

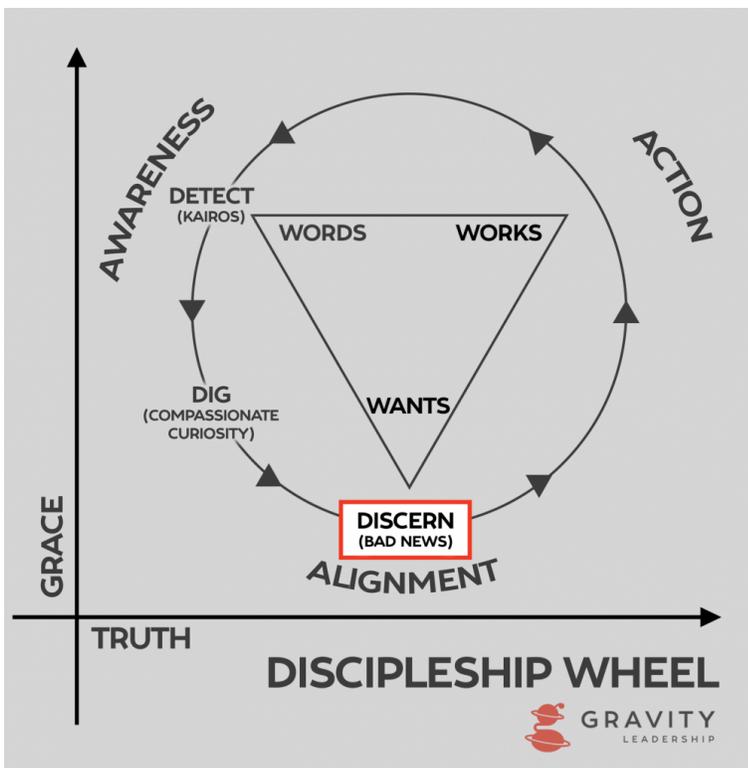
The Practices - Repent...

“The **time** has come, the **Kingdom of God** has come near,” Jesus said. “**Repent and believe the good news.**” - Mark 1:15

“The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason.”

– T. S. Eliot

The Discipleship Wheel helps us with our awareness of the places God is actively at work to conform us to the likeness of Christ. Repentance may not be what you thought it was.



Now we get into the alignment part of this process whereby we align our Words/Works/Wants with the Kingdom of God. The first step in alignment is the practice of discerning the “bad news” at work underneath the surface of our lives.

We now get in touch with our “wanters” and begin to discern the ways our desires have been hijacked by untrue stories. The “bad news” that we discern are lies that seeks our trust and our worship. Idols, in other words.

Idols promise us something only

God can deliver; and lies are the stories we believe that carry this false promise.

Getting to the heart

Lasting transformation happens when we get below the surface of our words and works and into our wants. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, our righteousness has to go “beyond” (i.e. *deeper than*) that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

He didn't mean *more* strict, but rather a different kind of righteousness altogether. One that wasn't "skin-deep," only dealing with knowing and doing the right things. Jesus was talking about a righteousness that goes deeper than doctrine and deeds, all the way down into our desires.

Jesus made it clear throughout his entire ministry that you can assent to "correct" doctrine and behave "correctly" and still completely miss the Kingdom of God! Unless we get down into our desires, our motivations, and our wants we often miss the bad news (idolatry and lies) that run our lives! That's what the practice of **discerning bad news** is all about.

Bad news = lie-idols against love

As we said earlier, by "bad news" we mean lies we believe that become idols we worship, and that interfere with our capacity to live in God's love. If living in grace and truth (love) is the goal of our discipleship (divine union), then bad news (lie-idols) are surrogate gods and alternative stories that *seek to be substitutes for God/love*.

There seem to be three main "ways" that set themselves up against Jesus' way of love, three main areas of bad news that sabotage our worship and rob us of being centered in God's love. These "ways of doing things" come up over and over in the biblical record and throughout human history.

- These ways are seen as early as Genesis 3, when the serpent tempts Eve.
- They show up again in the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness.
- They are also named by the Apostle John in his first letter to the church (the three "things that are in the world").

They also appear throughout Scripture in more subtle ways, and **if we are paying attention, we will see them at work in our own lives as well**. Christian teachers have noticed these patterns for centuries.

Thomas Keating calls them "programs for happiness," and they are essentially the three main ways we attempt to obtain, in our own strength, what we were created to have in our relationship with God but lost in the fall: **Security, Belonging, and Significance**.

