

How to Be Human: A Jubilee Spirituality for All of Us - Resisting the Great Temptations

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[0 : 00] God of all creation, thank you that you are graciously here with us now.

It is because of who you are that we seek you and worship you, because of your love and your justice, your grace beyond measure, and your desire for the flourishing of everything that lives. Lord, we are here to learn more about this goodness and this love. So regardless of what we have come from this day, may all of that interact with the space, with the folks beside us, in ways that bring wholeness and healing and peace.

In Jesus' name, amen. It's hard to be good when the world's on fire.

Those words form the subtitle of a 2020 article in the online climate justice magazine, Brist.

[1 : 31] The article itself is or was about the Netflix philosophical comedy that some of you may know about, The Good Place. And The Good Place is basically about these four extremely different people who are thrown together in the afterlife.

Without revealing too much, I'll just say that these four very different people realize that neither the bad place nor the good place are really what they expected.

Both of them are full of these surprises. And what's brilliant about the show is that as the characters struggle through their afterlife experience together, they also uncover some pretty profound wisdom about life before death and what it means to be human and all the complexity of that and the beauty of that.

And part of what they uncover about human life is that it is hard to be good when the world is on fire. In my favorite episode of the series, I had to do some research, y'all, some research.

It was fun research, too. My favorite episode of the series, The Book of Dubs, Afterlife Architects. There were some true fans over there, some true fans.

[3 : 03] Afterlife Architect Michael begins to realize more and more that people are disproportionately ending up in the bad place rather than the good place. Even the people who seem the most likely to end up in the good place, the most pious and conscientious people based on this point system, the system of points is earned during life.

Those people even are sent to the bad place. Michael realized the nature of the problem by comparing two men who live generations apart and who are both named Doug.

As Michael reviews their lives and the points accrue from good deeds, here's what he notices. In 1534, Douglas Weingar of Hawkehurst, England gave his grandmother roses for her birthday.

He picked them himself and walked them over to her. She was happy. Boom. 145 points. And then in 2009, Doug Ewing of Skaggsville, Maryland also gave his grandmother a dozen roses.

But he lost four points. Why? Because he ordered roses using a cell phone that was made in a sweatshop. The flowers were grown with toxic pesticides picked by exploited migrant workers delivered from thousands of miles away, which created a massive carbon footprint.

[4 : 41] And his money went to a billionaire racist CEO who sends his female employees inappropriate pictures. Then, in the next episode, Michael gets the chance to tease all of this out before the person that he believes will be able to solve the problem will be able to help the judge.

Life is now so complicated, it's impossible for anyone to be good enough for the good place,

Michael tells the judge. These days, just buying a tomato at a grocery store means that you are unwittingly supporting toxic pesticides, exploiting labor, contributing to global warming.

Humans think they're making one choice, but they're actually making dozens of choices that they don't even know they're making. Okay?

It's hard to be good. It's hard to be good when the world is on fire. Now, if you know the good place, the situations in it are pretty over the top.

But the human predicament that Michael identifies isn't over the top at all. We do find ourselves in a world of oppression and injustice with ever more complicated decisions to make.

[6 : 04] And there are so many kinds of exploitation that our lives touch, so many kinds of oppression that we must confront. Unequal access to water, to food, to housing, the climate crisis, the enslavement and trafficking of human beings, the prevalence of war and conflict, sweatshop labor, not to mention the frameworks that ground those things.

Supremacy culture, and imperialism, and patriarchy, and racism, and elitism, and homophobia and transphobia. We could go on. You get the picture. How do we remain human in a world like this? How do we avoid the temptation of trying to be superhuman or of living as subhuman in the midst of all that tragedy and all that pain?

What does a Christian spirituality look like which day to day can re-humanize us? And what kinds of shrewd practices do we need that can undergird such a subversive spirituality?

So over the next six weeks, we're going to explore these questions in our summer series. It's all going to be from the book of Luke, and it's called How to Be a Human, A Jubilee Spirituality for the Rest of Us.

