

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Common Temptation 1*

To Be **Relevant**

July 9, 2023

Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)

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

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "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."

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also 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 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

We're in Matthew, Chapter Four, today. You could turn there with me if you like as we as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table together. Matthew, Chapter Four.

My preaching professor, Don Demaray, encouraged all his students to keep close track of the number of times they had spoken on different biblical books and texts and then refer to that list regularly as we planned new messages.

The reason is, just like everybody else, preachers are prone to return too often and too easily to pet passages and themes and topics, and doing that does not deliver to the church the "whole counsel of God," as we're called to do.

So, keeping track of what you preach makes one aware of, and can help one avoid, the ruts that certain books, verses and topics can become.

And, of course, that's not just true for preachers, but that's true in all of our devotional lives, too. We're all liable to dwell too much on just those passages and topics that interest us, so it's healthy and broadening to push ourselves beyond those.

Personally, I think that's really good advice, but I'm not following it today.

In fact, I'm speaking for three Sundays in a row from the book I've preached out of more than any other, and I'm using the exact same text for all three Sundays.

And it's not because I hit my head on Friday, and I'm whacked out.

It's because understanding this text is, I believe, critically important to any person's ability to live a victorious life following Jesus.

Satan's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness was his attempt to knock Jesus out of the fight in the first round, you might say.

We may think it strange that it was the Spirit that led Jesus into this situation, according to verse one there, but the reality is, Jesus came to earth to do just this: to battle the one John calls, "the prince of this world" for the soul of God's creation.

So, the Bible makes it crystal clear: we do have an enemy, just as Jesus did. There is an evil power at work in the world who is out to destroy us – to separate us from God eternally, and if we deny that or pooh-pooh it as unimportant, we have already lost the battle.

Imagine what would happen if President Zelensky simply chose to not believe that the Russian army exists. Ukraine would be overtaken in moments.

That's what happens to people who deny Satan's reality. Most of them think themselves quite sophisticated, but in reality, they're the walking dead.

They're done before they know it.

Jesus understood this and He embraced Satan's reality, so to follow Jesus means to do the same and to fight against him – to resist him as Jesus did – with all the spiritual tools available to us.

There in the wilderness, Satan hit Jesus with three temptations, all of which He successfully overcame.

This, by the way, reminds us that *to be tempted is not to sin.*

To give in to temptation and to do evil is to sin, but to experience temptation is not to sin.

We need to keep that straight, because the Church has often been guilty of assigning sin to those who are merely tempted.

Some guilt-obsessed believers put that burden and accusation on themselves. Many find it easy to put that on others – but neither is right.

Temptation is not sin.

Jesus experienced temptation, but He did not sin.

Thinkers through the ages have presented these verses in so many good ways, it would be presumptuous of me to imagine I could add to them.

But the comments on this passage from Dutch Catholic priest, Henri Nouwen, were, years ago, inspirational to me and so they do form the basis for what I share.

It's been my observation that, through the years, there have been "catch-words" that some in the Church grab hold of and, frankly, quickly overuse.

It's not that the words and concepts are necessarily bad or wrong. Sometimes they are, but not usually.

Usually, it's just that their overuse makes them appear faddish and then they get annoying and then

people intentionally forget about them, which is often unfortunate.

A few examples from just the last 25 years or so would be: *WWJD (what would Jesus do), purpose-driven, prayer of Jabez, emergent church.*

Words like: *authentic, missional, apostolic, seeker-sensitive.*

Expressions like: *lean into, or press into, doing life together, love on* – stuff like that.

It's not that those are insignificant concepts; they are not. Most of them anyway.

But when people wrap their whole lives around them, and they come up again and again – and again, they just become part of the wallpaper of the church. And frankly, most of them not only don't communicate to non-Christians – non-Christians find them bizarre.

Christian jargon – that's what they become.

In a recent blog post about this, Pastor Nadia Weber writes, tongue in cheek: "After a recent *quiet time*, where I was *bathing in prayer* those close to me, God *laid it on my heart* to *lean into* being a *transformational leader* by *loving on my blog readers* and offering them some *anointed* ideas from my *missional imagination.*"

Let me say, if you don't find that funny – bordering on ridiculous, then you're not engaged enough with people outside the Church.

But the point for today about that is that Satan's first temptation of Jesus was all about one of these sorts of trendy concepts: to be *relevant*.

Relevant. That was a super-popular Christian jargon word a decade ago. The FM church even had a plant in the Carolinas back then that was called, "Relevant Pointe." "Pointe" spelled with an "e."

I mean, "Oh, brother!"

We see here in Matthew that the temptation of relevance has existed for way longer than a decade.

The idea that **God** has to work to be relevant, and that His relevance to our culture is tied to what He or His people can **do** – even good things and good things for others: that's the temptation.

To turn those useless stones that were all around Jesus there in the wilderness into bread – something helpful, not only to Him, but to others, even to the animals that were there with him in that dusty, barren place: that would have made Jesus relevant to those around Him.

Do something actually *useful* and *helpful*. That will make people see value in Him (in us), and so they will see value in God. Right?

Is that so bad? To be relevant like that?

Many of us have been places, both nearby and far away, where we've seen hunger, and we wish we could offer the hungry more than our prayers or maybe some of our money.

Walking through city slums or poor country villages where children die of malnutrition and contaminated water, who of us could have withstood the temptation to be able to do what Satan tempted Jesus to do here?

I mean, really: isn't part of our call in following Jesus to feed the hungry and heal the broken? Aren't we supposed to be people who make a real, practical difference in the lives of others?

This was the temptation laid before Jesus: to use His power as the Son of God to prove Himself relevant to His world.

