

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 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.’” Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, “‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Matthew 4:1-11

Well the salesman had finally gotten his chance to make the really big sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. He was ushered into the office of the executive buyer; an assistant brought him a cup of coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial, and he gave his best presentation ever to the executive. Then the assistant tapped on the door, re-entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive, who then stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to another matter. I'll just be a minute or two" - and he followed his assistant out of the room. The sales rep sat and looked around the beautifully adorned office. He saw the executives' family pictures on his desk – and then also noticed a contract on the desk, and obviously it was a bid from another competitor. Leaning forward, he couldn't quite see the column of figures, as it was covered by a can of diet Coke. He was tempted to move the can and see the bottom line of his competitor's bid. What possible harm could there be in just taking a little look? After all, the contract had *almost* been left out in plain sight. After wrestling with himself a moment, he finally decided to take a peek. And so he lifted the Coke can and discovered that the can wasn't filled with Coke at all. Instead it was a bottomless can filled with small ball bearings which gushed out, and ran all over the desk and spilled out onto the carpet. His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed. Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge of our heart. Not even Jesus was spared that.

Our text for this morning describes the temptation of our Lord in a pretty straightforward manner. “*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*” (Matthew 4:1). These words open our text for this morning right after the Spirit of God had descended on Jesus' during his baptism at the end of Matthew 3. After a time of fasting, Jesus is challenged by Satan to demonstrate his divine power by turning stones into bread. Jesus refuses by referencing the Word of God. Then the devil takes Jesus to the top of the great temple and challenges him to demonstrate his omnipotent power by jumping off of the top of the building. Again Jesus refuses by answering with a quote from Scripture. The third time the devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain and challenges him to claim authority over everything he sees, simply by bowing before him. One last time Jesus refuses, and again points to God's Word. And finally the devil leaves, and angels come and minister to Jesus.

This event was not a chance encounter with the devil. This was God's plan. Our text tells us that Spirit of God “*led*” Jesus into the wilderness *for the purpose* of being tempted by the devil. Mark's gospel gives us a clearer picture of that in using the word “*drove*” rather than “*led*.” Jesus was God, but he was also human. Jesus faced these temptations right after his baptism *because* God used them to prepare Jesus for what was to come. These temptations are like a table of contents to all the decisions that he would make, all the miracles that he would perform, and all the words that he would speak. These temptations reveal Jesus' heart and his ministry to come. This testing was also a necessary step in Jesus' preparation for the future test that would come: the greatest test of crucifixion and death at on a cross at Calvary that lay before him.

Greek mythology speaks of Achilles, the mightiest of the Greeks who fought in the Trojan War, and who was the hero of Homer's story in the *Iliad*. When Achilles was an infant his mother dipped him in the river Styx, whose waters were sacred as it was believed that anything that touched the water became immortal and indestructible. Yet by holding onto his heel as she immersed him, his mother allowed that particular spot – his heel – to remain mortal and vulnerable. Ultimately Achilles was wounded in the heel with an arrow and he died of that wound. Thus we have the term today “Achilles heel” which is a reference to one's particular weakness or area of vulnerability. In our text we read that Satan went after what would have been Jesus' most weak or vulnerable spot, who, though being God Himself, came in the form of a man. In the same way, as we have all been created in the image of God, we too have those same weak spots, the same areas of vulnerability. The reality is that Satan is quick to notice and go after our Achilles heels too – and he does so regularly. If we are truly going to fulfill the command to follow Jesus through this life, we will face the same temptations Jesus faced.

1) When we follow Jesus we will be tempted *to not trust God*. “*And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But he answered, ‘It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’*” (Matthew 4:2-4). Satan's first strategy in attacking Jesus' Achilles heel was to go for the obvious: tempt Jesus with the *self-indulgence* of making bread from stones. Of course you could argue that Jesus had not eaten for 40 days; he was for sure starving! But this really wasn't about food. This is about trusting God for the provision of food. In the midst of agonizing hunger, the devil says: “Jesus, you don't need to put up with this hunger. You are the Son of God! You don't need to trust your Heavenly Father to take care of you. He hasn't fed you for 40 days ! Think of yourself Jesus. You have the power of God. Turn the stones to bread and fill your stomach!”