You are probably familiar with the story. A serpent slithers into the garden God gave to the man and the woman. The serpent begins speaking with the woman, questioning God's motives in his prohibition of eating fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The serpent creates antagonism by misquoting God (“Did God say you can’t eat any of this delicious fruit?”).

The woman falls for the antagonistic bait and dives into arguing with the serpent about what God said. “No, only from this one tree. We’ll die if we eat that fruit.” Then the serpent offers the woman a different vision of what will happen when she eats the fruit: “Your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Look at the woman’s response in **verse 6: “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.”**

Notice the three things the woman internally noticed about the fruit. It was:

- **Good for food**
- **Pleasing to the eye**
- **Desirable for gaining wisdom (which would make her “like God”)**

The three things the woman noticed about the fruit are the three ways she was tempted. She saw that the fruit was **“good for food,”** meaning she could sustain her life with it. Instead of trusting God to provide for them through the abundance of the other trees in the garden, she grasped for what she was convinced she needed. She trusted the fruit for **security** over/against God’s prohibition.

She saw the fruit was **“pleasing to the eye,”** meaning it was beautiful to look at. Instead of trusting that God would bless her with beauty and beautiful things to behold, she grasped for the beautiful object in front of her. Wanting to identify with something beautiful, she made an idol of the fruit, identifying with it in an effort to secure **belonging**.

She saw the fruit was **“desirable for gaining wisdom,”** meaning she would become “like God, knowing good and evil.” Instead of trusting God to give her wisdom and power when she was ready for it, she grasped for the control she felt she could gain through knowledge. She sought **significance** and power outside of God’s goodness, making an idol of power.

The three ways expanded

These are the three ways the bad news most often comes to us. The bad news is essentially the lie-idols that consistently sabotage our trust in God.

They have been labeled a number of different ways by different teachers:

- Finding identity in What I Do, What I Have, and What Others Think Of Me (Basil Pennington)
- The temptations to be powerful, relevant, and spectacular (Henri Nouwen).
- Power and control, security and survival, and affection and esteem (Thomas Keating)

To make them easy to remember, we will call them Security, Belonging, and Significance. (When they are capitalized, they refer to the temptation to seek these in our own power; lower case indicates the legitimate needs we have.) We will dive into each of these in forthcoming articles, but for now, keep in mind the following resonances as you use these words:

- Security – “good for food,” the need for safety and security, the fear of not having enough; the core lie: “I am what I have.”
- Belonging – “pleasing to the eye,” the need for approval and affection, the fear of not being enough; the core lie: “I am what others think.”
- Significance – “desirable for gaining wisdom,” the need for power and control, the fear of not doing enough; the core lie: “I am what I do.”

These are the dominant stories of bad news that seek to motivate and move us. We will find a way to make into an idol anything that promises us security, belonging, or significance. We must discern the bad news at work in our lives, and this is why we detect kairos, why we dig with compassionate curiosity!

How the bad news plays out

“The enemy never immediately tempts us with what is obviously bad; instead, he is more likely to deceive us with appearances of good.”– St. Theophan the Recluse

These counterfeit ways are the temptations that have beset humankind since the very beginning, and they continue to haunt our lives today. But we don’t often live with the awareness of these forces pressing in on us. Why is that?

One of the reasons is that **the bad news often isn't overt and obvious**. Its power in our lives is hidden, which makes it all the more pernicious. This is why we dig.

Another reason is that **the bad news often comes to us as a good idea**. Since we were created for security, belonging, and significance, we are quite adept at convincing ourselves that our bad news is really good news!

Let's take a look at how these counterfeit ways hide themselves by looking at the account of Jesus' temptations in Luke 4:1-13.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Jesus answered, "It is said: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

A few things are important to note at the outset of our examination of this story. We'll discuss these things in the article today and then begin to dive into each temptation more deeply.

Doing the right things in the wrong way

First of all, it's important to note that **Jesus went into the desert intentionally to prepare for his public ministry**. Immediately prior, at his baptism, his identity and

vocation were confirmed by the Father's word and the Spirit's presence: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:20).

So Jesus knew who he was; he knew he was called to announce and demonstrate that God's kingdom was present and available to all through him. The only question left was, "How?" In what manner would he bring the kingdom?

This means that the temptations were not intended to lure Jesus away from his mission, but to lure him into implementing his mission in a counterfeit way, out of a heart that was seeking to prove something rather than a heart secure in his identity. Don't miss this: the devil didn't argue with Jesus about his identity or his vocation, but rather tempted him toward living those things out in a way other than being centered in God's love! He lied to Jesus about how to live out his identity and vocation.

The temptation is to do the right things in the wrong way.

