

Yield Not to Temptation

Matthew 4:1-11 Then the Spirit led Jesus up into the wilderness so that the devil might tempt him.

² After Jesus had fasted for forty days and forty nights, he was starving. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "Since you are God's Son, command these stones to become bread." ⁴ Jesus replied, "It's written, People won't live only by bread, but by every word spoken by God." ⁵ After that the devil brought him into the holy city and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, ⁶ "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down; for it is written, I will command my angels concerning you, and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone." ⁷ Jesus replied, "Again it's written, Don't test the Lord your God." ⁸ Then the devil brought him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ He said, "I'll give you all these if you bow down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus responded, "Go away, Satan, because it's written, You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him."

¹¹ The devil left him, and angels came and took care of him.

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It had been a while since I looked at the story of the temptation of Jesus. At first glance this is a story about a sort of contest between Satan and Jesus. Jesus wins, and that confirms that he's the Son of God and he's one with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Trinity. But the whole life of Jesus, his teachings, his compassion and love, the decisions he made and the things he did - all point to him being divine. A contest between God and the Devil seems like a no-brainer. If God doesn't win, then we're worshipping the wrong god. But, when the power is off and you're sort of cooped up with your thoughts, you have more time to mull the passage over and give it some deeper thought.

First of all, there's Satan. Actually, the word Satan only appears once in this passage. The term "devil" is used, coming from a Greek word in this text that literally means "slanderer or accuser." The word "tempter" is used, coming from the Greek word in this passage that means, of all things, "tempter." And in verse 10, we read the word Satan for the Greek word in that verse that means "advisory."

Back in the Old Testament, Satan (literally, "accuser") was a member of the heavenly court. By the time the New Testament texts were written, Satan seems to have shifted from divine employee to God's chief competitor.

I've realized that there is some danger in defining Satan too clearly. We tend to describe Satan as a being, a being that looks a lot like a human, except red, with two short horns and a barbed tail. It's fair to say that Satan **represents** the power of evil, **represents all** that opposes the will of God. But when we **exclusively** personify all evil as this one being, then we move the source of temptation from within us to external to us, and then we quickly move on to "the devil made me do it." This becomes an escape from personal responsibility. We are quick to try to put responsibility on someone else. Kids in the back seat shout, "Well, she hit me first!" Wives say, "He's mean to me." Husbands fire back, "She makes me so mad when she spends too much money. It's her fault!" Adam said, "It's not my fault, the woman gave it to me to eat!" And whether we say it or not, a lot of the time we act like "I'm not responsible because it was the devil that got me to do it!"

Let's take a moment to think about temptation. The ultimate truth is that temptation is internal. It cannot be forced on us externally. You can't tempt me with oatmeal. I don't like it. It makes me a little nauseous. It is no temptation. I **can** be tempted if you wave something in front of me that I want. But I already want it. You don't cause that. You might provide the opportunity.

You might suggest the idea. But my temptation is internal, not something that you somehow made me feel. Nonetheless, please don't offer me a second helping of cheesecake. I would be tempted.

What's more, Satan isn't always some other-world being. Remember that Jesus once said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Satan is whatever evil comes between us and God's will for our lives. Sometimes that's one of Jesus' closest followers like Peter. Sometimes that's you. Sometimes that's me.

Just as we can think of the term Satan too narrowly, as always being someone other than our self, so too, we can think of Son of God in terms that are too narrow. Yes, we proclaim that Jesus is the Christ, Son of the Father, holy and one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But the expression is used in other ways in scripture. In Psalm 2, verses 6 & 7, God says that the king of Israel is his son. In Hosea 11:1, the people of Israel are called the son of God. That same relationship is inferred in Deuteronomy 8:5. Psalm 82:6-7 says, I hereby declare, "You are gods, children of the Most High--all of you! ⁷ But you will die like mortals; you will fall down like any prince." And Jesus tells us in Luke 6:35, ". . .love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. If you do, you will have a great reward. You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for he is kind to ungrateful and wicked people."

The more I studied and thought about this passage, the less it seemed to be a contest between the evil Prince of Hell and the divinity of Jesus. For one thing, it doesn't seem plausible that you could tempt a good and powerful God to do evil. And the temptations listed? Turn stone to bread? Hardly a temptation for the creator of the entire universe. Jump from the roof of the temple so that angels will rescue you? It goes without saying that God can "rescue" God if you could imagine any circumstance where that would be needed. And bow down to Satan to have power over the nations of the earth? That would be a reduction in power. How is that a temptation? This isn't a story about tempting the divinity of Jesus. It's a story about tempting the humanity of Jesus.

In fact, only if this is about the tempting of the humanity of Jesus does it really have much relevance to us mortals. If it were a contest between divine and semi-divine beings with only one possible outcome, what relevance would it have for our lives?

