

NEVER CHOOSE SHORT-TERM COMFORT

When I was pastor at Alanson UMC, we had a brave grandmother who brought her two rough-and-tumble grandsons to church. The younger of the boys was a natural-born athlete, stocky and strong, already involved in wrestling and football. But like Hoss Cartwright, he had the gentlest of hearts.

One day during VBS, Craig got a splinter in his finger. No problem, I assured him, as I got out the handy-dandy first aid kit. I dabbed some rubbing alcohol on the tweezers and a needle, then turned toward Craig. But as I reached out my hand to take his, he pulled his hand away.

“It will hurt,” he said.

“Yes, but if you don’t get the splinter out, it will keep on hurting,” I said.

I reached for his hand again, but he pulled it away again, almost with a whimper. I have to admit I was a little tickled seeing this tough kid refuse to let me take a splinter out. He went back to play, splinter still in place. His grandmother told me later that she almost has to tie him down to get splinters out of his fingers because he hates the pain so much.

How often are we like that boy? We know we need to make a change, but avoid it because it will cause temporary pain or discomfort. We know we are in the wrong relationship – but the pain of breaking up keeps us in place. We know additional education could improve our income opportunities – but we don’t want our lives to be disrupted with classes and homework. We know we need to relocate our business if we are going to expand our clientele – but the discomfort of remodeling a new location, informing our clients, moving all of our furnishings and making all the changes in paperwork keep us in the same place year after year.

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In all of these cases, the issue is not that we are lazy. The problem is we are unwilling to go through short-term, time-limited one-time, painful steps required to get us from where we are to where we want to be.¹

Those who have faced the pain and hardship are rewarded, and witnesses to the benefit of looking beyond the short-term to the long-term goal. Many admit once they experienced the end result, their first thought was, “Why did I keep putting this off?” And their second thought was, NEVER again will I choose short-term comfort over long-term benefit.

For this season of Lent, my sermons are inspired by the book *Never Go Back* by Dr. Henry Cloud. Some of you may have heard of Dr. Cloud, a psychologist who has his own radio broadcast and is featured often on the news.

According to Dr. Cloud, his first idea for the title of his book was *I Repent!* After all, that is what repenting means – it means we will never go back to the people we used to be. Our series will have to do with realizations we have that we never want to do certain things again the same negative way. As Dr. Cloud says, “We have *repented*, or literally ‘changed our mind and turned away’ from that way of doing life. ... In another word, we experience *growth*. Or *maturity*. Or better yet, *wisdom*.”²

And it is fitting to begin our never go back series with the need to never choose short-term comfort over long-term benefit, because that is what Jesus did in the wilderness.

Just prior to this morning’s lesson, Jesus was at the Jordan River being baptized by John. There was the moment of revelation when the Holy Spirit came down in the form of a dove and

¹ Dr. Henry Cloud, *Never Go Back: 10 Things You’ll Never Do Again* (Howard Books: New York, NY, 2014), p. 90.

² Ibid.

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the Father's voice was heard affirming Jesus by saying, "This is my Beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

Well pleased, yes, but that didn't mean Jesus' life was going to be a cakewalk. As soon as that moment passed at the river, Jesus went into the wilderness. Forty days without food, without water, without Facebook – well, without friends or family. Forty days, during which Jesus faced three short-term comforts from the devil offering three short-term comforts. What were they?

The first one had to do with physical hunger. Those who have gone on long fasts find that after the first couple of days, there isn't any sense of being hungry. However, after a week or two, the hunger pangs would have returned – with a vengeance. But where would a person get food in the middle of the desert?

The devil has an idea. When we think of the wilderness or desert, we often have an image of the Sahara Desert with just sand shifting in the wind. In the area around Israel, the desert floor wouldn't have been sandy – it would have been littered with limestone rocks, most of them the size of a loaf of bread. So the devil suggests, "Turn these stones into bread."

Such a plan certainly would have satisfied Jesus' hunger. It was a simple miracle, something he was fully capable of doing. But the temptation was to use God's powers for the sake of satisfying Jesus' own needs. That is not what God intended, and to do so would have meant disobedience to his Father's will.

