

Welcome

How many times have y'all had to participate in trust building exercises? Maybe it was in couples' therapy. Or in school. Maybe in the workplace.

I have a confession: I *love* those sorts of activities. I know most people hate them, but I think they're so much fun. (What can I say: I'm an extrovert and I love games.) So whether it's a trust fall or an obstacle course, sign me up!

We're going to talk about trust today, so I was reviewing a bunch of these exercises. I think my *favorite* is the Blindfold Obstacle course. If you've never done this one, you set up an obstacle course - you can do it as simply as using chairs and string or something. Then you pair up. One person wears a blindfold and has to navigate the obstacle course. The other is only allowed to direct their partner using verbal cues. Stop! Turn left! Five steps forward! That sort of thing.

This is a trust-building exercise because the person wearing the blindfold has to obey despite the fact that they can't see. It *also* reveals how differently we communicate. You can't complete a blindfold obstacle course without learning to communicate and trust.

Communication and trust - two essential aspects of a strong, faith-filled relationship. That's true for our relationships with each other - romantic partners, business relationships, friendships - and it's true of our relationship with God.

What do trust-building exercises with God look like? That's a trickier question, and one Jesus shows us the answer to. Today, we're going to explore how Jesus teaches us to grow a deeper, faith-filled relationship with our creator.

Message

This is the fourth Sunday of Lent. Lent is our six week journey toward celebrating Jesus' resurrection at Easter. We prepare by walking with Jesus toward the cross - Lent is a season of introspection, confession and repentance. We root out sin in our spirits, our families, our church and our world. We confess them to God and ask for God's help to live lives of justice and flourishing for everyone.

This year, our Lent series is "Bad Deal". We're exploring the nature of sin and temptation. Our English translations use a couple of different words for the same idea: testing and tempting. We think of temptation as always bad, but in the Bible, the idea of temptation is more neutral, like the word test (I know, I know - you folks in school still think of testing as bad). But tests are not in and of themselves bad. Tests reveal the state of our lives. They're an opportunity for us to see the truth of our lives. Do we really trust God? Or are we trusting something or someone else?

We began last week with our most basic test: natural cravings. To be human is to have desires. Our desires can be beautiful and they can be poison. How do we know which is which? God created our physical desires to draw us into relationship. Too often, though, those desires rule us instead of connect us. Jesus showed us that we don't live by bread alone, but by seeking out connection with the "bread of Heaven".

Last week, we faced our desire for certainty. We saw that our impulse to test God, to determine whether God is really someone we can count on, is a sign of an immature faith. That's not necessarily bad - as long as we continue in faith, maturing and growing into a people who trust God is with us even when we can't see it.

Why is that important? Is God insecure - the kind of deity who can't handle questions? Well, no. As we'll see today, it's much more about our ability to weather life's inevitable storms than it is assuaging God's frail ego.

Turn with us to Matthew 4.

Our 40 days of Lent participate in and echo Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, a time of fasting and prayer that culminated in his testing by the devil. So in our exploration of our bodily cravings, we witnessed him refuse to turn stones into bread.

Today, we're looking at his second test - which is one that always really confused me. Let's read it and then dive in:

Matthew 4:5–7 NLT

Then the devil took him to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.' "

Jesus responded, "The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the Lord your God.'"

I never understood how this was a test. Who among us when we've been somewhere really high thinks jumping would be a good idea? But the devil isn't trying to kill Jesus. No, he quotes one of Israel's worship songs, Psalm 91, to Jesus. Here's what the song says:

Psalm 91:9–12 NLT

If you make the Lord your refuge,
if you make the Most High your shelter,
no evil will conquer you;
no plague will come near your home.

For he will order his angels

to protect you wherever you go.
They will hold you up with their hands
so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.

Just like the stones to bread, there's a near and a large test here. The near test is the one we've been exploring: does Jesus trust God the father to protect and provide for him? The song promises that if someone puts their trust in God, then God will send angels to protect them. And surely spending 40 days in prayer and fasting counts as making God his refuge, right?

So go ahead... prove God is faithful to do what God promises. Jump, and get that confirmation you need that God really is with you!

No surprise that Jesus responds as he does with the quote from Deuteronomy we saw from last week: Don't test God.

Remember: that was about having a mature faith, a faith that recognized God is with us even when it doesn't feel like it. (And I imagine if you've been without food for 40 days, it's hard to feel very spiritual.)