Satan said, "Give people what they want and they'll vote for you!"

No, wait. Sorry, that's the political application.

Satan said to Jesus, "Give people what they want, and then they'll listen to you – to your message!"

That's the spiritual application.

But Jesus would not do it.

He would not fall into that trap.

He did feed and He did heal from time to time, but He held to His primary mission to proclaim the word of God, and He did not make that secondary to any worldly demand for relevance.

"*One does not live by bread alone,*" Jesus answered Satan, "*but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*"

In other words, "God's word is all the relevance that's needed."

Our increasingly secular world announces more and more loudly, "We can take care of ourselves. We do not need God."

And in response to that, many Christ-followers have given themselves to becoming, in some way, relevant to our society, in sincere hope that the lost might see Jesus in their relevance and power.

With truly sincere desires to improve our world, more and more Christ-followers, it seems, are aspiring to competence – to personal power and means of influence – instead of aspiring to faith.

But here's the thing that Jesus knew and that we, His followers, must learn: beneath all of both the great needs and accomplishments of our world there runs a current of deep despair.

We aspire to efficiency and control, but those will never soothe a society filled with loneliness, isolation, emptiness and depression. We may well feed a world bread – which is a good and fine thing to do – but all the bread in the world will never satisfy the hungry soul.

The bread cannot become the main thing.

In his 1985 novel, *Less Than Zero*, Brent Ellis describes the moral and spiritual poverty of the children of the super-rich. They had the world at their feet, but still they longed for purpose and love.

You see, Jesus knew that bread, in any of its forms, does not meet the most important needs of our world.

Jesus knew that His mission was to be more than simply relevant, as the world defines it, and so He actually chose to be, from the world's perspective, completely *irrelevant* – which allowed Him to enter the deeper places in persons and offer them bread that lasts.

And Jesus calls His followers to do the same, to reject the temptation to use our power to be seen as relevant by our world.

In their conversation on the shore of Galilee, Jesus did not ask Peter, "So, how many people take you seriously these days? What are your three- and six-month goals? How much have you accomplished since I saw you last? Print out your stats. Let's see your results."

No, Jesus simply asked Peter three times, "*Do you love me?*"

Which is the question Jesus always asks, isn't it? "*Do you love me?* If so, then, "*Will you simply do as I ask you to do?*"

Because, you see, in the end, any good we do in our world will come, not from our own personal power and presumed relevance, but from our knowing and loving Jesus enough to do as He tell us – to keep in step with Him, no matter what the world does or thinks.

And in order to do that, we have to leave our pursuit of relevance – and the ways and the praise of this world – behind.

In 1985, after teaching for over 20 years at Notre Dame, Yale and Harvard, Henri Nouwen took the role of pastor of Daybreak, a home for men with developmental and intellectual disabilities.

What he quickly realized there was that none of his new parishioners either knew or cared about his credentials, his degrees, his books or lectures or travel or accomplishments.

All they cared about was, "Would he love them and be there for them?"

Losing all that had been so identifying to him was a painful process, but Nouwen admits that, "Really, it was there at Daybreak that I found the heart of following Jesus."

That's why Jesus' rejection of the temptation to be relevant was so important.

To feed people is fine – it is good, even.

But in the end, the good can't be allowed to take the place of the great, and the greatest thing any Christ-follower can do for someone else is to love them unconditionally, as Jesus loves.

That's what feeds people at the very deepest level.

That's the bread for which every soul searches.

That's what leads hungry people to God the Father, which is the great thing.

And we dare not give up the great for the good.

We all face the temptation, day by day, just as Jesus did, to be relevant, and so to be celebrated by our world.

But it's to the irrelevance of love that we're called.

Today's Church, this church, is full of people who've done good things for Christ: pursued good ideas, written good books, lived good lives, accomplished good things.

But here's the question with which we all have to wrestle: Have we done the good things we've done at

the expense of the great thing – the *great* thing: "to love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength – *and to love our neighbors as ourselves?*"¹

Will we reject the temptation of relevance for the sake of love?

God will help us do it. By the power of His spirit, He will not only help us overcome the temptation to relevance, He'll also fill us with love – His love – for Jesus and for others. He'll love through us.

But the choice to let Him do that is ours to make.

Will we reject the temptation to relevance?

Instead of the world's applause, will we pursue, as Max Lucado calls it, "the applause of Heaven"?

In order to follow Him, I think that's what Jesus wants to know from each of us today.

Prayer:

Jesus, you know how tempted we are to leverage our power in order to get things – even good things – done for you. To be seen as effective and efficient and helpful and respectable in the eyes of our world: it's a great temptation, especially as faith falls out of favor in our high-tech, scientifically-minded culture.

But that is not who You call us to be.

Holy Spirit, would You show us any place in us where we've given in to the temptation to be relevant to our culture – to seek its glory and praise, and would You turn us back to what You'd have us be?

Help us choose love over relevance, so that we might do the great thing of feeding a hungry world what it is truly hungry for: the love of God and the reality and purpose He brings to life. Amen.

Service of Holy Communion

The nature of the Lord's Table is that as we remember and honor Christ, He fills us anew with all we need to live lives that honor Him. It's not magic that happens here. It is the Spirit of God filling and empowering us to live as Christ – to overcome temptation, and to know His peace.

Closing Song: *I'd Rather Have Jesus*

Benediction:

May the Lord help us remember that that which is truly relevant is that which is eternal. May we all live day by day in that reality, overcoming the temptation of the power of this age, and so live lives after Christ – lives that always please, and point others faithfully to God the Father.

¹ Mark 12:30-31