

March 1, Lent 1A (Matthew 4:1-11)

The devil is testing Jesus. Jesus is also testing the devil.

by [Amy Zietlow](#) in the [February 26, 2020](#) issue

I used to serve as chief operating officer of the Hospice of Baton Rouge. My role included assessing the skills of our nurses, social workers, chaplains, and administrative staff each year. That task overwhelmed me. Each member of the team held different levels of expertise and training. They completed unique tasks in service to patients and their families. Could there be one universal way to assess their overall commitment to our goals as a team?

I found some help in the skill/will matrix, defined by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in their work on situational leadership. It measures the intersection of two critical qualities: the individual's ability and motivation to complete the goal at hand.

I quickly learned that addressing an employee's ability was something in my control as a supervisor. Our organization could offer training or coaching to a team member who was unlearned in a specific area. Motivation, however, was far trickier. Highly skilled employees who were unmotivated to meet the current challenge or to change were often the ones to receive "freedom counseling" (a kind term coined by our CEO for "fired"). We could change skill but not will.

In Matthew 4, Jesus is in a liminal time between the anointing of his baptism and the three years of public ministry to come. For 40 days, Jesus follows John the Baptist's ascetic example, retreating to the wilderness to prepare himself for proclaiming that the kingdom of God is near. But there, in the middle of the desert, the kingdom of this world draws near. The devil approaches and assesses Jesus and his commitment to God's team and God's plan for the world.

The devil uses the skill/will matrix, at first focusing on God's ability to meet Jesus' needs: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Even though Jesus is famished from fasting, he knows that God's ability to

feed his belly was never in question. While bread can meet his bodily needs, true life is fed by the presence of God. Jesus acknowledges that God has the skill to work a stone-to-bread transformation, but Jesus does not have the will to ask.

The devil then moves beyond God's ability to God's willingness. God may be able to do the impossible, but is God willing? Jesus is placed on the pinnacle of the temple and asked, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." Surely, God is not only able but also willing to save you. Jesus doesn't take the bait—he won't test God's willingness.

The devil then turns away from God's ability and willingness to Jesus' own. The devil focuses on the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me." Jesus is taken to a high mountain. The devil expresses his ability and willingness to give Jesus all the kingdoms and splendor Jesus sees in exchange for his faithfulness.

This is the crux of things. God's ability was never really in question for the devil, only the willingness of Jesus to shift loyalties. Jesus responds that he is only willing to worship God.

In the wilderness, Jesus assesses the devil's skill and will as well. The devil has the skill for faithfulness to God but not the willingness. Perhaps this insight guides Jesus to look first for willingness in his disciples. Returning to society, Jesus promptly calls an inner circle of followers, none of whom rates high in skill. However, unlike the devil, they all rank high in willingness. Jesus begins with their willingness and then develops their skills on the road.

Jesus' coaching of the disciples reminds me of Edwin Friedman's work with families and organizations. In his final book, *A Failure of Nerve*, he writes of focusing his energy on supporting well-differentiated leaders—because he recognized the transformative presence such a leader can have on a system. If a leader was willing to be healthy, Friedman could help the "leader become better defined and to learn how to deal adroitly with the sabotage that almost invariably followed any success in this endeavor." Clearly drawn boundaries provoke opposition from those with competing goals, as Jesus experiences firsthand in the wilderness. Facing those temptations is good practice for his clearly defined salvific ministry, which will be full of opposition and persecution.

He equips his disciples to use the skill/will matrix as well. In Matthew 10, he sends the 12 apostles out into the Galilean countryside. He defines their abilities: heal the

sick, raise the dead, cast out demons, and discern willingness. If a household is not willing to welcome them, they are to shake the dust from their feet and move on. They can control their own willingness to proclaim, heal, and teach, but they cannot control the willingness of others to receive them.

We follow in their footsteps. Our willingness is infinitely more important to God than our skill. God can equip us for whatever God calls us to do. We offer our willingness to follow, and we anticipate growing in our abilities to be faithful. In turn, as leaders, we discern who is willing in our ministry contexts, and we invest our time and attention in developing their skills for love and service.

And for those unwilling we state our boundaries and set them free. Only God's spirit can work on a resistant will. We trust that angels surround them and us on the journey.