

The High Stakes of Temptation
Matthew 4:1-11
March 9, 2014

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do 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 splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Grace, mercy, and peace from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who was tempted as we are but without sinning.

In today's Gospel reading, we hear the familiar story of Jesus being tempted by Satan. Most of us have heard this story often enough to recite it from memory. And the very fact we know this story so well is why we need to take a good look at it. Often what is familiar loses its significance.

It's easy to read this account of our Savior's temptation and just pass on to what's next without really seeing how Christ's experience speaks to our experience. We can easily forget that, during his temptation, Jesus was just as human as you and me. He had to say no to Satan just as we have to say no to Satan. This was one of the times when Jesus didn't turn to his divine nature for help. So let's take a look at the six key points of Jesus' encounter with the devil.

First, **it was Spirit-led, marking it as a necessary chapter in his ministry.** This wasn't just a chance encounter between Jesus and Satan. Matthew tells us: *Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted* (Mt 4:1). It was fully within God's plan for Jesus to fast himself into physical exhaustion and then be tempted by the devil. We need to know why this had to be.

For Jesus to be our Savior, for Jesus to lead a perfect life in our place, he had to face all the trials and temptations we face – and he had to win. If Jesus had never been tempted, his humanity would have been a sham. How could we look to Jesus as our role model if he was never tempted as we are? But he was tempted. He was tempted specifically so he could say no. A good thing to keep in mind when you are tempted.

Our second point is: **Jesus was involved in a one-on-one struggle.** I said earlier, this was one of the times Jesus didn't use his divinity. He also didn't have any others around

to help him stay on the straight and narrow. Sometimes it helps to have people around. Sometimes that's enough for us to say no because being caught in a certain sin would be embarrassing. It's called shame, and there's not enough of it in our world today.

But Jesus didn't have anyone around to see if he sinned or not. It was just Jesus and Satan – and, of course, the Father, who's always watching. It's important to know this because quite often our sins are personal and may never show to the rest of the world. But sin is always sin, right and wrong are always right and wrong, and the Father is always watching. Jesus was in a one-on-one battle with Satan. No human audience. And he succeeded – because sin is sin.

The third point in our reading is: **Satan keyed in on Jesus' weaknesses, his strengths, his identity, and his goals.** Look how carefully Satan aimed his attack. Jesus had fasted 40 days. He was hungry and Satan knew it. So Satan leveled his first assault at Jesus' humanity. "Don't be hungry. Zap up some bread and be satisfied" (Mt 4:3). This appealed to both Jesus' weakness and his strength. Sure he was hungry. Sure he had the power to do something about it. But he said no because saying yes would have been outside God's will.

Satan also took a shot at Jesus' identity: *If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down* (Mt 4:6). It's all in that little word if. In that little two-letter challenge, Satan was just daring Jesus to prove who he was. But Jesus was secure in his identity. He knew who he was and he didn't need to prove it to Satan or anyone else. After all, what's the worst thing Satan could have done – claim Jesus wasn't really the Son of God. Not believing in God doesn't change the fact that God is God.

The devil also tempted Jesus to short-circuit God's plan to put everything under his feet. God allows the devil a good deal of freedom as he interacts with the world and the people in it. The Bible calls Satan the prince of the world. That must have given Satan the feeling he could appeal to Jesus with a shortcut to power. But Jesus couldn't be tempted with what was already his.

Our fourth point is: **These temptations carried high stakes and serious consequences.** What was really at stake in Christ's temptation? Nothing short of the salvation of all mankind. If Jesus would have succumbed to the pressures and temptations of the devil, our Savior would have been spoiled. The spotless sacrificial lamb, who was to carry our sins, would have been blemished.

We might read about this encounter with Satan and commend Jesus for standing up to him, but what happened during that temptation had implications that reached all the way to the core of God's plan of salvation. The condition of our eternal souls rested in the hands of a half-starved man, who was engaged in battle with the epitome of evil. The stakes and consequences were very high.

Point number five is: **Temptation was overcome with the Word of God.** Jesus knew who he was up against and he selected the proper weapon. The apostle Paul writes:

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). Jesus knew his adversary and he knew how to fight him.

Jesus could have flicked Satan off like you brush a fly off your arm. But he didn't. With his chosen defense, Jesus demonstrated the proper way to ward off the devil and his minions. Satan cannot stand in the presence of God's Word. The Bible tells us God's Word is sharper than a two-edged sword (Heb 4:12). Jesus used this sword of the Spirit of God to cut Satan to pieces.