But there's a bigger issue at stake here, as well. Because the devil didn't take Jesus to a high cliff in the wilderness somewhere (there were plenty of those in the area where Jesus was fasting).

No, the devil took him to the top of the Temple - the busiest spot in Jerusalem. It'd be like taking him to the top of the Washington Monument on the Capital Mall, or maybe One World Trade in New York City.

If Jesus jumps here, everyone is going to see. If Jesus jumps here, and the angels come and keep him from dying, well... no one is going to wonder if he's really the Messiah right? First step, jump from the Temple. Next stop: the palace to kick Rome out of the Promised Land! Jumping from the Temple Mount wouldn't just prove to Jesus that God is with him. It would prove to everyone, the thousands of people in the Temple complex that day, and everyone they'd tell.

This is what Dostoevsky picks up on in his story, "The Grand Inquisitor." The story is a meditation on Jesus' wilderness tests, imagined as a conversation between a powerful church official and Jesus. The church official believes Jesus was wrong to turn down each of the devil's tests, and explains why.

Here's what he says to Jesus about the second test:

You knew that your deed would be recorded in books, would be handed down to remote times and the utmost ends of the earth, and you hoped that humanity, following you, would cling to God and not ask for a miracle...

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Grand Inquisitor

He claims that Jesus set an example here for us: rather than trust God because God does miracles for us (like miraculous food or angels who act as safety nets), we would follow Jesus’ example and trust God because God is trustworthy.

The Grand Inquisitor - who, remember, embodies Dostoevsky’s critique of religion and human nature - believes that humans are weak, that we don’t have the strength of character required to have real faith. So he insists that Jesus should have dumbbed it down for us, reducing faith to certainty.

The thing is, the Grand Inquisitor isn’t exactly wrong.

Turn with us to John 6.

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at Jesus’ encounter in the wilderness with some who would be his followers. He had provided more than 5,000 of them miraculous food, so they chased after him, demanding more miraculous bread.

And to justify their requests, they kept citing Moses. They said, “You know Jesus, when Moses led people into the wilderness, he gave them manna. So if you expect us to take you seriously, you’d better feed us too.”

I want to revisit that conversation and read further because Jesus’ invitation to them informs this discussion about following God for what God does for us in the moment:

John 6:47–58 NLT

“I tell you the truth, anyone who believes has eternal life. Yes, I am the bread of life! Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness, but they all died. Anyone who eats the bread from heaven, however, will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and this bread, which I will offer so the world may live, is my flesh.”

Then the people began arguing with each other about what he meant. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they asked.

So Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have eternal life within you. But anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise that person at the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. I live because of the living Father who sent me; in the same way, anyone who feeds on me

will live because of me. I am the true bread that came down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will not die as your ancestors did (even though they ate the manna) but will live forever.”

2,000 years later, we recognize the communion meal in Jesus’ warning: if they want to have eternal life, they have to eat Jesus’ flesh and drink his blood. It’s understandable that the folks in the desert that day were pretty confused.

But Jesus is being intentionally difficult here. He wants to drive home a point: his story only ends one way. If you follow him, you’re not following a conquering king. You’re following the guy Rome is going to crucify.

That is, after all, what the communion meal remembers and acts out!

Jesus is concerned that these desert followers, these folks in it for the free bread, have an immature faith. It’s the same kind of faith their ancestors had - when the magic tricks stop, they start doubting, complaining, questioning.

And Jesus knows that faith can begin with free bread, but it has to move somewhere deeper. Because before the Promised Land comes the wilderness. Before the resurrection comes the cross.

And people who only follow God for the miracles, for the good times, for the health and wealth, aren’t going to make it all the way to the cross.

If they’re going to follow him all the way to the cross, they need a mature faith, one that trusts God, one that doesn’t resort to testing God.

So friends, as we prepare to approach Jesus’ table today, as we prepare to share his meal, to receive the true bread that comes from Heaven, I want to ask you:

Do you trust that Jesus is who he says he is?

The last year (or maybe, for many of us, the last several years) have been hard. They’ve felt like wilderness. And we haven’t been able to see the Promised Land.

Do you trust that Jesus is giving you daily bread? (Not yearly bread, or even weekly bread, but daily bread?)

Do you trust that God is faithful even at the cross? Even in those wilderness places?

Communion + Examen

Jesus offers us his body as true bread.

When in the last week have I trusted in God’s character?

What in the last week has led me to doubt God's character or love for me?
When in the next week might I doubt God's character or love for me?
How can I rest this week in God's character and love for me?

Assignment + Blessing

Fasting!