

THE COMPASS

SHOCK TALK: *Straight From Jesus' Mouth*

Part 2:

The Super Bowl of Temptation

Doug Brendel

If I were the devil — and there are probably a few people in the world who would say, “What do you mean, ‘if?’” — I would feel the need to have a really good system for tempting good people to do bad things.

I wouldn't bother with bad people; they would already be on board with my program. But to get somebody to do something destructive, or self-destructive, or both — that would be the code to crack.

If I were the devil, I would have staff meetings where we brainstormed temptation techniques.

There would be a big white board and we would write all kinds of ideas up there. And I would subscribe to all kinds of sinful magazines, and pore over them, looking for ideas.

I would read all the latest books written by all the most sinful authors.

I would have a tech division, where software engineers would run programs on powerful computers, trying to come up with the most tempting formulas.

I can imagine the devil going through these kinds of grueling routines year after year, century after century — you know, scoring some major victories along the way.

Adam and Eve: score!

Cain and Abel: score!

But then suffering some major defeats, too.

Joseph goes to work for an official in the Egyptian government, the guy's wife tries to seduce him — Ooh, she's pretty, ooh, she's hot.

But no. Joseph refuses to give in to temptation.

The devil loses one.

Then David finds King Saul sleeping in a cave — Saul's been tracking him for weeks, trying to kill him; now he has a chance to put an end to it all.

But David doesn't give in to the temptation.

Ooh, the devil takes it on the chin.

Thousands of years, the devil is crafting his technique.

Until finally, it's time for the Big One.

God has sent his own Son to earth as a man, called Jesus.

He's been growing up for the past 30 years or so; and now, finally, he's set to go out on his own, start up his ministry.

But before he does, Jesus is going to head out into the desert — why?

Because God wants him to experience this human phenomenon called temptation.

Jesus is going to go out there for almost six weeks, no camping gear — no tent, no sleeping bag — no food at all: 40 days, 40 nights.

Meanwhile, the devil is cramming, like for finals.
 This is going to be the Super Bowl of Temptation.
 The one target you want to be sure you hit — the one game you want to be absolutely sure you win — is when you get a crack at God's own Son.
 So I can imagine the devil running his final numbers, having his final practice runs with his key staff — like a presidential candidate gearing up for a debate.

And finally, it's time.
 Jesus hasn't had anything to eat for 40 days; he's really, really hungry.
 He's in a weakened condition. He's vulnerable.
 The devil has to be feeling good about this contest.
 And even more important, he's taken his thousands of years' worth of temptation experience, and he's identified three enticements — the three enticements that all the other enticements in the world are made of.
 Now he's compressed his entire arsenal of techniques into three highly concentrated appeals — and he's going to focus them like a laser on Jesus.

But it's a high-risk strategy. It's an all-or-nothing-at-all kind of deal. Because Jesus came as a substitute for us regular everyday human beings — he came to “stand in” for us. So if Jesus can withstand these three come-ons — there's nothing left in the universe that the devil can use to tempt people.
 When I feel any kind of temptation, its roots go back to this Super Bowl contest between Jesus and the devil.
 There's nothing I can experience in the way of temptation that wasn't already covered in this confrontation.
 So I can lean back on the power of Christ, dwelling in me, and he overcomes the temptation I'm facing.

That's the potential, as Jesus and the devil square off in the desert.
 If Jesus crashes, the devil has the upper hand with every person on the planet for the rest of human history.
 But if Jesus hangs on, I've got an awesome power for dealing with temptation when it comes my way.

What are the three enticements the devil uses?
 The first one is the lottery ticket.
 Not an actual lottery ticket, but the same concept.
 Here's how the devil pitched it to Jesus (**Matthew 4:3**): **“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”**
 He's saying, Look, you're hungry, you need something to eat, and you've got this magical power. Do a little magic.
 You don't have to be bound to the fixed rules of nature.
 Sowing, reaping — nuts to that; agriculture takes too long.
 I can hear the devil saying, Look, you've been living in this ridiculous suit of skin for 30 years now.
 Take a short-cut.

It seems harmless, actually, doesn't it?
 I mean, he had gone 40 days without eating.

Who could blame him for snapping his fingers and whipping up a little dinner?

And can you imagine what might have happened if Jesus had gone along with the idea? If word got out?

Jesus could have promoted his kingdom by distributing free bread.

But what is the devil really selling here?

Something for nothing.

He's saying, Hey, you can get ahead, you can be comfortable, you can achieve your goals, without paying a price.

He's appealing to the instinct we call *greed*.

The intense, selfish desire for gain.

Dostoevsky, the great Russian writer, talked about this in his book *The Brothers Karamazov* — and in our own generation, the Christian writer Phillip Yancey talks about it in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*.

Dostoevsky says what the devil was selling to Jesus was the power of “miracle.” Yancey agrees, and he also points out that governments and religious institutions have been using the same pitch for centuries to try and control the multitudes.

