

Matthew 4:1-11
The Temptation of Jesus
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Do you know what it's like to be tempted to do the wrong thing? To receive an invitation to go down the wrong road, you know what that is like, yes? And now I ask you this, do you see the wider world around you, the world in your immediate surroundings—like here in our community, and even the world inside you and think: it is overwhelming, the level of need, and all of what is wrong is simply more than I can bear, what good am I?

These are not unrelated questions, do you know why? Because the world needs men and women who have grown strong in resisting what is wrong and moving towards the good. Now if one person does that, what good are they, really? But if whole communities are equipped in what it means to grow in and follow God, and then rise up. Well then there is a lot we can do.

It is our goal here at WPC to be people who day after day, week after week, year after year, gather to listen to and learn from Jesus so that we can be better equipped to be people who can resist the evil and pursue what is good, pure, worthy, the things Jesus pursues. Now whether you know it or not, that is what you were created to be, God's instrument of good in the world, not just on Sunday mornings when we gather in this room with mustard yellow colored carpet, but everyday and in every place you were meant to be God's instrument.

This morning we are going to look at a passage in which Jesus faces temptation. Specifically, we're going to look at how he confronts temptation, as well as the tools and resources upon which he draws strength from the Father. We will see how God provides all that we—you and me—will ever need to face every challenge.

Now, I want to make something clear at the outset. What the Scriptures are not saying is that God will protect us from every temptation when we knowingly and willingly walk into situations that are not good for us. For example, I have been on a journey of really trying to eat healthy and exercise plenty. Now if I walk into Dairy Queen and say "God please give me strength not to get this Large Peanut Butter Cup Blizzard with extra cups" I am probably not going to resist that temptation.

But, what we will see is that when GOD calls us to the places, or people, or work that HE has for us, we will face temptation—that is a guarantee. And what we will find from the story of Jesus in the wilderness is that those temptations generally fall into three categories. And if we search for strength from what the Scriptures teach us, I believe we will be equipped and strengthened to withstand temptation. And with that let's look at the first part of our text and the first temptation.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

If I had the power to turn rocks into food I would weigh 700 pounds. Jesus has been in the desert for 40 days without food, he's famished, his stomach is completely empty, and he's in the desert—a wild and unruly, dangerous place. And at first glance it would appear that the enemy, the devil, the

tempter is just inviting him to use his power to meet a very basic and reasonable need—he's hungry, it's been 40 days, obviously he's starving (literally).

But looking more closely we will see that what Satan is tempting Jesus to do is move away from his mission and purpose. He is tempting Jesus to use his power to help himself. You are desperately hungry, your stomach is telling you what you should do—you should eat—you should let your appetite dictate what you do with the strength you have. Use the resources you have to take care of some discomfort in yourself. In short, Satan is inviting Jesus to use his power to help himself.

Jesus' first response to this temptation is to think about Scripture. **“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”** Does this sound familiar? Of course it does, it's the very next verse in Matthew 4. But what Jesus is quoting is Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus is recalling the period from Israel's life when they lived in the wilderness—the very same wilderness he's in. And while they are there their bellies are empty and their grumbling with Moses because they're so hungry (It would be better if we were back in Egypt there, at least, we had food to eat.). But when Jesus meets this temptation to use his power for his own purposes, to satisfy his own hunger, he recalled what God said to the people back then.

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. And what Jesus is saying, and what he is inviting us to believe is that God is trustworthy for all of our needs. That in any and all circumstances of life we can place our trust in God's faithfulness to provide for any and all of your needs. Jesus responds to this temptation from the devil, the temptation to use the powers within him to serve himself, by calling to mind what God says we are to do with the power that is within us.

Do you know what God calls Jesus and calls you and me to do with the power within us? Serve one another. This makes no sense to the tempter, and it will often make no sense to the world around us. If you use your energy and power to give to others, instead of making yourself feel more and more comfortable, you will be fulfilling the mission and purpose God has for you.

Let me put it in the context of our church. We are a powerful gathering. We have been given so much in terms of resource and blessing and this place. But if we use all of what we have simply to make ourselves feel more comfortable, if we serve only ourselves, then we will be missing out on the power available to us from God, to be his instruments.

That's the first temptation. The second temptation, the enemy grabs Jesus and he takes him out of the wilderness and takes him to Jerusalem. Then when they're within the confines of the city, the tempter takes him to the temple, to the pinnacle of the temple. And there Jesus will face a second temptation. Here's what it says:

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple⁶ and said 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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.””

Do you see how crafty the tempter is here? Jesus in his first temptation responded to the tempter by quoting scripture back as a source of strength. Now what does the tempter do in his second assault on Jesus: **“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,**

That's the first thing, he now tries to use scripture and quote it back to Jesus in his temptation of him the second time. The other area of his craftiness is that the first go around the devil went after Jesus in his greatest area of weakness (his stomach). Now he turns and approaches him from his greatest strength, which is that he trusts God and knows his word. And what we learn here is that when we are able to stand up to temptation in one area, we shouldn't think that we'll be fine in all other areas. The tempter went from an area of weakness in Jesus, to his area of greatest strength.