Our last point is another thing that was at stake in this temptation: **Jesus' obedience to the cross**. Make no mistake, when Jesus was fending off the temptations of Satan he could see the cross in his future. Jesus knew where he was heading. He also knew one little slip and he could say good-bye to the pain and torture of his impending execution. But Jesus was obedient to his Father's will.

Look at the dilemma Jesus faced. Obeying his Father meant to willingly submit to unimaginable pain and agony. Disobeying his Father would take this suffering out of the picture. You can see how easy it would have been for Jesus to rationalize the commission of just one little sin? But he didn't. He knew what was at stake and he stuck to his mission.

These eleven verses contain a wealth of insight as to how our Savior acted and reacted during his temptation. But what do these eleven verses say to us? In this text, there are four important truths we can learn and apply when faced with temptations.

Truth number one: **For us, just like Jesus, temptation is a one-on-one affair**. In the book of James we learn: *Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed* (Jam 1:14). Temptation is a very personal thing. Its deepest root runs down to the very nucleus of your own evil desire.

If it weren't for our sinful nature and our evil desires, Satan would be powerless against us. Some years ago, when Flip Wilson said, "The devil made me do it," he was wrong. The devil can't make you do anything. The devil is just the best fisherman around. The devil tempts you by looking at where your evil desires would take you, and then he just throws out the proper bait. He doesn't make you take the bait. He just waits.

What does that mean? That means you need to take a good inventory of your own evil desires. You have to get very familiar with yourself so you know where your weak points are. Then you can structure your life so as to avoid anything, or any place, or any situation that would put you at risk of falling for Satan's bait. Satan wants to take you on one-on-one. Don't let him. Find someone you can trust and be accountable to. Let someone help you keep an eye on yourself.

That's the earthly side of warding off Satan. There's also a spiritual side. Have you ever heard the phrase, *the best defense is a good offense*? Bring the Word of God into your life,

not as a defensive weapon, but as an offensive weapon. Getting close to God means putting up a wall against Satan. The psalmist writes: *I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you* (Ps 119:11).

Remember, Satan cannot be in the presence of God's Word? If you fill your heart and mind with God's Word, Satan can't get in. Here's how Martin Luther described it. *When Satan comes knocking upon the door of my heart, and asks "Who lives here?" the dear Lord Jesus goes to the door and says, "Martin Luther used to live here but he has moved out. Now I live here." The devil, seeing the nail-prints in his hands and his pierced side, takes flight immediately.* So, truth number two is: **The Word of God is our offensive weapon in temptation.**

Truth number three is: **Temptations carry high stakes and serious consequences concerning our identity, mission, and relationships.** The way we handle temptations, whether we give in or resist, affects everything else in our lives. Caving in to temptations can destroy our identity by eroding our self-esteem. We can't help but lessen our opinion of ourselves when we know we've been unfaithful in standing up for what we know is right. It's hard to know exactly who you are when you have no self-respect.

It's also hard for us to carry out our mission, which is God's mission, when we are giving in to the temptations of life. In order to carry out our mission of spreading the Gospel message of Christ, we must keep our eyes on our Master. We can't be looking ahead to the Master if we're looking aside to temptation.

Succumbing to temptations can also destroy relationships. Sin always affects everything around it. When we give in to the lures of Satan, the world, and our own flesh, we weaken our relationships with others. Sin always acts to separate people.

Sin also weakens and can even destroy our relationship with our Savior. Jesus died to pay the price of our sin. But if we don't use that knowledge to avoid sin, if we, instead, use that knowledge to give us liberty to sin, we may do irreparable harm to our relationship with Jesus. We could even lose that relationship.

The last truth is our comfort in all temptations. This truth is Jesus knows what it is like to be tempted in every way. We don't have a Savior who can't identify with us. Our Savior loves us so much he came here to face what we face. He came here and defeated our temptations so he could take our weaknesses to the cross and redeem them, and us.

The last truth, and our comfort, is: **The good news of the Gospel.** Jesus took our sins on himself. He faced our enemy and beat him. Jesus now stands next to you. He holds your hand as you walk past temptations. Jesus gives you the power to face Satan and all he can throw at you. With Jesus at your side you can tell Satan to go back to hell where he belongs. You see, it's no longer you who lives in your heart, but Jesus.