

**“Trust and Obey”**

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**Matthew 4:1-11**

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.

## YIELDING TO TEMPTATION

Temptation can be defined as the desire to do something wrong.

All of us have been tempted by one thing or another over the years. We know from an early age that we should just say “no”. We should not yield to temptation because as the old hymn puts it, “... for yielding is sin.”

But, despite our best efforts ... we yield.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans,  
 “I do not understand my own actions.  
 For I don’t do the thing that I want,  
 but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15)

In other words, the great apostle Paul admits that he too yields to temptation. He does the very thing that he hates. And he is absolutely miserable on account of his failures.

Let’s be honest  
 Temptation a big problem for all of us.  
 And often, despite our best efforts, we do yield to temptation.

Temptation is a part of every human life.  
 And temptation was a part of Jesus’ life as well.

## LED INTO TEMPTATION

In our passage for today we learn that Jesus was led into the “wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil.”

We want to avoid temptation.  
 In fact we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation.”

But, notice that in Jesus’ case temptation was no accident. He was led into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. The temptation of Jesus was a part of God’s plan.

Why? Why was Jesus tempted?  
 What could be gained through this trial in the desert?  
 There are two reasons for the temptation of Jesus.

## TEMPTED LIKE US

First, the temptation of Jesus shows that he has experienced and understands the trials of being human. All of us have had our own run in with temptation. And all of us bear the scars of those experiences.

We know what it's like to be in the wilderness.  
 We know what it's like to have choices that all seem bad.  
 We know the temptation to take the easy way out.

Well, the same was true of Jesus.  
 In the book of Hebrews we read that Jesus, the Great High Priest who makes atonement for our sin is compassionate toward us.

Why?  
 Because he knows what it's like to be tempted.  
 He was tempted in every way just as we are tempted. (Hebrews 4:15)

The temptation story is one of the most important stories in the gospel. If you want to understand the gospel, beginning with the story of the temptation of Jesus is a good place to start.

The struggles highlighted in this passage will continue to plague Jesus for the rest of his journey toward the cross.

And those struggles will continue to be a part of our journey as well.

So, first, the temptation of Jesus illustrates his humanity and his struggle with evil. Since Jesus has been tempted in every way just as we are, He is the Savior who can understand our weakness and treat us with compassion.

## HOW TO RESIST TEMPTATION

Second, the temptation of Jesus is a case study on how to understand and resist the temptations that will inevitably come our way.

That quote from Hebrews continues that though Jesus was tested in every way just as we are ... there was one big difference.

He did not sin.  
 He did not succumb to temptation.

How did Jesus resist temptation?  
 How did he recognize and rebuke the devil?  
 That's an important question.

The devil doesn't always come to us in a negative way.

In fact in the original temptation story the serpent who tempts Adam and Eve is not the despised serpent that makes many of us queasy when we see it. The serpent is described in somewhat positive terms.

The serpent was "more crafty" than the other animals that the Lord had made.

To quote a song from my generation, the devil sometimes has "blue eyes and blue jeans."

I watch a TV show that always begins with a quote from some famous writer. This week's quote was from an 18th century writer, Mary Wollstonecraft.

She wrote,  
 "No man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness."

Temptation comes disguised as happiness.  
 A bad choice is made to look good.

All three of the temptations in our lesson for today look like good choices ... at least they look good in the wilderness.

## THE WILDERNESS

The setting for today's lesson is important.  
 Temptation does not come in a time of affirmation and praise.

Temptation comes in the wilderness.  
 Temptation comes when we are losing, and we think that nobody cares.

The passage that precedes this one records a time of great affirmation.

Jesus is baptized and a voice from heaven says,  
 "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."

You'll remember that the voice from heaven said the same thing when Jesus was on the mountaintop with his disciples.

But, what about all those days that he spends in the valley?

How was Jesus able to walk the way of the cross when his disciples and his own human instincts were telling him to go in another direction?

It was this wilderness experience that prepared Jesus for what was to come.

Many of you recognize the symbolism of this story.

God's people wandered in the wilderness for 40 years before they were ready to enter the Promised Land.

The wilderness acted as a kind of spiritual preparation for God's people. It was in the wilderness that they learned to truly trust God, and this provided the foundation for their nation.

In the same way, Jesus prepared for the coming Kingdom of God by spending 40 days in the wilderness. In the wilderness Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, and afterwards he was famished.

And that's when the devil came to tempt Jesus.

## TEMPTATION AND HUNGER

Temptation often comes when we're hungry.

Temptation often comes when there is some great need in our life.

Maybe it's a need for food ... but more often it's a need for security ... or a need for companionship ... or a desire to feel appreciated ... or a lack of money.

What do you need more than anything else?

What is the great hunger in your life?

That's where you are weakest.

And that's where you are subject to temptation.

Jesus was famished.

And so the devil's first temptation was the temptation to turn stones into bread.

Now what would be wrong with that?

When we're hungry, we need food, right?

I hear that some of the stones in the desert even looked like little loaves of bread.

Jesus was hungry.  
 There was no McDonald's in the desert.  
 Why not do a small miracle for himself?  
 What would be the harm?

But, that's to miss the point.

This temptation isn't about turning stones into bread.  
 This temptation is to doubting the call of God.

## THE BIG IF

The big "little" word in this passage is the word "if".

"If you are the Son of God (and by the way I'm not so sure you are ... you look pretty pathetic after 40 days in the wilderness) but if you are the Son of God then turn these stones into bread."

In a sense, all three temptations are the same.  
 They are the temptation to doubt God's Word.

That, of course, was the basic temptation in the Garden of Eden.  
 tempter asked Eve, "Did God say you shouldn't eat from any tree in the garden?"

Notice that the clever serpent distorted God's Word.  
 God didn't say that they couldn't eat from all the trees in the garden.