What is your greatest strength as a follower of Jesus? This is perhaps the place where the tempter will attack you fiercest.

Jesus is taken up to the highest place of the temple and is told by the devil, jump off, it will be a grand spectacle, everyone will be watching, and because you are God's son the angels will swoop in and rescue you. Won't that be a sight to behold? And won't it cause so many to say, "wow, he certainly is God's son." This is the approach of the tempter, always taking us higher and higher, tempting us with grander and grander promises. But do you notice that this is just the opposite approach Jesus takes from his baptism.

When Jesus arrived to begin his ministry as Emmanuel, God with us, as I mentioned last week, Jesus coronation was not in the temple where all of the powerful and religious people were gathered, it was in a muddy river surrounded by sinners. When Jesus emerged from the river he didn't go to the homes of the powerful or teach in the great courts of knowledge, he went to the poor, the crippled, the lame, eating and drinking with the lost and reprobate, and then he goes even lower as his own people who were supposed to revere him mock and spit and beat him, and ultimately crucify him with common criminals. DO you see how Jesus' trajectory was not up and up and up, higher and higher, but to go lower and lower and lower.

The life of Jesus was a life of downward trajectory.

The danger of this second temptation, is asking God to follow you as you make your plans for your life. It is such a subtle one, it's so crafty, we do it all the time. I am facing this one right now. We have this wonderful Preschool, Izzy Lewis was a part of its inception over 40 years ago, and just this fall we had the opportunity to hire a young lady named Addie who is a licensed Montessori teacher and director. This was something that we had prayed about for so long, the preschool committee believed that this would be an amazing opportunity for the children of Wabash and surrounding counties to have a Montessori school, and we were poised to offer it to them. And this week I found myself daydreaming in my office of expanding this school to offer elementary and middle and high school and purchasing land either around the church or out away from town and building a new school. And in my mind that would be so great, and such a great gift, **and wouldn't we be such a great gift to the people of our community?**

Be careful. This is that second temptation, asking God to follow you into your plans. This is how Satan operates here with Jesus. "Go up on that high point and throw yourself off and ask God to follow you." Instead of following God in obedience, the second temptation is to try and get God to follow your plan, not be obedient to his.

Now the third temptation, going yet even higher. Here Satan takes Jesus even higher, and here is where I think he offers the most seductive temptation of all. Look at what Satan says to Jesus in this third one.

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

Now, for a moment, let's imagine that Satan has the authority to give Jesus power over the kingdoms of the earth. Now there's an awful lot of people for whom this temptation would mean really bad things. But this is the one and only person who, if he said yes, would do it perfectly. He came to the world to assume authority over all kingdoms for their own good. His mission is to come and rule over the world with grace and mercy and power, for the good of everyone. And in this moment, what Satan is tempting him with is success in the mission that he's been given. This is the craftiest of all. Do you see it? Success in the mission, which is supremely good, to have success in the things that God has given us to do, even this can be used by the devil to tempt us.

The way he to achieve his good ends by a slightly compromised means. Do the ends justify the means? When the devil says to Jesus fall down and worship me, it doesn't imply a continuous action. It's not, bow down and worship me over and over again. One little bow, one little acknowledgement, do that and I'll give you everything. Achieving God's good ends, by some other means.

Do you see here, that Jesus' response to him in this moment is the strongest and most assertive rejection of the temptation. Jesus says: Be gone Satan. The tempter is inviting Jesus to the success of God's work without the cross. The path that Jesus is on will lead him directly to the cross, there is not another route, there is not a more convenient or direct way to the good end of God's redeemed creation that doesn't go through golgatha. In fact it has never been God's plan for his people's lives to give them the easy route, the expressway to the good ends which he is leading. When the Israelites were released from Egyptian captivity, when Moses said: “Pharaoh, what??? Let my people go.”

Did you know there was actually a direct route to the promised land from Egypt that took them right along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was called the Via Maris (the way of the sea), it would have been easy, it would have been comfortable, and without struggle. But the way God led his people was not the Via Maris, but a windy circumnavigation of the desert, the long road, the hard road. But it was on that road where God's people learned faith, learned obedience, learned to live with God. And that is always the road upon which God will lead us to the good ends he has for us. Not always the road of greatest resistance, but the road that will enable us to learn and see God's good plan, and the road that will teach us about living in faith and obedience to him.

The danger of this last temptation is to mistake success in our mission for God himself, and Jesus never mistook success in his mission for his obedience to God.

And so as we prepare to close this morning, and we sing and ask God with our voices and with our hearts to be the person to whom our gaze is fixed, we need help. We need help, because we all face temptation, in one form or another, and we will fail over and over again—we will all do this 100%. What should you do? Don't try harder, don't beat yourself up, don't think if I could only get my act together. Don't do any of these, they're useless. But instead do this, look to Jesus and remember what Scripture says about him. Listen to these beautiful and encouraging words from Hebrews 2:18:

Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Because Jesus went through this he is able to help you and he is able to help us. Alleluia!

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.