[7 : 39] In a world that so often works against solidarity and generosity because of its insecurity works against open-handed hospitality and vulnerability.

A sense works against a sense that there's enough for everybody. How do we embody a faith which helps us overcome that insecurity?

The insecurity that's out there when we watch the news and the insecurity of our own day-to-day lives. The world in which the biblical writers lived was also a world of insecurity.

Insecurity of empire and the insecurity of agricultural subsistence living, also often exacerbated by empire. In the most basic way, it was easy to fall into poverty.

One crop failure or one essential farm animal dying prematurely could land a family in debt. And then, as that debt mounted, the family might be forced to sell the land and to become basically sharecroppers on it.

[8 : 59] And then, if things got bad enough, they might have to sell themselves into slavery to pay off that debt. And although the details might look a little bit different, that slow descent into poverty isn't that different from what so many folks in our world experience.

Perhaps global corporations and ambitious real estate developers and corrupt governments initiate the processes in our day, but it's basically the same story.

And in light of that kind of insecurity, the people of Israel also came up with a solution, at least on paper.

Recognizing that one misfortune could destroy a family, they devised a system to interrupt the descent into poverty. Where there were structures and realities of everyday life that could easily lead into marginalization, they created counter structures to halt and reset those realities.

On the seventh day, work was to stop so that people and animals and the land could rest. In the seventh year, debt was to be forgiven and anyone enslaved was to be freed.

[10 : 25] And in the seventh year, the seventh year of sevens, the Jubilee year, people who otherwise might become permanently impoverished, had the right to recover land they had lost due to debt.

All of this ensured that even if a person fell on hard times, they and their family would not become permanently trapped at the bottom of the socioeconomic land.

Then, centuries later, Jesus comes on the scene in a land of political and military occupation by Rome. It's also a time of insecurity where conditions of subsistence living for peasant farmers had only gotten worse.

And while the practices of Jubilee seemed really excellent on paper, there's not really evidence that those practices, that those systems of interruption were active.

and they definitely weren't active by the Roman overlords who really had the power to interrupt.

Jesus lived in this in-between time, time between the Jubilee vision of a world of flourishing and yet in a time in which that vision was painfully slow and unfolding.

[11 : 53] Maybe they didn't use the words some of us do. You know, poverty, abolition or climate justice or reparations or redistribution. But they were the same basic ideas.

Reversal, interruption, restoration. Like us, they were what writer Adrian, they were in what writer Adrian Marie Brown calls an imagination battle.

for the future and for their present. And Jesus stepped into this in-between time with some ideas about what it meant to practice a Jubilee spirituality even before a full vision of Jubilee was realized. That was his ministry. A Jubilee spirituality that humanizes. and I, for one, desperately need that kind of spirituality.

I can remember over a decade ago, can't believe it's been that long, but okay, a decade ago studying Arabic in Jerusalem and being overwhelmed by the routine violence that I witnessed every single day.

[13:16] It was the only time in my life that I've ever had someone point a rifle directly at my chest. And that summer I listened to one song on repeat.

World on Fire by Sarah McLachlan. Here are some of those lyrics. I watch the heavens but I find no calling.

Something I can do to change what's coming. Stay close to me while the sky is falling. I don't want to be left alone. I don't want to be left alone.

And the chorus says, the world is on fire. It's more than I can handle. I'll tap into the water, try to bring my share. I'll try to bring more, more than I can handle.

Bring it to the table. Bring what I am able. And then, on a more recent day, just the other day honestly, like this past week, I remember driving in my car downtown.

[14:24] And I was listening to a podcast from which I get a lot of wisdom, it's called The Magnificast. And the episode was on this book called The Imperial Mode of Living. And the hosts were talking about the premise of this book, this idea that everybody in the global north is benefiting from the kind of processes of deepening justice everywhere else in the world.

And the example that they used, the case in point, was the increasing production of the SUV. I was riding in my SUV.

this car that I love. They also basically said, if you're riding in your SUV, this is you. So, I was listening to the hosts recount this, this case in point, this increasing manufacture of this car.