We are not unfamiliar with the temptation for self-indulgence. We think along these very same lines. We have to survive - and we also want our desires to be gratified, preferably, *instantly*. But none of us will ever be tempted to turn stones into bread. It's not something we can do, even if we wanted to. But I'm sure we've all been tempted to turn a Nanaimo bar into body fat or a sick day off from work into a day of recreation – or an unexpected financial gift into something we really want rather than we really need. Those are the real temptations of self-indulgence. The problem though is that when our worldly appetites are satisfied, we still have a gnawing emptiness in our souls. And so God allows temptation to enter our lives to remind us again that life is not just about bread. Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 5:6 when he said: “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*”

God will lead us to places where the evil one will tempt us in our trusting of God. And often in those difficult situations and trying circumstances the devil says to you: “You don't need to put up with this. You're justified in doing what you want to. God won't take of this, you need to do it. Yes this is difficult but God will understand.” But Jesus didn't go there. He renounced the terrible tyranny of self-indulgence and he refused to forsake the cross for doing things his own way. He knew that God is the one who provides us with everything that we need. In James 1:17 God's Word tells us that, “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*” And so Jesus responded to the devil's temptation by quoting the divine truth of trusting God's provision from the Word of God in Deuteronomy 8:3: “*Man shall not live by bread alone,*” he said “*but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*” Whenever we are tempted to not trust God, we need to trust in the provision of God promised us in God's Word.

2) When we follow Jesus will be tempted *to test God*. “*Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 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.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test’*” (Matthew 4:5-7). When we successfully resist the temptation of self-indulgence by trusting in the provision of spoken of in God's Word, we are often tempted to ask God to prove Himself.

The devil first begins by saying: "*If you are the Son of God*" and then tells Jesus to throw himself down the hundred feet to the temple floor because if Jesus is really who he says he is, God will save him: "Hey Jesus, just step off the ledge, and if God is really God, He will send angels to catch you." And to give that challenge a little more meat, notice that the devil uses Scripture to back it up his challenge. This is how the Devil sometimes tempts us too. We've heard or said things such as: "*A loving God would not allow pain or suffering or divorce or cancer into my life. A just God will punish those who are against me. A good God will bless me with what I want. A compassionate God will rescue me from my circumstances. A forgiving God knows I didn't mean to do what I did.*" Friends, we can always find a verse in the Bible to back up whatever we want to believe – if we are willing to make the deadly, fatal error of bending that belief around the corners of truth, to support what you want that belief to be.

The devil would love for us to do that because the nature of this temptation is *distraction*. Jesus has just began a three year journey that would lead him to a cross at Calvary. That was to be the purpose of his life. But the devil tried his best to get Jesus to fight all the "wrong" battles. The devil is saying to Jesus, "See if God will be with you in this little thing. Make God prove himself before you head towards the cross." Ultimately, jumping off the temple would be a good way of proving himself to himself - that as the Son of God, God is with him. Presumably, the successful test case would open the door for Jesus to saunter into Jerusalem and take control. But Jesus counters by quoting God's Word from Deuteronomy 6:16: "*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.*" What happened at Massah? The people tested God there by demanding that He give them water, demanding proof that God was with them (Exodus 17:1-3, 7). God refused to do so and Jesus did the same. He would go to Jerusalem in God's time and face its fury and trust that God will be with him without proof of God's power. Whenever we are tempted to make God prove His power of provision, we need to remember that He has already done so through the life and death of the risen Jesus Christ.

3) When we follow Jesus we will also be tempted *to worship another god*. "*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve"*" (Matthew 4:8-10). In the first temptation, the devil tempts Jesus to a self-indulgent use his own power. In the second temptation the devil tempts Jesus to test God and prove God's power. In the third temptation the devil says: "I offer you my power." The reality of this temptation begs to ask the question: Can Satan really give us anything? No. He owns nothing. If Satan owned anything, then God would not be God. But God is sovereign and He owns everything. Whatever power Satan exercises over anybody or anything – is because it has been given to him by God. The Bible tells us that that when believers live in ungodly ways, God even hands them over to Satan for him to deal with. Satan is simply a tool of God.

Satan offered Jesus everything in the world if only he would worship him. This temptation was not unique to Jesus. We are all tempted in this way. We are all constantly tempted to bow to and worship the gods of comfort and convenience and control and prosperity and possessions and position and opinion and rights and entitlement. In Matthew 16:26 Jesus asks his disciples: "*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?*" What does it profit us, if we are given something that is not of God? This last temptation is the least subtle of all. This temptation represents the goal of all temptations: *the worship of someone or something other than God*. This temptation is the mother of all temptations. And it comes in oh so many forms. A survey of readers in *Discipleship Journal* ranked areas of greatest spiritual temptation to Christians today: 1) Materialism; 2) Pride; 3) Self-centeredness; 4) Laziness; 5) Anger/Bitterness; 6) Sexual lust; 7) Envy; 8) Gluttony; and 9) Lying. And for those of us who think we have a pretty good handle on all of those temptations – number 10 would be *self-righteousness* – which simply is worshipping our own personal opinions rather than our most sovereign and holy God. This is a temptation that is well imbedded into all fallen human hearts. God knew that would be true, which is why the first of his Ten Commandments begins with the command: "*You shall have no other gods before me*" (Exodus 20:3).

