

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Common Temptation 2*

To Be Spectacular

July 16, 2023

**Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)**

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

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

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

*<sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

*<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor.*

*<sup>9</sup> "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

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

*<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

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We are looking for a few weeks at Satan's temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4. You're welcome to turn there and follow along if you like: Matthew's gospel, Chapter Four.

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In light of my injury that I mentioned last Sunday, I just want you to know that I managed to cut our yard this week without passing out and hurting myself.

Vic Reasoner also told me a good joke about that sort of thing, about the pastor who cut himself shaving before church on Sunday morning, leaving a very visible slice.

And so, feeling conspicuous, he explained to the congregation that while shaving, he was thinking about the sermon and cut his face.

After church, there was a note in the offering that said:

"Dear pastor, next time, think about your face and cut the sermon."

In one of his books, Tom Wright tells the story of Jennifer.

Six months earlier, the political party Jennifer belonged to told her, to her surprise, that they wanted her to be their candidate for Parliament. She was overwhelmed at the request and the honor of potentially serving her people and, though she couldn't even imagine actually being elected, she focused her thoughts on being able to make things better for those she might represent.

Now, six months later, she could hardly believe it – she had won the election – and by quite a margin! She was happy, but exhausted, and she needed time to think. So, she went for a long hike in the woods.

In the quiet of the forest though, she was shocked at the voices she heard in her mind.

Voices that whispered, "Now, at last, you have the chance to make some real money. Lots of businesses will want you on their boards to lobby – to influence. And that's just the first step. You know, if you play your cards right and get to know the right people, you could go even further: fame, popularity, press conferences, TV appearances..."

She was truly appalled at the thoughts, but they continued to come: "Just think what you could do now. That guy in the party that did you wrong years ago, you could get rid of him. Now you're in charge of the game!"

Have you ever been in a place like Jennifer? Most of us have.

Even Jesus was.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was tempted like other humans in every possible way.<sup>1</sup> So we shouldn't be surprised that right after His baptism, when His sense of God's call and love was so powerfully confirmed, He would begin to hear the whispering voice of temptation.

And though the title of this section in most of our Bibles reads something like, "The Devil Tempts Jesus," and although it may be a bit uncomfortable for us to think about it like this, it's perhaps more accurate to say that this was God the Father's testing of Jesus, and He used Satan as His unwitting tool to accomplish it.

Since our culture tends to think of temptation as always having a negative connotation as simply an enticement to do evil, we tend to think of temptation that way.

Biblically though, the idea of tempting is larger than that. It involves the whole process of testing, and also the strengthening, refining, fortifying and improving that comes from it. And God is, if not the instigator, at least the governor of it all.

You see it back in the very beginning of Genesis 22, which says plainly, "**God tested Abraham,**" with regard to offering his long-wanted and only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. It doesn't get much more awful than that, and there, you see, God was behind it.

Now, we may not think that it is very fair of God to be involved in something like that with Abraham or Jesus or anyone else.

But as soon as we think that, we then have to ask, "So who defines our concept of fairness? Could my and your notion of fairness really surpass God's notion of fairness? What is our basis for suggesting that God might be unfair?"

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 4:15

You see where that line of thinking goes.

Because, after all, how is strength developed? In every case, isn't it through enduring and overcoming resistance?

And isn't that what God is about in our lives: making us, His Church, a holy bride for Jesus, His Son?

That's why the testing.

Of course, along with that, we should also remember that the same God who tests is the God who promises that He'll never give us more than we can handle. God knows our limitations.

And even more, He also promises that everything He allows into our lives He'll use for good in some way.

Those are all benefits of being a child of God.

So, as we consider that, all that's left for us to do is to believe Him and obediently trust Him, and that's where faith comes in.

You and I—and Jesus, here, for that matter—live by faith when we decide by experience and evidence that, in spite of the current circumstance, to trust God makes more sense than anything else. So, we approach all of life, and even times of testing, from that perspective.

That's what Jesus does here.

It's evident Jesus lived all of His life under Satan's attack. But here, there were three distinct temptations, all of which Jesus overcame.

How did He overcome them?

That would be something that's good to know, right?

How do we *pass the tests* and *not fall to temptation*?

*How did Jesus?*

As Pastor Dwight said to the children last week, Jesus did not rely on His own creativity or wit and cunning.

Instead, Jesus overcame the enemy by knowing *God's word*, and then answering the Devil's challenges directly with God's word.