And I just felt so overwhelmed and so paralyzed and like, how can I be a preacher? I don't know, Lord, I don't know. You know, you know what I'm talking about.

how can we remain human in this kind of world, this in-between world? So, that's what we're going to talk about this summer. That's the premise for our whole summer series.

[15:38] Next week, Daniel is going to come and he's going to deepen our understanding of Jubilee and how Jesus starts his ministry in Luke 4 from the perspective of Jubilee. But today, in the next 10 minutes, I want to do a kind of prequel.

I want to explore what happens to Jesus just before the beginning of his public ministry. And I think it might have something to do with the kind of spirituality that we need for a fullness of life.

So, if you have your Bibles, your devices, feel free to read along. You might want to look at this in Luke 3, 21, because I am going to skip a portion and talk about it, so you may want to see it.

It will also be on the screen. Luke 3, 21 is where we're starting. Now, when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened.

And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove and a voice from heaven and you are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.

[16:58] Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his work. And then you get a genealogy. He was the son. And then, a little bit further in the next chapter, here's what Luke says.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan from being baptized and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. But for 40 days he was tested by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days and when they were over he was famished.

The devil said to him, if you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread. Jesus answered him, it is written, one does not live by bread alone.

Then, the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, to you I will give the authority, all this authority and their glory for it has been given over to me and I give it to anyone I please.

If you then will worship me, it will all be yours. Jesus answered him, it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

[18:16] Then, the devil led him to Jerusalem and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, if you are the son of God, throw yourself down from here for it is written, he will command his angels concerning you to protect you and on their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

Jesus answered him, it is said, do not put the Lord your God to the test. When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

The passage for this evening begins with one of the most well-known stories in the gospel, the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is baptized by John in the River Jordan and as Jesus prays, the heavens are opened in this moment that basically symbolizes apocalyptic fulfillment.

Something is being fulfilled. Jesus is endowed with the Spirit and receives affirmation of his sonship. And interestingly, unlike in Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus, Luke makes clear that this voice of affirmation is a voice that only Jesus can hear.

And I love that detail because I think that for so many of us, our sense of belovedness and calling can often feel like something that only we can hear.

[19:54] Like something that we have to act on in faith despite other people not having a vision for it. But Jesus acts on it and begins to prepare for his public ministry.

And then, if you did pick up your Bible or device, you'll notice that there's this genealogy, this long genealogy that the writer of Luke gives us. And it's basically this stylized retelling of who Jesus is, the lineage of Jesus, the origins of Jesus.

And what the writer of Luke chooses to emphasize is the humanity of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew, his genealogy traces Jesus back to Abraham.

But the writer of Luke traces back to Adam to emphasize that he, Jesus, was a brother to us in our humanity. So when Jesus encounters these temptations in the wilderness, we are to get a sense of, yes, the identity and mission of Jesus.

But we are also to take them as an example of Jesus fully living into his vocation and our vocation to be human.

[21:16] These temptations are fundamentally about how Jesus will use his power. in submission to God or in submission to unjust demonic power. And you don't have to believe in a literal devil to fully enter into this story.

You can, but you don't actually have to. You just have to be willing to admit the way in which our world does so often seem to be led forward by powers that dehumanize and destroy.

You just have to be willing to ask yourself even more powerfully who or more likely what is the devil in our world.

And you have to be willing to consider the ways in which you are tempted yourself by that power. All right, I'm going to run through these temptations.

The first temptation Jesus faces, command this stone to become a loaf of bread. It's a temptation to provide for our own needs and our own way, to eat when we are not supposed to.

[22:32] And on top of that, to be immediately and spectacularly successful in fulfilling a calling rather than being faithful in the long term.

I'm just going to say, so many of these temptations remind me of D.C. culture. So I won't stay there, but I'm just going to tell you that. So I love this city, but you know, yeah.

All right, second temptation. Receive the glory and power of the world in exchange for worshipping what is not God. This is a temptation to serve a second-rate God, to compromise with all that seems so immediately ultimate in order to have influence.

