. Jesus has gone to a garden on the Mount of Olives to pray with several of his disciples. Twice he tells the disciples to pray that they may not "come into the time of trial." And then, alone, Jesus prays his way through his "last temptation." He prays that God might "remove this cup from me." The "cup" stands for the cross, of course. Jesus' last temptation is, quite simply, to avoid the cross. He is tempted to take an easier route that skirts the horror to come. Jesus' last temptation is to take a road that would bypass the very act of sacrificial love that somehow saves us.

Both the Kazantzakis novel and the Scorsese film present this final temptation in the form of a dream. Instead of the cross before him, Jesus dreams of living a long and "successful" life. The dream includes marriage to Mary Magdalene replete with passion, children, and the good life in the green hills of Galilee. Had Jesus yielded to this last temptation, had he passed by the cross, he might have become a great carpenter. He might have become a successful teacher. He might still have been an inspiration, even a venerated sage, but he would not have been the Savior.

Actually, the three temptations in the desert and this fourth temptation in the garden are variations on one theme. Each of them is a temptation to be a "success" but in the process to forget whom he was meant to be. In the desert, *diabolos* tempts him with the power that would come with an endless supply of bread. He tempts him with the "kingdoms of the world," power implicit in political position. He tempts him with the "success" that would doubtless follow a flying act off the top of the Temple. And finally, according to Kazantzakis and Scorsese, when none of that worked, *diabolos* tempts him in the garden—"at an opportune time"—with a simpler and subtler kind of success: "Forget the cross, be a good rabbi back in Nazareth, get married, settle down, and become modestly famous for a while."

More than Peccadilloes

When we think about temptation (something we are supposed to do in Lent), we usually focus in on our peccadilloes, our "little sins." Our consciences dutifully offer up memories of questionable tax deductions, edgy deals, and awkward passions. We remember convenient lies and unkind words. All these are real, of course, and we do well to resist them and repent of them. But in the end, they're not our most serious temptation, any more than they were Jesus' real temptation.

We live in a world in which our sharpest temptation is often much the same as the sum of the four Jesus faced. Just as he was tempted to forget who he was and be a success, we are tempted to be a success in the eyes of the world but in the process to forget whom we are called to be. Don't misunderstand me; success can be a very good thing. Indeed, sometimes being whom you are called to be may well lead to success in the eyes of the world. But the harder truth is this: "success" in the

eyes of the world and “whom you are meant to be” are not always the same thing. In fact, sometimes they are at sharp odds with each other.

The real temptation Jesus faced, the real temptation we face in a hundred subtle ways, is the temptation to be a success in the eyes of the world but at the cost of integrity. We are tempted to succeed at the price of our families, to succeed magnificently but to lose our happiness, to succeed grandly and pay for it with our souls. Had Jesus given in to *diabolos*, either in the desert or in the garden, he might have been a smashing first-century success—plenty of bread, famous worker of miracles, major Judean politician, or maybe just a locally renowned rabbi-carpenter, husband, and father. All of these are credible manifestations of success, but Jesus was meant to be more. And you and I are finally meant for even more than success in the eyes of the world.

Resisting Diabolos

I don’t know precisely what I believe about the devil, but I do know that there is some malign and centrifugal force rumbling about life, a *diabolos* forever throwing everything all over the place. The one who throws things all over the place wants to confuse me about what really matters, wants to confuse me about whom I am really called to be, and wants to entice me down paths that seem alluring at the moment but do not lead to the life I am called to live.

Jesus resisted “the one who throws things around,” of course. Just *how* he resists is of crucial importance. Three times in the desert he resists, and each time he arms himself with Scripture, with tradition, with memory, against the fresh ideas of you-know-whom. Three times he remembers sacred words that he knows like the back of his hand. And three times he is strengthened by remembering. Jesus resisted temptation by reaching deep into the tradition, the long heritage of faith that teaches us what matters most. ““One does not live by bread alone,”” he remembered. ““Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,”” he recalled.

When we are tempted and need to remember whom we are meant to be, when we are tempted with easy and beguiling success, when we need to remember what really matters, we too need to reach into the tradition as Jesus did and remember—remember who we are.