And so, we are to strive to know the objective word of God so thoroughly and so well that it rises up naturally within us when we're challenged in faith.

We hear something and we know it's wrong— as Jennifer knew those thoughts she was having were wrong—because deep down, before those tempting thoughts ever come, we already know what's right.

You see, Jesus didn't have to take time and think and study and pray and wonder about what the devil was suggesting to Him.

Jesus knew that this color is white, so when Satan tried to tell Him it was green, Jesus knew immediately that was wrong.

Jesus already knew God's thoughts about the things Satan was saying, and so that's what naturally came out.

And you know, if God's Word came out of Jesus like that, God's Word can come out of us in just the same way.

That's one big reason why His word is such a gift to us, and also why knowing it is so important for enduring spiritual victory.

So—Jesus overcame with God's word – soundly hidden in His heart.

And then, as I just mentioned to the kids a few minutes ago, Jesus overcame temptation by simply commanding Satan to leave Him, which we can also do if we're in Christ.

Every person in Jesus has the *authority*, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, every believer has the *ability* to push the Devil back when he comes to tempt and accuse.

James tells us, "*Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you.*"<sup>2</sup>

Why? Because, "*Greater is He who is in you than He who is in the world.*"<sup>3</sup> That is the promise of God

We do not have to give in to the Devil's challenges any more than Jesus did.

By our knowing, trusting and declaring God's word, and by our firm resistance to Satan and standing our ground, Satan and all his strategies can be conquered. John tells us that when he writes, "*I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one.*"<sup>4</sup>

You know, I also think that Jesus defeated Satan, in part, by not entering into conversation or discussion or debate with him.

I think that's a big part of what took down Eve back in the garden; she engaged Satan in discussion. She thought about what he said, pondered and considered it.

That very thing is what's taking down lots of people today. It could have taken down Jennifer on her walk in the woods.

People like to think they're smart enough to go head-to-head in debate with the enemy, and they wind up buying into what he says just a little. And see, if you do that, that's when he has you.

That's part of what it means to "*give him a foothold,*" which the apostle Paul warns the Ephesian Christians against.<sup>5</sup>

Satan's a deceiver—a liar, and you can't enter into any sort of honest, real discussion and negotiation with a liar and ever expect to come out ahead.

That's why Jesus just answered the devil briefly, curtly and flatly with God's word. And if Jesus chose that route, then how much more should we!

Last week, we said the devil first tempted Jesus to seek relevance with his culture.

'Meet their needs, speak their language, look like them, talk like them, act like them, engage them on their terms, and then you can win them over. Then they'll listen to you and believe you.'

That was the devil's message. But Jesus knew better. He knew the fickleness of humanity and that people will not be swayed to faith by either a meal or a "heal," which is why He told the devil, "*God says man does not live by bread alone.*"

There's far more to true faith than mere relevance.

<sup>2</sup> James 4:7

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:4

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:13b

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:27

So, the devil moved on, from the temptation to be *relevant* to the temptation to be *spectacular*.

Instead of just a quiet little “stones to bread” miracle, Satan now suggests Jesus do something far more public, more visible, more extravagant.

Verse five tells us the devil took Jesus to Jerusalem, had him stand at the highest point of the temple, and said to Him, “*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it has been written, “He will command his angels concerning you and they will lift you up in their hands so you will not strike your foot against a stone.”*”

A few things to note.

First, Satan attacks Jesus, for the second time, at the point of His identity.

“*If you are the Son of God,*” he says.

Wow, does Satan know how to get to us or what? He attacks at the most important, meaningful point in our lives – the core of our identity.

“If you really are the Son of God...”

“If you really are a Christian...”

“If you are truly a *good* mother or father...”

“If you are as holy as you say you are...”

“If you are so honest...”

“If you are a true professional...”

“If you really care about your company or your students or your family or your spouse, then you should...”

You see, those get our attention, don’t they, because they’re places in which we take confidence, until someone questions us there. That can put us on edge – on the defensive. It can rattle our confidence when something we thought we knew is called into question.

That’s exactly what Satan intends to do. But He did not succeed with Jesus, because Jesus knew, without a shadow of doubt, who He was.

You see, knowing who we are, not just as followers of Christ and so sons and daughters of God, but also as husbands, wives, persons of integrity and kindness, followers of truth, believers of Scripture, (you can fill in here with any other noble identifiers) ... Knowing who we are is so, so important in defeating temptation, because when we know who we are, we have no reason to prove who we are to anyone else.