Jesus could have compromised, becoming the political and military Messiah that people expected him to be. And he would have gained power and probably could have done a measure of good.

But he also would have preempted God's process for his mission. And he would have acknowledged as legitimate all that is anti-Christ.

[23:45] And then the last temptation, the third temptation, to throw himself from the highest pinnacle of the Jerusalem temple, forcing God to prove himself. God's this is the temptation to try to control God's actions.

The temptation to make faith about transaction. It is the temptation to exist, to insist on being delivered from suffering and sacrifice and the process of dying to ego amid a faith that is cross-shaped.

that's about death and resurrection and death and resurrection often simultaneously. And then I also just have to point out one interesting thing about this final temptation.

It's like the devil figures out, like, oh, I've got to quote some scripture. Maybe I can, like, get ahead if I also quote scripture. But it makes clear that when the devil quotes scripture, it makes it super clear that a literal reading of scripture isn't ever enough.

Because what Jesus comes back with is basically what lies behind and goes beyond the plain sense of scripture. It's an understanding of God's desire.

[25 : 07] God's desire for flourishing, these three temptations are perennial. We face them all the time. They're the same temptations that the Israelites faced while wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

And it's no accident that every single scripture that Jesus cites in this passage comes from Moses' exhortation to the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy. They're the same temptations that Adam and Eve faced when confronted with the fruit in the Garden of Eden.

And while I do hope that you go home and reflect on each of these temptations in your own life, I start our series here for this reason. Any spirituality that is to help us remain human in a world of oppression and injustice must be grounded in a theology of limits.

There is no fullness of life without restraint and renunciation. That's why the first temptation that Jesus faces, the temptation to eat, is so powerful.

The temptation is a remix of the story of God giving manna to the Israelites in the wilderness. God tells them if they eat within these constraints, the constraints of God's guidance that they will have enough.

[26 : 35] Everyone will have enough. If they can learn to live within the limits of their humanity, the entire community can be whole.

And in the same way, Adam and Eve, they have this just one limit that they're unable to abide. The limit of not eating the fruit from the tree. Because they cannot live by that one limit.

Shalom, the flourishing and abundance and relational unity of the garden is lost. Simone Bay aptly summarized the human predicament in her spiritual classic *Waiting for God*.

The great trouble in human life is that looking and eating are two different operations. It may be that vice, depravity, and crime are nearly always or even perhaps always in their essence attempts to eat beauty.

To eat what we should only look at. It's hard to be good when the world is on fire. Yet to maintain our humanity in such a world and to live toward a vision of Jubilee, we have to accept limits just as Jesus did.

[28 : 00] In our own world of insecurity, it is so easy to feel paralyzed and to feel overwhelmed, to feel like we cannot possibly be faithful.

Yet the good news in this passage is that Jesus does forcefully overcome these temptations and the specific temptation to transgress limits.

And in his life, we find life. I want to end by going back to the good place. so in the next episode that follows the book of Doug's and the good place, the character who's kind of wacky Jason tells a story which draws these four characters out of their hopelessness regarding the human predicament.

In his life on earth, Jason led a dance crew. I wish I had gotten someone to dance through at this moment. Big Noodle was in the dance crew but was always late to practice.

Jason explains that he would yell at Big Noodle for being late to practice. Then one day, Jason's house floods and he's forced to go stay with Big Noodle and he learns something important.

[29 : 31] He learns that Big Noodle has three jobs and is unable to support all four of his grandparents. And Jason says after that he never yelled at Big Noodle again for being late to practice because he knew what he was going through.

In all of this, the good news is that we don't serve a God who yells at us even in our best attempts to do good.

And even when those attempts don't work out because our God knows what we're going through, knows our temptations has lived in our world on fire.

And they lead us forward in loving kindness even as we struggle to fulfill the Jubilee vision in which all have a fullness of life.

This vision grounded in limits. We are met by the God of compassion. Perhaps now life is more complicated.

[30 : 44] But may we never forget in our lives and as we move through the series that our God has come down in the in-between time to embrace us in love and to draw us forward in flourishing.

Amen.