A politician will promise to cut the budget and still increase government services.

A preacher will promise that if you give \$10, you'll get \$1,000 back — or your sickness will be healed.

The power of “miracle” — essentially, something for nothing.

So how does Jesus respond?

He goes back to God's design. To the way God designed people to thrive.

He actually quotes the Old Testament: **“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).**

“Living on bread alone” is a picture of me trying to get through life under my own power. With my own ideas. My own wisdom. My own strength.

Not depending on God. Not acknowledging him as my source, as my best provider.

Jesus saying, that kind of life will grind me down. It will wear me out. It will be unsatisfying.

All that striving and struggling for stuff that ends up not being all that important? Exhausting.

Jesus acknowledged from the beginning that life is difficult.

There's temptation, there's discomfort, there's frustration.

But he didn't come to earth as a man to live some kind of Superman existence — *Look! Bullets cannot penetrate my skin!*

No. He came to experience life just like we do.

How would he eventually come to the cross? Overpowered by regular human beings.

How do I get to a crisis point in my life? When I've been overpowered by regular human beings, regular human situations.

And when I find myself there, I know — Jesus has been there before me.

And he won the battle — so I can too.

* * *

So the devil loses Round 1. He goes *Grrr!*
 But now he bounces back with his second intense enticement.
 He takes Jesus to Jerusalem — I see this like a scene from *Lord of the Rings* or something; they're flying over the landscape — and they come to rest standing on the highest point of the temple.
 Now the devil makes his second pitch.

“If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Look at this slick strategy.

The devil says to Jesus, every time, “If you're the Son of God, then do so-and-so.”
 It's the same way he weasels into my head today.
 He says to me, every time, “If you're a child of God, then do so-and-so.”
 Same kind of pitch he made back there 2,000 years ago with Jesus himself.
 “Come on, Doug, you're hot stuff. You're intelligent. God loves you. You've got God's power in you.” Or something like this. “So go ahead. Go for it. Do it.” Whatever.

He doesn't usually appeal to me as a heathen.
 He doesn't usually say, Hey Doug, you're a rat, so you may as well go ahead and *sinnnnnnnn*.

No. He says, Doug, you deserve this. You have the right. You earned this.

The other thing the devil does to Jesus here is, he quotes Scripture to him — *Look what the Bible says! The Bible says you can do this!*

But he's clever — he's quoting this Scripture out of context.

He's doing what a lot of people do even today: finding one little passage out of 1,600 pages, and spinning this into some kind of instruction or regulation for our lives today.

So Jesus says, basically, You're gonna quote Scripture to me? I'll quote Scripture right back at you. You're telling me what's written. Well, look, buddy: **“It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”**

You want to pluck some passage out of Scripture and use it as a weapon? I can play that game too. But when I pull a passage out of Scripture, it will be a timeless truth.

Jesus sees what the devil is really selling here.

He says if God has promised to take care of you, then take advantage of it! Do whatever illogical, crazy thing you want to do, and if it doesn't work out, it's God's fault!

What the devil is selling here is ***The Blame Game***.

Trust God — escape responsibility!

Do something stupid — get away with it!

Suffer some consequence of your behavior — get mad at God!

What the devil said to Jesus is what he says to me today.

You be the boss, Doug. You do what you want, and make God responsible for the outcome.

In other words, you be the master, and let God be your servant.

And when God doesn't perform the way you want him to perform, you make him the whipping boy.

He's the one to blame.

I actually play this game a lot. If blame were an Olympic sport, I would win the gold! I don't want there to be any rules, and I don't want to have to live within the boundaries of moderation.

I don't want to have to stop after one Burrito Supreme at Taco Bell. What I really want is *three*.

And then when I look at my stomach, and I can hardly tie my own shoes, I want it to be *someone's fault*.

God didn't have to hard-wire me with a craving for Burrito Supremes.

What was this? Some kind of cruel joke?

And hey, this phenomenon — making God the servant, and blaming him for our problems — is not just something that excessive-compulsive guys like me have to deal with.

I have an acquaintance who's as cautious as I am reckless.

Where I tend to go too far, he tends to back away — he doesn't see opportunity, he sees danger.

Business opportunity? No way. Too risky.

New people in the neighborhood invited you to party? Nah, who knows what kind of weirdos they are?

But then when somebody else gains advantage, when someone else is enjoying the benefits of trying something new, he's inclined to want to assign blame.

"Well, I'm just wired for caution; that's how God made me."

In other words, I'm not having a good time, and it's God's fault.

But the truth is, when God set up the human race, he gave us freedom to choose.

Choose his way, choose another way.

Choose health, choose junk food.

Choose risk, choose caution.

Choose to take action, choose to be passive and let events shape our lives.

I can't blame God, because he's not responsible to me.

He gave me the responsibility. He gave me the freedom to choose.

Even when I'm in a situation where I feel I have no options — say somebody invades my life and forces me into an uncomfortable corner and it feels like I'm stuck — I can still choose how to respond.

