

Identity Theft

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Matthew 4:1-11

1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

4 But he answered, "It is written,  
     'One does not live by bread alone,  
     but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him,

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,  
     'He will command his angels concerning you,'  
     and 'On their hands they will bear you up,  
     so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,  
     'Worship the Lord your God,  
     and serve only him.'"

11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.  
 Identity theft is a big problem in the modern world.

## IDENTITY THEFT TODAY

I remember when we etched our social security number on items to keep them from being stolen. We don't do that any more. Today's digital criminals can take your social security number to the bank, literally.

We now have companies that specialize in protecting us from this danger.

Unfortunately there are also criminals who specialize in overcoming our safeguards. Recently a hacker wrote an article entitled, “Cyber Crime Made Easy.” In it he wrote,

“Interested in credit card theft? There’s an app for that!”

We hear horror stories about people who wake up one day to find their bank account drained. In some cases people are even arrested because someone has stolen their identity and is committing crimes in their name.

Not long ago I got a call from my credit card company that asked if I had bought \$4000 worth of clothes in Los Angeles! We were some of the lucky ones who shopped at Target this past Christmas season!

New credit cards were issued right away.

We long for the good old days don’t we? We long for those days when you didn’t have to lock your front door and everyone did banking face to face with people you knew and trusted.

Now I do all my banking online and pray that my credit card isn’t skimmed at the gas station.

Today’s technology makes things more convenient, but technology also empowers criminals to do us harm. We can avoid financial identity theft by guarding our personal information and treating those that we don’t know with a healthy dose of skepticism.

## IDENTITY THEFT, THE TEMPTATION

On the other hand, I believe there is another, more malevolent form of identity theft that has been around a very long time indeed. In fact I don’t think it’s an overstatement to say that this kind of identity theft can even be devilish.

And the consequences of this kind of theft are much worse than just having to replace our credit cards. Our whole life can be ruined if we are not careful.

Yes, it’s the first Sunday in Lent, and we’re once again talking about the temptation of Jesus.

I have a preacher friend who used to joke that most of his sermons consisted of three points and a poem. I don’t know about the poem, but today’s lesson does

lend itself to the classic three point sermon. After all there are three temptations, so the sermon should have three points. Right?

But, after reflecting on our text from Matthew, I have come to believe that there are not three temptations in our story for today. There is only one temptation presented in three different ways. And the temptation comes in the form of identity theft. The devil is trying to get Jesus to question his identity, his mission in life. He is trying to sow doubt about the Word of God.

This is not a new tactic. In the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, the serpent asked Eve, “Did God really say that? Surely God didn’t say that? There must be some mistake.”

The passage that precedes the story of the temptation is the story of the baptism of Jesus. Most of you remember how that story ends. The heavens open up like a scroll. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove. And a voice from heaven says, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”

That is a great affirmation. With that knowledge surely Jesus is ready to start his ministry.

But, it doesn’t happen that way.

Instead the Spirit of God leads Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the devil. This was no accident. The trip into the desert was for the expressed purpose of confronting the evil one.

And in that desert Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights. (Don’t try this at home kids. You’ll die.) Jesus didn’t die, but he was famished. He was really, really hungry.

And it was then that the devil came. Three times the devil came and each time the devil began his temptation with the same prepositional phrase, “If you are the Son of God ... “ That’s a big “if.”

And that’s the temptation, the temptation for Jesus to doubt his identity. Are you really the Son of God? Can you prove it?

#### WEAKNESS IN A TIME OF HUNGER

Jesus didn’t need to prove anything. The voice of God had already declared from heaven that he was His Son. God was pleased with him.

But, in a time of weakness, a time of great hunger we are tempted to listen to those voices that cast doubt on the promises of God. Maybe it's not true. How can we know?

And so we sometimes take the bait that the devil offers. We set out to prove that we are worthy of the title that God has given us. We seek affirmation in ways that ironically lead us away from the God who called us in the first place.

The devil sought to rob Jesus of his identity by suggesting that the voice from heaven was not enough. The devil tempted Jesus to do things his way, to replace the identity given to him by God with an identity more in line with the ways of the world.

The devil wanted to suggest that what Jesus had was not enough. He needed more in order to be truly called the Son of God.

How did Jesus overcome this temptation, this assault upon his identity? He took refuge in the promises of God. He quotes Scripture.

Jesus said,

“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

“It is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

The Bible tells us that Jesus was fully human. (Hebrews 4:15) He knew what it meant to be tempted.

He knew what it meant to be hungry.

He knew what it meant to feel powerless and alone. He knew what it meant to have self-doubt.

When we read the gospels we see this most clearly.

In today's lesson Jesus is famished. In other passages Jesus seems to be uncertain about what God wants him to do. He agonizes about the cross in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And one of the last words he says on the cross is “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?”

## SON OF GOD

We can identify with Jesus because he has been tested as we are tested. The example of Jesus is a very down to earth example. But, this very down to earth man was more than he seemed.

He was also the Son of God.

Many people used the title Son of God in the ancient world. Caesar was sometimes referred to as the Son of God. The kings of Israel were also referred to as Sons of God.

In this case these leaders proved their “divinity” by bringing victory in battle and giving the people the material things that they needed to survive.

You brought in the kingdom by personal charisma and brute force.

But, these are the very things that Jesus rejects. He is indeed the Son of God, but this does not mean he will be like the other kings.