So Jesus' response to the first temptation is to quote scripture, Deuteronomy 8:3: "People won't live by bread alone." The work of the Son of God would entail more than satisfying his own desires – it would be bringing God's message to all people.

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For the second temptation, the devil takes Jesus up to a mountaintop. Last week we discussed Jesus on the mountain where he was transformed by God. In this case, however, there is no mountaintop experience. From this vantage point, the devil lays out all of the nations of the world, not just Israel. And he says to Jesus: “Worship me, and all this will be yours.”

Technically, all of those nations already belonged to Jesus. However, it is also true through free will, many people in those nations were choosing to NOT follow God. The temptation the devil was offering was one of compromise. In effect, the devil is saying, “These people that belong to me I will willingly turn over to you. Just relax your standards a little – allow for a little evil to co-exist in your world.”

To counter this offer, Jesus again quotes from Deuteronomy, this time verses 6:13 and 10:20: “You will worship the Lord your God and serve only Him.” In other words, right is right and wrong is wrong. Although it will be the tougher way to go, Jesus will not permit any compromise in his war on evil.

So the devil tries a last time. This time in Jesus’ imagination, he is led to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. There was a sheer drop of 450 feet down to the Kidron Valley below. “Since you are the Son of God, he says, throw yourself down from here.”

And then, the wily devil – who has been countered twice by Jesus with scripture – cites scripture himself to sweeten up the deal. Quoting Psalm 91:11-12, the devil adds, “For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘they will take you up in their hands so that you won’t hit your foot on a stone.’”

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Two men were standing beside a flag pole scratching their heads. A woman starting to pass by stopped and asked if she could be of any help. “We’re supposed to measure the height of this flagpole, but we can’t get our measuring tape to extend the entire way,” one man said.

“Do you have an adjustable wrench?” the woman asked. When one of the men handed one to her, the woman went to the base of the flagpole, loosened the bolts, laid the flagpole down on its side, and then ran the measuring tape along the side of it. She handed the measuring tape back to one man, put the flagpole back up, tightened the bolts and gave the wrench to the other man. “It’s 24 and ½ feet,” she said, then turned and continued on her way.

For a few seconds, the men watched her walking away. Then in disgust, the first man said to the other, “Isn’t that just like a Know-It-All woman? We need the height, and she gives us the length!”

This Know-It-All Woman asked Google for the height of the tallest building in Grand Rapids, and found out it is the River House, which stands 406 feet – almost 44 feet shorter than the distance Jesus was encouraged to jump. The Amway Grand Plaza Motel comes in at a measly 318 feet.

To say the least, 450 feet would have been a significant jump – especially for those watching saw Jesus make the jump only to emerge unscathed.

What a temptation. Never mind the three year journey that is only going to result in a brutal death on the cross. The devil is tantamount to saying, “Here and now, Jesus, see if God will keep you from facing death.” Even better, the spectacle of seeing Jesus jump and emerge unscathed would be enough to persuade people to follow Jesus. Never mind trying to teach them by words – Jesus could convert an entire city on the basis of that one miracle.

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Well, at least temporarily. When the sensation wore off, or another person came up with a really good magic trick, likely people would turn away from Jesus.

And so Jesus' response is again to turn to scripture. He cites Deuteronomy 6:16: "Don't test the Lord Your God." Jesus is not challenging the devil to do this; rather, it is a command which Jesus himself accepts.

These verses from Deuteronomy aren't just intended for Jesus: they are intended for each one of us as we have to ward off the temptation of choosing short-term comfort over long-term benefit. We are to make life more than just the pursuit of our physical needs; we are to worship and serve God and God alone; and it is not for us to test God. Any pursuit, priority or preoccupation – anything that feels like it would be easier than submitting to God – needs to be seen for what it truly is, a temptation and nothing more.

In this season of Lent, may we vow to NEVER choose the shortcuts, but to accept the temporary pain and discomfort to get us to where God would have us to be.