I can choose judgment or mercy.

I can choose love or hate.

I can jump to conclusions or wait patiently for more information.

I can rush to ease my own pain, or I can live through the pain and see what there is to learn there.

It's up to me.

So if I choose to do something stupid — if I throw myself off a building, the way the devil was trying to get Jesus to do — I can't blame God for my busted skull.

My freedom is a gift from God.

It's what makes me a human being, instead of a hippo or a hydrangea or a Hyundai hatchback.

* * *

So now, in this Temptation Super Bowl out in the desert, the devil is 0 for 2. He's got to be furious.

But he has one more killer enticement to throw at Jesus.

So once again they take off — I guess they're whooshing through the air like Gandalf or something — and they wind up on top of a high mountain, so high that they can see what the Bible describes as **“all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (Matthew 4:8)**.

And now the devil turns real estate agent (no offense to those who are real estate agents).

“All this I will give you,” he says.

Uh, what do you mean, “give”? What's the catch? What's it cost?

All you have to do, the devil says, is **“bow down and worship me.”**

What's he really selling here? Not real estate.

He's selling the ***power rush***.

Kingdoms are governments. They control people.

This word *splendor* is more often translated *glory*.

So you not only run people's lives, but they look up to you while you're doing it!

The devil makes the same pitch to me. Every single day.

He shows me a mental picture of how cool it would be for me to run your life. To have you obey me.

I want to have my way. I want my wife to obey me and my children to obey me and my pastor to obey me and everybody else in the church to go along with me.

The most important question in the world, in my mind — the question I want everybody to be asking themselves all the time — is “What is Doug's will for my life?”

But I don't want you to hate me for it. I want you to agree with me and still find me charming!

“Oh, that Doug Brendel, I just love him.”

So when I say, “You know, I want to move our meeting time from 7 pm to 7:30,” you say, “Of course! What a great idea! You are brilliant!”

I don't want some kind of push-back from you: “What? I'm not doing 7:30 — 7 o'clock is already almost too late for me!”

Hey, this isn't my fantasy! My fantasy is a kingdom-and-glory fantasy. I'm your king, and you *like* it that way!

But just about every conflict you and I could ever have is a kingdom-and-glory conflict.

Who's going to be king in a given situation?

Who's going to get the credit, the glory, in a given situation?

The devil appeals to my love of power and glory.
 But if I go with that craving, it's not God's design for life that I'm pursuing.
 I'm bowing down to a different ideal.
 I'm trying to live in a different system.
 The devil would love for me to give it a try. He loves it every time I give it a try. Every
 time I manipulate someone to selfishly try to get my own way.
 Every time I maneuver a situation to try to gain the advantage for my own sake.

The devil tried to tell Jesus that it would be worth it. All that power, all that glory — what
 a rush!

“Give my way a shot. Try it, you'll like it!”

But Jesus shut him down. He knew this wasn't the way God set it up.

He said, Get out of my face. God has already laid out his design in the Scriptures:

“Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matthew 4:10).

If I will trust God and do life God's way, that's going to be the most satisfying for the
 long haul. That's going to be the healthiest life-strategy long-term.

Clawing for power and advantage and jockeying for recognition and status is going to
 disappoint me. And eventually, it's going to eat me alive.

The selfless life — the life of loving God and loving people — may be counter-intuitive,
 but it's how God designed me to thrive, to truly flourish, to prosper in the most
 authentic and valuable and rewarding ways.

* * *

Jesus could have gone for it.

He could have taken something for nothing — he had that right.

He could have thrown himself off the roof of the temple and made the angels rescue
 him.

He could have taken control of all the kingdoms of the world.

But he decided to do something different.

He decided to set an example for me. He didn't exercise his own divine power — he
 limited himself, for myself.

And in the process, he accomplished two really important goals.

First, he demonstrated to me where temptation is going to hit me hardest, and how it
 really is possible to overcome it. If I know God's Word, if I understand God's
 design, and I really trust God to be telling me the truth about how he designed
 me to flourish in this world, then I can resist temptation when it smacks me.

But the other goal Jesus achieved out there with the devil in the desert was that he
 preserved my freedom.

He made my freedom his highest priority.

If he had caved in on any of these temptations, he would have launched his public
 ministry as some kind of rock star.

People would have followed him just for the goodies, or for the miracles, or simply
 because they had no choice.

In any case, we would have been manipulated into following him.

But that's not what he came for.

He came for love.
He came out of his own love for me, and he came looking for love *from* me.
And in order to get authentic love, he had to leave me free.
Free to say yes *or* no to him.

Jesus basically said no, I'm not going to overwhelm people.
I have the power to compel belief, but I'm not going to use it.
I'll put my own reputation at risk before I'll make people into robots.
I'll defend human freedom to my death.
I'm going to give people the choice of loving me, or not.

He gave up his own power. He gave himself up to me — and in doing so, he showed me that giving myself up is the richest way to live.