He just said that they couldn't eat from one particular tree.

But, in order to create a sense of need, a sense of hunger, the crafty serpent distorted God's Word. He focused their hearts and minds on the one thing that they couldn't have to the exclusion of all those things that they could have.

The same thing happens in this first temptation.  
 The devil attempts to focus Jesus' mind on what he doesn't have, food, in order to take his mind off of the greater blessing that he does have ... the promise of God's Word.

Remember, the voice from heaven has already said that Jesus is God's Son and with him God is well pleased. The trick of temptation is to get Jesus to focus on his hunger instead of the promise.

Jesus sees through this ploy.

He not only trusts God's Word; he quotes God's Word. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."

## MATERIALISM

For us this is the temptation of materialism.  
It is the temptation to fill a spiritual need with something physical.

Frederick Buechner wrote that we have a hunger inside us that even the Blue Plate Special can't fill.

Our greatest need is not physical.  
Our greatest need is spiritual.  
Our greatest need is for God's grace.

Trying to fill a spiritual need with food can even be harmful to our health. Indeed I wonder if our struggle with food ... eating too much or too little ... might sometimes be related to a spiritual problem.

This story is about more than bread.  
It's about using any material thing as a substitute for God.

Jesus once said that life is about more than what we eat or what we wear or what we have.  
At it's foundation life is about trust in the promises of God's Word.

Listen to the voice from heaven.  
We are God's children.

He loves us. He forgives us.  
Let that feed you first, and everything else will fall into place.

## TESTING GOD

In the second temptation, the devil decides to quote Scripture. He takes Jesus to the Holy City, places him on the pinnacle of the Temple and says,

“Jump. Don’t worry.  
 If you are the Son of God, you won’t get hurt.  
 The Scripture says that the Lord will send his angels to catch you.”

Once again we see the big “if”.  
 If you are the Son of God (and I’m still not sure that you are), prove it. Jump.

When we doubt God’s call to us, we are tempted to test God.

“Okay God, if you’re real, then heal this disease or deliver me from this problem or give me what I want.” This is a temptation that comes to us under the guise of greater faith.

We think that we are testing the truth of God’s Word.  
 We think that we are showing our faith by “claiming the promise”.

But, not so.

Religious charlatans thrive on this mistake.  
 Instead of asking us to jump off a building they ask us to send more money.

And if the healing doesn’t come, there’s a built in excuse. If only we had more faith, God would do what we want God to do.

But, putting God to the test isn’t a sign of faith.  
 It is a sign of doubt.

## JOB

In the Old Testament book of Job we read the story of a man who loses everything.

He loses his family.

He loses his job.

He loses his health.

In those days people thought (as some still do today) that tragedy is due to a lack of faith and/or sinful behavior. So Job’s friends ask him to confess his sin so that he can be healed.

But, Job can’t think of anything that he has done that would warrant such a horrible punishment. And then there’s Job’s wife ...

Henny Youngman was a comedian who used to say in his comedy routine, "Take my wife ... please."

Well, I think he based that line on Mrs. Job because she finally told her husband,

"Enough already. I've had enough of your complaining. Curse God and die!"

Job didn't curse God, but he did ask God, "Why? Why has this happened to me?"

God tells Job, "I'll answer your question if you answer mine.

"Will you ever put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me so that you can be justified?"

And then the Lord proceeds to describe creation and asks Job if he can do what He has done.

Of course Job can't. And Job realizes that he and his friends have made a big mistake.

They have put God to the test. God is God. And they're not.

Jesus is the Son of God, but he is also human. And so he struggles to walk the difficult way of the cross.

He is tempted to take an easier way, a way that is spectacular and would demonstrate his power.

But, he will not swerve from the road that is ahead of him. Jesus continues his journey trusting in the goodness of his heavenly Father and his will.

We will see this temptation arise again as Jesus struggles in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But, though he sweats blood as he prays, he comes to the same conclusion, "Not my will by thine be done."

## POOR THEOLOGY

For us, I would call this temptation the temptation of poor theology.

This is the temptation to confuse faith with magic.

We are tempted to believe that if we just say the right things or do the right thing, then we can control God.

That's not faith.

That's magic.

And we don't believe in magic.

## EXPEDIENCY

Faith is trusting in the promise of God's Word in good times and bad.

Faith is believing in God's grace on the mountaintop and in the valley.

The devil has one final temptation to try before he leaves Jesus.

He takes him up a high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.

And he tells Jesus, "The world can be yours if you just fall down and worship me."

This is the temptation of expediency.

We have many proverbs that make this point.

For example:

"Sometimes we have to break a few eggs in order to make an omelet."

"Sometimes you have to fight fire with fire."

In other words, in order to do something good, sometimes you have to do something bad. In order to bring in the kingdom, Jesus would have to do things the devil's way instead of God's way.

Sometimes you have to resort to violence in order to have peace.

But, the life of Jesus is a rebuttal of that premise.

He did not fight fire with fire.

He did just the opposite.

He willingly laid down his life on the cross.  
He died for the sins of the world.  
And in so doing he banished the temptation of the devil.

## BANISHING SATAN

The temptation of Jesus is concluded when Jesus tells the devil,

“Away from me Satan, for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”

The devil left.  
But he would be back.  
And the results will be the same.

In the Garden of Gethsemane the last temptation of Christ will be rejected once and for all.

Now is our chance to reject the temptation of Satan.  
Once again we are in the season of Lent.  
Once again we walk through the lonesome valley on the way to the cross.

Let us reject any other path.

Let us trust in the promises of God’s Word.  
We belong to God, and God will be with us every step of the way.

Body broken and blood shed will not be the end of the story.

They will mark the beginning of the story that continues even today.

Amen.