Jesus will not surrender his identity to the Great Deceiver. He will reject brute force as an option, and will instead rely upon his Heavenly Father to give him what he needs when he needs it.

Jesus will be content to be hungry as others are hungry. Jesus will find hope not in being popular but in being faithful to God’s Word.

And Jesus will not seek power in any other way except from his relationship with his Heavenly Father.

## TEMPTED THROUGHOUT HIS MINISTRY

Someone asked at Bible study if Jesus was tempted after this initial encounter with the devil. And the answer is yes.

Jesus was tempted throughout his life.

For example, do you remember when Jesus asked the disciples an important question, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter answering for the disciples said, “You are the Christ, the Son of God.”

Then Jesus started talking about how he would suffer and take up a cross for the sake of the kingdom.

Peter did not like this. And he told Jesus as much in no uncertain terms. And do you remember what Jesus told Peter?

“Get behind me Satan.”

It seems to me that Jesus defined Satan as anyone who would tempt us to do things the world’s way instead of God’s way. Satan is the one who tempts us to lose our identity, to forget who we are and whose we are.

Again and again Jesus makes it clear. He has come not to rule Satan’s kingdom, but to bring in the kingdom of God.

After the resurrection Jesus will indeed receive all authority in heaven and on earth. (Matthew 28:18)

But, for now the temptation of Jesus continues all the way to the cross.

When Jesus is arrested, he refuses to be rescued by angels or by violence.

And at the crucifixion the religious leaders taunt him.

If you’re the Son of God prove it. Come down from the cross. Doesn’t God care enough to rescue you?

But, the Son of God even avoids temptation on the cross. He trusts God to see him through to the end.

And when Jesus dies forgiving his enemies we see that the devil really has been banished. The centurion who had been in charge of this murderous act proclaims,

“Truly, this man was God’s son!”

## THE DEVIL TODAY

The decisive victory was won on the cross. But, the battle for the hearts and minds of humanity continues. The devil continues to try and steal our identity, to suggest that the promises of God are not sure.

Whenever I teach a Bible study on this passage I always get the same question: “Is the devil real or just a symbol of evil?”

Let me put it this way,  
“The devil is real, and he’s on TV!”

Think about the advertisements that we hear every day. They all have one thing in common. They want to create in us a sense of insecurity. They want to undermine our God given identity as Sons and Daughters of God by suggesting that we need to do something to prove our worth.

If only we buy this car or use this deodorant then the girls will like us. If only we eat more (or less) then we will be happy. We’re too fat (or too skinny.) We’re not pretty enough or smart enough or strong enough or rich enough to be loved and accepted.

In essence the advertisements are always telling us that we are not enough.

This is not only a lie; it’s a dammed lie. It’s the message of the devil, even if a handsome young man with blue eyes and blue jeans is proclaiming it!

It’s a case of identity theft that is far worse than the financial dangers we face in the digital age. It is a message that threatens to take our very soul.

## AVOIDING IDENTITY THEFT

But, Jesus offers us a way out. Jesus offers us a way to safeguard our identity. And that way is to put our trust in God’s grace.

Jesus was the Son of God, and he didn’t have to prove that to anyone.

And the Bible also says that we too are a part of the heavenly family. We too are God’s Sons and Daughters.

What does that mean? It means that we don’t have to prove anything to anyone either.

We don't have to drive a fancy car. We don't need teeth that are so white that our friends have to wear sunglasses. And our worth is not judged by the job we hold or the friends we keep.

God has come to us in Jesus, and he has given us a very comforting message. In Jesus we are forgiven and freed to live a life filled with gratitude and joy. Our true identity is lodged in the promises of God.

God loves us. God loves us so much that He sent his Son into the world not to condemn us but to save us. And soon in our 40-day journey through Lent we will be reminded just how much God loves.

His Son will die for us on the cross.

He didn't die on the cross in order that we might be acceptable or to make God more loving. Jesus died on the cross for us to show that God already loves us.

When we look upon the cross we see that we are more than just all right with God. We are precious to Him. We are treasured. We are priceless beyond measure.

This is our true identity, and we can't let anyone tempt us into believing anything different. We can't give up our heavenly birthright for the sorry materialistic stew that the powers that be want to serve us.

I'll bet sometime this past week you were tempted.

Perhaps you were tempted to fill a spiritual hunger with the blue plate special.

Perhaps were tempted by a loved one who suggested that you were a disappointment to them.

Perhaps you were tempted to believe that what you did and what you said wasn't nearly enough, that you needed to do more that you were inadequate.

Perhaps you were tempted to believe that you were all alone in wilderness.

We need to remember that Jesus stood in the wilderness for us.

Because of Jesus we don't have to feel alone or overwhelmed or overcome with worry about what might happen.



It is said that when Martin Luther was plagued by doubt or fear he would sometimes shout out words that echo Jesus' words in our lesson for today. Martin would say,

“Away with you Satan! I am baptized.”

Martin had it right. We are baptized. We are God's children by the power of God's grace. In Jesus God has promised to be with us and for us. And nothing, not even the cross can break that promise.

We don't have to stand alone in the hungry wilderness because Jesus stood there first. He stood for us. And he still stands for us and with us.

So, brothers and sisters when the voice of temptation suggests that we are not all that we should be, and when the voice of temptation asks us to doubt the goodness of God, remember who's speaking.

It is the original identity thief. It's the voice of the devil. Claim your true identity, and tell the devil to take a hike!

I leave you today with the words of the Apostle, Paul,

*The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. Romans 8:16.*