Tom Long teaches preaching at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and is one of the finest preachers and storytellers I know. He once told me a tale about a high school play he’d been a part of, a story about being tempted

with success, but forgetting whom you are meant to be. This play was being directed by a teacher new to Tom’s high school, a young woman fresh out of teachers’ college, full of energy and enthusiasm. She hoped to direct the best high school play there ever was. She worked with the kids week after week, fitting costumes, blocking the movements of stage, and, of course, helping the students memorize lines. Her zeal was contagious, and by the time opening night rolled around, the whole cast believed in themselves. That night was electric; the school auditorium packed full and charged with anticipation.

All went well at first—until the middle of the second act. Then, one of the lead players forgot a line. It was painfully obvious; the auditorium fell silent. Sitting at the foot of the stage, the young teacher/director whispered the forgotten words to the student, but he either didn’t hear or didn’t pay attention. The silence from the stage grew ever more awkward. In desperation, unable to remember his words, the kid ad-libbed a line. He just made something up.

The audience was relieved, the line was clever enough, and it got a laugh, a good laugh the kid enjoyed. So he made up another line. There was laughter again, but less laughter this time. After delivering his third fabricated line, there was nothing in the auditorium but silence and embarrassment. Tom remembers looking down at the foot of the stage to where the young teacher was sitting, watching her play. He said he saw tears streaming down her cheeks.

The one who throws everything all over the place is forever tempting us to make up our own lines, make them up for success with the crowd. All we can do in order to resist such temptation is reach into the tradition and remember who we are, remember our lines as it were.



Lines like: "One does not live by bread alone." "The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear." "Do justice and . . . love kindness, and . . . walk humbly with your God." "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." "Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil." "Strive first for the kingdom of God." "Love one another."

"You shall not steal." "Hold fast to what is good." "Help the suffering, honor all people."

Our Identity

Diabolos didn't tempt Jesus with Cuban cigars or single-malt Scotch. It wasn't geisha girls or shady deals. "The one who throws things around" tempted him to forget his identity. And when all is said and done, that's eternally our most serious temptation as well.

When we wear the name "Christian," we do no less than assume our core identity. To be a Christian is not one loyalty among many. To be a Christian is not one of several equally important identities. Faith cannot be just one personal interest among several hobbies. Church is not just another of the various associations you might belong to. The teachings of Jesus are not just one possible source of guidance among many we might select, cafeteria style. At the end of the day, you just can't dabble with Jesus. You might be a mom or a music teacher who is a Christian. You might be a Christian investment banker. You can be a follower of Jesus Christ who is also a lawyer. In these dual roles, however, it is your faith that guides your music teaching, your mothering, and your banking, not the other way around.

This is not exactly how the world sees it, of course. Let me offer a simple illustration. You are at a party, milling

around in the hubbub, and you meet somebody new. Three or four sentences into the conversation, you ask the big question that always hangs in the air at such events: "What do you do?" Innocently enough, I've asked it a zillion times. But often "What do you do?" really means "Who are you?" It doesn't just mean "What is your job?" It means "What is your identity?"

To confess Christian faith means that you have been given your central identity. Who you are is defined by the ethics of Jesus. Who you are is defined by the compassion of Jesus. Who you are is defined by the death and life again of Jesus. Of course, the world generally insists that you are defined by what you do for a living, or where you went to school, or your address.

Our core human temptation is the same as the sum of the ones Jesus faced in the wilderness and on the night before his death. The eternal temptation is always to forget who you are and let the world define you, to forget who you are and let your job define you, to forget who you are and let money define you, to forget who you are and let clothes, or smarts, or looks, or addiction, or sex define you.

Over the years, whenever one of our children has gone out the door, whether for an evening or off to college, I have always whispered the same words in his or her ear during the farewell hug. I've been saying these words for so long that they've become a standing family joke. I said them when our oldest moved to New York after college graduation. I said them to my son when he got on the plane to go on a mission trip to Israel. I said them to our youngest when she flew off for her freshman year. I give them the farewell hug and say to them, "Remember who you are."

About the Writer

Michael A. Lindvall is pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City.