The writer of the book of Hebrews says that, "we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) And Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, "No temptation has seized you that isn't common for people. But God is faithful. He won't allow you to be tempted beyond your abilities. Instead, with the temptation, God will also supply a way out so that you will be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13 CEB) This isn't what we want to hear! We want it to be the devil's fault! We want Jesus to be able to resist temptation because he's divine, not because humans can resist temptation!

So what are we to resist? What are these temptations? The first is about turning stones into bread. It refers to the time the Hebrews were in the wilderness of the Sinai peninsula. They were afraid they would starve. Even though God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt, they didn't trust God. And God provided manna for them to eat. Later on, Moses reminded them "³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deut. 8:3 NRS) This is the passage that Jesus quotes in today's text.

There are three issues here. One is a matter of trust in God. We are tempted to rely only on ourselves. We work hard at acquiring food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and amusement as if it

all depended on us. In our lack of trust, we stockpile these things, never being sure that we have enough, always afraid that we will run out, all because we have little or no trust that God will be involved in any way.

Second, Jesus is tempted to feed himself. The focus is too narrow. Later on Jesus will feed huge crowds, showing us that our concern and our efforts need to be less turned inward and more turned outward to the needs of others.

Third, we are reminded that there is more to life than self preservation. We are summoned to not only feed our bodies, and the empty stomachs of others, but also to feed our minds and our souls with study of the scriptures. We not only hunger for bread, but also for the bread of life the love and teachings of Christ.

The second temptation refers to another instance during the wandering of the Hebrews. They were thirsty and they said, “Is God with us or not? If God is with us, then produce water to prove it!” Water is produced, but again in Deuteronomy Moses reminds the people of this event and writes “¹⁶ Do not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. (Deut. 6:16 NRS) In today’s text the human temptation is to jump from a high spot on the temple to test if God will send angels to catch him. And Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy again, this time warning against testing God.

This is certainly a temptation for us. “Just help me pass this test, Lord, and I promise I’ll study harder next time.” Or we pray to be saved from some predicament. Then when we suffer whatever predicament we’re in, we think God failed the test. God doesn’t exist or God doesn’t care, because God didn’t do whatever we prayed for. We so often try to manipulate God. But God isn’t our celestial house boy, God isn’t our genie, bound to do our beck and call. Testing God’s reliability shows our lack of faith (trust). Don’t demand signs of favor – ask for faith.

This second temptation in today’s text also illustrates the misuse of scripture. Psalm 91:11-12 is misused. “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. ¹² On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.” The temptation is to take this scripture literally and use it to test God. There’s also the temptation of pride to think that not only do we know God’s promises, but also when, where, and how they will be fulfilled.

Also imbedded in this temptation is the desire to be a spectacle, to draw attention to ourselves, to be a celebrity – all with God’s help. Obviously, this runs counter to the virtue of humility.

Temptation number three faced by Jesus is idolatry. At the foot of Mount Sinai, the Hebrews grew tired of waiting for Moses to return from the mountain top. So they combined their gold jewelry, cast it into the form of a calf, and worshipped it. (Exodus 32:1-6) Later, in Deuteronomy Moses warned against this. (Deut. 6:13-14 NRS) “The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, ... ¹⁴ Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you.” And it is this passage that Jesus quotes. There is the temptation to serve other gods, but Jesus has undivided loyalty to God. This may be our most common temptation. It’s easy to idolize beauty, youth, certain life styles, fame, fortune, and various forms of entertainment to the point that they consume our time, our energy, and our money, and crowd God over into a small corner of our lives.

This third temptation also speaks to the temptation of political power. Lord Acton famously said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This certainly seems to almost always be the case on the world’s political arena. But it’s also all too often been true of the church. Over the centuries, the church has allied itself with various governments, lending power to them and

drawing power from them. We call this Christendom, a shortened form of Christian domination. But it always seems to end up to be the quest for ultimate domination of the Christian religion – not of Christ. We have always craved power. But Christ taught love, not power. Love is the only, so to speak, power that assumes the vulnerability of the lover. As Paul wrote, “Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things.” (1Co 13:7 CEB) That’s not a description of power in the usual sense.

These temptations faced by Jesus are temptations that have been faced all through the ages. Israel faced them, Jesus faced them, the church faces them. Evil would have us defined by selfishness, insincerity, pettiness, pride, fear, and a need to control. It’s a bit interesting to note that this story doesn’t explain evil or describe temptation in terms of bodily, especially sexual, disobedience. In our fascination with those things, we overlook the evil temptations that this text would have us recognize and resist. Temptation rules us when we are able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself.

We want our identity as Christians to protect us from evil and even from temptation. But Jesus was tempted. Jesus’ character and faith were tested and forged in the wilderness. And he didn’t yield to temptation. The same is true for us. When we find ourselves in the wilderness, attracted to wants and weaknesses that distance us from God, may we find inspiration and strength in the example that Jesus set for us. May we, too, yield not to temptation. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Trust in the wisdom of God
Even though it may seem foolish.
Doing that will move us into a life that IS salvation.