Jesus gives us a solution to this particular temptation in Deuteronomy 6:13 of God's Word: "*You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.*" Oh that we might we embrace the reality that the call and priority of our hearts should be love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength – by worshipping God and God alone with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. God is our Lord Jesus, our Creator, our Provider, our Healer, our Righteousness, our Sanctifier, our Peace, our Shepherd, our Judge, our Strength, our Deliverer, our Savior, our Redeemer, our Shield, our Rock, our Counselor, our Righteousness, our Glory. Only God and God alone is worthy of our worship!

*Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!*
Psalm 96:1-9

The reality is that every temptation is designed to turn us away from Christ and cause us to worship satan. You and I go through this temptation on a daily, moment-by-moment basis because the devil is against God, against Jesus, against the Holy Spirit, against the church, and against us. And while it is true that Jesus did not give into temptation - we need to realize that you and I are not Jesus, and we most often do not respond like Jesus responded. The evil one knows our Achilles heel. He knows the things to say that cause us to not trust God and to test God and to worship another god. And though Jesus passed the test, we most often do not, because Jesus was sinless and the reality is – we are not.

Some years ago a London newspaper sought the help of its subscribers in addressing the problem of evil. Readers were invited to send in their responses to the question: "What is wrong with the world today?" The best response of all was also the briefest. It read: "Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G.K. Chesterton." Chesterton understood that the responsibility for the world's problems and the solutions to the pervasive problem of evil, are not to be found in any myth or human reasoning or belief system. Rather, the blame must be assigned much closer to home. Each of us must accept the fact that the face that looks back at us in the bathroom mirror every morning is our greatest problem in the world.

The truth is – temptation is *not* a sin. But yielding to temptation *is*. Sin is yielding to temptation and actually doing the will of the evil one himself, the devil. You see all temptation really is *the promise of a short cut to reach a desired goal*. Yet the reality is – is that sin never, ever makes good on its promises. A story is told of a construction foreman who went to his employer one day and said, "I've worked for you for many years, and I'm tired. I think I'll take my retirement and hang it up. It's been great working for you." His disappointed boss said: "I really hate to see you go. I was hoping you could work through just one more big project for me. Are you willing to do just one more?"

Reluctantly the builder agreed to build a home for some important client for his employer. It was a big, extravagant house on a lake, and the project required a lot of focused detailed work. But the builder's heart just really wasn't in it. He threw the house together in record time, by cutting corners on material and labor wherever he could. He saved his boss a lot of money, but it wasn't really his best work and he knew it. Imagine how he felt when he turned the keys over to the boss, and the boss gave the keys right back, and then pulled the title and deed to the property out of his briefcase and gave it to the builder and said: "This is my gift for you!" Thanks for all your good work over the years!" I would bet that the builder wished he hadn't cut so many corners and so many taken cheap, temporary short cuts just to get the job done well. It all ended up being his own personal loss.

Brothers and sisters, life is like that. Following Jesus is like that. We are the ones who become the product of our own integrity – or lack thereof – in following Jesus. We become exiles from innocence when we try to take a short cut to what God is truly calling us to in Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that the Greatest Commandment is to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. That is to be the central pursuit of our heart – and the victory we might fully know – in the face of the Greatest Temptations to not trust God or to test God or to worship someone or something else other than God.

We must resist temptation, but we must not be discouraged when we realize we are being tempted. *Remember that* when we surrender our heart and life to Jesus Christ is within us: *"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"* (1 Corinthians 3:16). *Remember that* the Bible calls the risen Jesus Christ the Word of God, and so we have the power to win the battle against temptation and sin in the written Word of God. Jesus himself used the Word of God to fight off the devil. *Remember that* in following our Lord, the shield of faith is also yours. Faith means that you trust in God, and in no one or anything else. In the words of Psalmist: *"You, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head"* (Psalm 3:3). *Remember that* you and I have an enemy. He knows our Achilles heel. The devil knows our greatest weaknesses and our greatest strengths, and he will use both to defeat you and I. He will come after us both as individuals and as a church.

God led, drove Jesus into the wilderness and it was there God empowered Jesus to resist temptation – by using the Word of God. Ephesians 6:17 tells us that the Word of God is *"the sword of the Spirit"* that has been given to us the fight *"against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places"* (Ephesians 6:12). In John 1:1 the word of God tells us Jesus is *"the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* In Revelation 12:10-11 we read: *"Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death."* Brothers and sisters *"by the blood of the Lamb"* – by the cross – Jesus disarmed, defeated, and destroyed sin, evil, death and the devil himself.

James 4:7 says: *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you."* When we follow Jesus through this life, we will face the same testing of temptations that Jesus faced. And like Jesus, the Spirit of God leads us, drives us into those testing of temptations to prepare us for the purpose and work he has for us while we are still here on earth. And when we are tested and tempted by the accuser of our souls - we must trust in God, and wait on God, and worship God – because Jesus has died in our place and he has paid the price of our sin, and he has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven– and someday He will return to take us home the eternal joy of his heavenly glory. In John 16:33 Jesus said: *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* Amen? Amen!