

“The Word Is ‘No’”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

10 March 2019 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church

Luke 4:1-13 = temptation

After the Revolutionary War, General Washington was so loved by the American people that there were widespread popular movements to crown him king. Some tried to seduce him privately with the allure of power.



As a young man Washington had been known for his boundless ambition. The tempters had no trouble convincing him he would fill the role of monarch far better than anyone else.

Even though well tempted, Washington made the decision in 1783 to resign his commission as commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. He believed in his bones that power belonged to the citizenry, not generals.

His hand shook as he read his speech to Congress. People wept. That speech was a defining moment for the new American republic. His saying “No,” his renunciation of the power the nation was eager to give him shows something deep about the character of our first president.¹



And the word is ‘No.’ [Video of Sesame Street’s *“The Word Is No”* played here]

<https://drdjayloser.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/the-word-is-no-sesame-street-edited.mp4>

Indeed, the word is ‘no.’

“How can just one word with just two letters,
keep so much from getting done?
We’d be worse off without it.
Stand up and shout it.
No doubt about it.
‘No’s’ no fun.”

'No' is one powerful word. We learn it early ~ one of the signs of the "terrible two's." At that age, I used to tease my children with a list of questions when they were in a "no, no. no" mood:

"Do you want a nap?" "No."

"Do you want to go outside?" "No."

"Do you want to stand on your head?" "No!"

"Do you want ice cream?" "No!!" Wait. Gotcha.

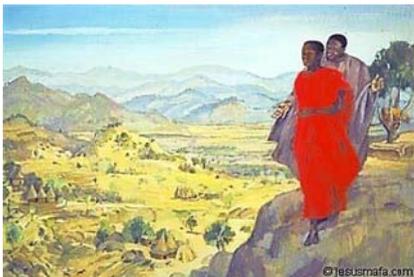
Jesus knew well the power of 'No.' He used it to deny the devil. Put to the right use, 'No' can be the most powerful word in any language.



Here we see Jesus at his most human. Led by the Spirit into the wilderness, he goes without food for forty days. Luke says with classic understatement "Jesus was famished." The devil sweeps in and first tempts him with the obvious: food. Whether Jesus has the power to turn stones into bread is not the question. The feeding of the 5,000 proves that. The test is obedience to God.

Jesus answers 'No' from scripture itself:

"One does not live by bread alone."²



Then the devil ups the ante to political power, Washington's temptation as well. Will Jesus worship the tempter to be given authority over all nations? Luke uses the name 'Diabolos,' Greek for 'slanderer.' Diabolos is the consummate liar. One, he does not actually possess authority to grant. Two, the question is a ruse to hide disobedience to God.

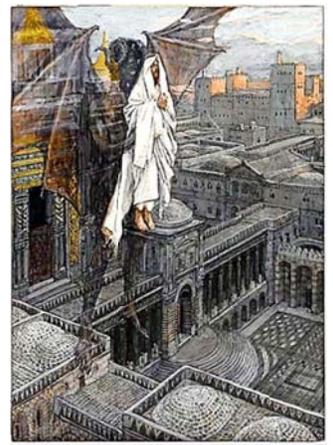
Jesus again answers a resounding 'No' from scripture itself:

"Worship the LORD your God, and serve only God."³

Next Diabolos ups the ante yet again to heavenly power ~ quoting scripture as well but still a deception.

Jesus' answer is another unequivocal 'No!' straight out of scripture:

"Do not put the LORD your God to the test."⁴



None of this seems at all relevant to us. Except personal boundary issues are being raised every day. The #MeToo movement is raising the cry of “No’ means ‘No.’” How Jesus defended against evil may seem impossible for us. Except using scripture to defend against evil can still work for us as well.



Jill Duffield, the editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*

points out there was a day when in Confirmation Class we all had to memorize a lot of scripture and the whole Westminster Shorter Catechism. The first question of the Catechism asks of us our purpose in life:



“What is the chief end of humanity?” and the answer:

“Humanity’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

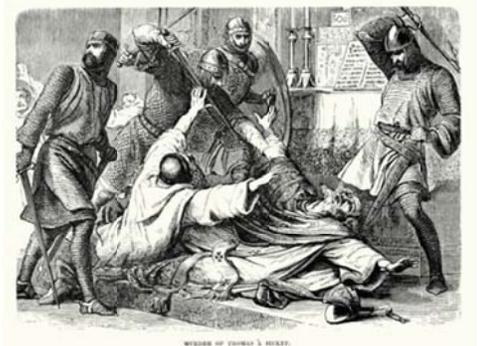
Powerful words ~ nevertheless, some argument of late whether we should go back to memorizing the Catechism and tons of scripture in our preparation for Christian living. Jill Duffield doesn’t come down on either side of the argument but she does say something profound:

“it does matter that those words are in our bones and not just on our smartphones. It matters a lot because those are the things we hold onto when hell breaks loose and the devil is more than at our doorstep or when we are famished in the wilderness and uncertain if there will be manna, water or a way out.”⁵



All three of Jesus’ answers come from Deuteronomy. Jesus knows scripture well, knows Diabolos well. Jesus’ courage to say ‘No’ to evil, to know right from wrong, both protect him. Not some magical power God gives him. Remember we said Jesus was at his most human in the wilderness. The capability of denying temptation is a human capacity God gifts to each of us.

T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* chronicles the assassination of Archbishop Thomas a Becket on orders from Henry II. In the play, the archbishop faces four tempters. The first urges him to consider



his own safety and “leave well alone” lest his “goose be cooked and eaten to the bone.”



The second tells him that if he aligns himself with the king, he will receive the benefits of wealth and political power.

Tempter three advises him to forge an alliance with the local barons to resist the king and “fight for liberty.”

Finally, the prospect of martyrdom rears its head as the fourth tempter declares:

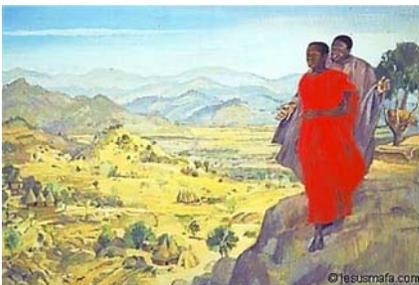
“You hold the keys of heaven and hell.
Power to bind and loose: bind, Thomas, bind
King and bishop under your heel.”

Thomas’ reply:

“Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain:
Temptation shall not come in this kind again.
The last temptation is the greatest treason:
To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”⁶



It is surprising how often worldly power pops up among the temptations of Jesus, of Thomas a Becket, of George Washington and of all the rest of us. Power is the most potent temptation of all.



However, holding onto God’s truth gets Jesus through temptation. This can work for us as well. Holding onto God’s truth which is down there deep in our bones can protect us as well; can help us identify the Slanderer trying to trick us; to identify the good and avoid the evil; to know the right from wrong; to have courage to say ‘No’ to evil.

Yes, “the word is ‘No.’”



¹ Lisa Kenkeremath, “A Sermon: The Devil You Know,” *Lectionary Homiletics* for 2/17/2013, p. 25

² Deuteronomy 8:3

³ Deuteronomy 6:13

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:16

⁵ <https://pres-outlook.org/2019/03/1st-sunday-in-lent-march-10-2019/>

⁶ Malinda Elizabeth Berry, “Reflections on the lectionary,” *Christian Century*, 2/3/2016, p. 21