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Matthew 4:1-11
 Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7
 Psalm 32
 Romans 5:12-19

March 1, 2020
 The First Sunday of Lent

Here is a simple yet unsettling truth...We all lie. From little white lies to big, harmful lies. We lie to make ourselves feel good. We lie to get something that we want. We lie to make people see us a certain way. It starts early...when you ask your 5 year old...did you take that cookie? And with chocolate smeared on their face they respond shaking their head, No, mommy.

It gets bigger as we get older...looking over someone's shoulder during a test, taking credit for someone else's work, grabbing an unfair advantage in game you play, to fudging on your taxes or misrepresenting your job skills on a resume. Surely those kind of lies won't hurt anyone, right? It's just a little deception. That's what we tell ourselves. And we justify that if we come out ahead, surely the lie was worth. Wasn't it?

But, what about bigger lies...cheating on a spouse, hiding an addiction, providing false accusations about a competitor, covering up a crime you committed. Those feel a little shakier because someone might get hurt on the other end. But, how often do we tell those lies too?

Lies are tempting. In research conducted by Dr. Dan Ariely, a professor at Duke University, he found that lying isn't necessarily a measure of good or bad character but about our ability to discern opportunity.¹

So, for instance, we might look at big lies, big temptations and say I would never do that. I'm not that kind of person. We tell ourselves that it's a bad person who would make those kind of choices. But the reality is that we often slip into increasingly bigger lies without even realizing it. We give in to temptation with the things we think we deserve, the things we think we should have. We bend the rules. Take a risk. Stretch the truth. After all, it was just a chocolate chip cookie.

Let me give you an example....

Dr. Ariely interviewed an accomplished cyclist named Joe. He was Olympic material but he took time off from his team to go back to school. When he returned to cycling, he was a bit older than the other athletes and he wasn't as fast anymore. He was discouraged and frustrated and one day he ended up breaking down in tears. So, a friend gives him the name of a doctor who could help him. Joe makes an appointment. It couldn't hurt. He gets a prescription for a

¹ <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/805808486>

performance enhancing drug. He fills the prescription. His insurance company pays for it so it must be OK. And then, day after day he takes the medicine.

He sees other athletes doing it. Apparently, these drugs aren't this hidden secret in his community. It's out there in the open. That emboldens him. Eventually, he starts to import the drug from China and begins to sell to other cyclists. At this point, not only is he addicted but he is supplying others with the drug. Would he have ever thought with that first little decision to see a doctor to get a little extra help, that he would end up so immersed in a culture that he would have once denounced?

Scientists know that the first time we lie, the brain reacts strongly. It tells us, don't do it! But as we continue to lie when temptations comes up, the brain gets more and more complacent. It gets easier as opportunities present themselves to fall into increasingly more tempting situations.

So would we have taken that first dishonest step when temptation presented itself? Chances are good that we would. If the temptation seems innocent, or non-impactful towards others, we might be able to justify it. Yet, temptation is a very slippery slope.

As one writer explains about Jesus being tempted in our Gospel reading... "The devil doesn't come to make Jesus do something "bad." He comes to make Jesus do what seems entirely reasonable and good — but for all the wrong reasons."²

The first lie...Satan says, Jesus just turn these stones into bread. You can do it and who would be any the wiser? It's just a few rocks after all and you can have what you need. You have the power to do anything that you want. The temptation seems simple enough. Who would ever know? It just a few rocks turning into bread.

The second lie...Satan says, hey, Jesus, jump off of this pinnacle and see if God will save you. Test him. Once you are saved, people will know how important you are. Imagine the accolades you will get if you just take advantage of the situation. Hmmm. That might be nice. The stakes get higher.

The third lie...Jesus, just one more thing. I promise it won't hurt anyone. If you give up all that you believe and follow me, I will give you more power and prestige than you could ever imagine. Wouldn't that be great? You can have everything the world has to offer. There would be no limits. Snap your fingers and it would be done. And thus, is offered the biggest lie of all, the greatest temptation...ultimately, giving up all that we know is good and right and true for a few moments of satisfaction.

From little rocks on the ground to power and money and prestige. The first lie seemed almost benign and insignificant but as the temptation grew so did the deception. That's how it works.

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2541-tempted>

Remember...The devil doesn't come to make us do something "bad." He comes to make us do what seems entirely reasonable and good — but for all the wrong reasons."

What does that mean as we begin our Lenten season? I think it means that as we enter a time of reflection and confession that we need to look at the little ways we have lied to ourselves and to others. Where have we tried to be something that we are not? Where have we dismissed our harmful actions and justified that no one will get hurt? Where have we convinced ourselves that our choices are reasonable even if they don't feel so good in the moment?

This process of self-reflection and repentance isn't easy work. It takes some deep soul searching. It takes letting go of things you think you may deserve. It takes a willingness to turn away from the things the world tells you to do.

I imagine that Jesus didn't just reject Satan with ease. I imagine that it was really hard at times. He had been in the wilderness for 40 days. He was hungry. He was probably discouraged and disillusioned. Maybe he was even a bit angry that God had put him through this. It would have been easy for him to claim the temptation, to get back at God, to turn away from what he knew was right in order to gain an easy way to power and honor.

But Jesus gives us an example of another way. A continual turning back to God, a grounding in our love of goodness and responsibility. A reminder that in our weakness, God pulls us up to greater heights so that we may live into who we were created to be...not some deception of ourselves but a beautiful reflection of God's creation.

I think the Gospel reminds us that there are no cutting corners, there are no quick fixes, or workarounds that will truly provide you with the wholeness that can only come from God. We will be tempted. At times, we will fall to that temptation but God simply asks that we keep coming back, asking forgiveness, working to amend our wrongs, committing to following a better path.

When we are weak, let God be strong. Amen.