Oftentimes we think temptation is what happens to people who are casually strolling through the wrong part of town. We think of temptation as what happens to people who are looking for ways to sin. But we doubt the devil spends much time on those people at all. Why? Because they're already primed and ready to sin! You don't need to tempt someone who is walking around trying to figure out how to sin.

C.S. Lewis' book *The Screwtape Letters* is one of the most brilliant explanations of how temptation actually works. Lewis points out over and over that people are tempted to do good things (like prayer) in ways that slowly and imperceptibly lead people away from God. The same is true in our lives. If you're reading this, you're probably not trying to figure out how to sin more. Just the opposite! You want to make disciples of Jesus, you want to see the mission of God fulfilled, you want to see the kingdom of God come on earth just as it is in heaven!

And that's exactly why you can count on being tempted to accomplish that **good vision** in a **counterfeit way**. As we've said before, it is entirely possible to learn to speak the words of Jesus and do the works of Jesus, but if we don't also learn to align our wants to the way of Jesus, we will be susceptible to wasting our efforts using these counterfeit ways. That's what an idol essentially is: an object to which we attach ourselves (i.e. worship) that

promises to give us what only God can. **Every idol is a counterfeit way of seeking belonging, significance, and security.**

Jesus models the way to overcome these temptations in this passage: seeing and naming these counterfeit ways. He is one well accustomed to living out of love; his heart is conditioned by God's very presence and power with him. Jesus leads the way as he sees and resists these temptations.

The allure of good ideas

"What attracts men to evil acts is not the evil in them but the good that is there, even under a false aspect and with a distorted perspective." – Thomas Merton

The second thing to note is that **it's unlikely that the devil appeared to Jesus with red pajamas and a flaming pitchfork.** He probably didn't smell like sulfur and announce, "Hi, I'm the devil and I'm here to tempt you." Why? Because it would have been too obvious! That's not how temptation works, because it wouldn't be very tempting. Hold on, you're the devil? These must be temptations, then! No, thank you! Too easy, right?

That's not how the devil rolls. Instead, he disguises himself as an "angel of light," because that's his only chance of gaining a foothold in our imaginations (2 Cor 11:14). If Jesus was tempted in every way, just like us, we can assume he didn't hear an evil voice in his head urging him to commit terrible crimes. Most people can resist a temptation to burn their neighbor's house down or intentionally harm someone, much less the Son of God! No, the devil doesn't come to Jesus in an obvious way and tempt him to do obviously evil things. **He came to Jesus in the same way he comes to us, in a much more subtle way, through our thoughts and ideas.**

What does temptation sound and feel like, then? Quite simply, it sounds like an idea that pops into our heads. Something occurs to us, we have an idea, and we think about it. Sometimes those ideas are creative and interesting and inspired, and sometimes those ideas are straight from the pit of hell, but it's hard to tell the difference in the moment. They all seem like interesting ideas at the time. This is the way the devil comes to us as an "angel of light."

The important thing to realize is that the bad news is a lie that makes an idol seem like a good idea! It's not like in the old cartoons where the devil sits on one shoulder urging them

to punch someone and an angel sits on the other shoulder urging them to be nice. It's more like several angels urging us to do various things, and they all sound like good ideas!

So Jesus has a calling and is seeking to live it out, and is being tempted as a human in the same way we're tempted. He knows the good work he has to do, but he is being tempted by multiple good ideas that come to mind as to HOW to do this good work.

These temptations work the same way in our lives. They are disguised as good ideas, and they are temptations to accomplish good things in ways that aren't love. These temptations very often prey on those who have a sense of calling and want to accomplish good things. If you're reading this, it probably includes you.

Counterfeit ways are subtle ways

We will explore each of the three counterfeit ways more deeply, but for now, let's review the subtlety of these temptations:

- ***The counterfeit ways are temptations to do good things for bad reasons. To accomplish the right things in the wrong way.***
- ***The counterfeit ways enter our awareness in subtle ways, most often disguised as good ideas for doing good things.***

Exercise: Bad News is not always obvious.

Let's practice together:

- *Break off into groups of 2 or 3. Ask for someone to volunteer that doesn't have a problem sharing.*
- *Use one of the Kairos moments from the week that you noticed.*
- *Ask the next most compassionately curious question until you can see either how the person sharing is struggling with significance, security or belonging.*
- *Help them name the bad news. Many times talking about frustrations or fears this brings helps. Remember you are looking for the lie they are believing about God, others, or themselves.*

Homework: This week connect with your "smaller" group and help each other find the "bad news" in their lives.