That’s what both of Satan’s first temptations were about, calling into question Jesus’ identity and pushing Jesus to prove it.

But this *second* temptation not only involves God the Father directly in that proving, it also comes with a new twist: Biblical support - a quotation from Psalm 91.<sup>6</sup>

Satan uses the exact same turn of phrase here that Jesus used in His defense against the first temptation. In Greek it’s one word, *gegraptai*, translated in English, “it has been written.”

Here is a great illustration of the subtle deception that characterizes Satan: misusing Scripture to draw a

conclusion that is completely unbiblical. The devil pioneered this tactic, but it’s used by many today.

He suggested that Jesus should prove his identity through performing a stunt to impress the masses.

Satan’s message was that it would be so impressive – so spectacular – that, again, the people would have to listen to Him. A fast track to success – to getting His way and fulfilling His purpose.

This was the way of false messiahs.

Theudas was a Jewish rebel of the first century who promised to split the Jordan in two.

Acts 21 tells of some Egyptian who started a revolt and claimed he would flatten the walls of Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

Then there was the fellow that an apocryphal book tells us about: Simon Magus, who promised that he’d fly through the air, and who, by the way, died trying.<sup>8</sup>

These guys claimed to be saviors, and offered to do spectacular things that they, in truth, could not accomplish.

But Jesus could do whatever he chose in order to prove who He was and that He had God’s approval. So why not?

Because Jesus already knew He had God’s approval, so some stunt like that would only have amounted to testing God.

And Jesus knew never to do that. That’s why He answered the seduction attempt with Deuteronomy 6:16 – a passage that speaks about ancient Israel’s doubting God’s provision of water back in Exodus 17:7.

It was a time God had reprimanded them because they tested the Lord by saying, in essence, “Is the Lord with us or not? If so, He should give us water!”

You see, trying to force God to reveal himself by some spectacular act, that’s not the language of faith. That’s the language of impatience and unbelief.

That’s why, later in Jesus’ ministry, he refused the Pharisees’ demand for signs as proof of His messiahship. He knew that God will not be manipulated.

God reveals Himself in His own time, and in a manner that pleases Him.

Which means, then, that the way of God’s Servant must be the way of plain, simple obedience to whatever God chooses. No good will ever come from seeing how far we can push God by deliberately and recklessly putting ourselves into a threatening situation and then expecting God to rescue us from it.

We cannot simply do as we please and still expect God to take care of us. To presume upon divine protection when being guided by human self-interest is the height of arrogance.

Now, at times, God does expect us to take risks in order to be true to Him, but always at His direction and never to enhance our own prestige.

The experiences of the prophets of old show us the risks God asks that we take at times, but they also remind us that those risks for not often lead to evident, earthly success.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 91:11-12

<sup>7</sup> Acts 21:38

<sup>8</sup> Acts of Peter and Paul

Frankly, more often than not, they lead to earthly suffering.

Jesus knew that, but He also knew the long-term result was well worth it.

In the end, Jesus understood that any faith that's dependent on signs and wonders is not real faith. If faith cannot believe without spectacular sights, it is not faith at all. It's just doubt looking for proof in the wrong place, and no matter how spectacular a thing we accomplish or witness, it will never be enough.

It's like trying to quench thirst with salt water: no matter how much we drink, more will be required.

God's power, in any of its forms, including His power to rescue, is not something to be played with, or for us to brazenly put on display.

It's just something to be quietly trusted day by day.

Our enemy tempts us to think differently, to think that God can be manipulated so that we can get what we want, so we can bolster our own egos and impress others by doing even spectacular things and in doing so, convince them to do what we want.

And supposedly all for God's glory and the greater good, of course.

But as Jesus well understood, that is never pleasing to God.

I wonder if Jennifer understood that there in the woods.

You might be wondering what happened to her, how her political career went. Did she stay true to what she knew was right, or did she listen to the voice and use her position for her own glory?

How did she respond to that temptation?  
We're never told.

But you know, what's really important is how *we* respond to temptation.

Do you struggle with the temptation to do the spectacular? Even in the name of evangelism or ministry or witness, to put God and His power, you might say, "on display"?

Oh friend, be careful there. Watch, watch, watch your motive. Are you out for God or out for self, reputation, and the way you appear to others? Are you working for God's glory or trying to use Him to enhance your own?

Maybe that's not the issue for you. Maybe you find the tempter attacking or accusing you in terms of your *identity*. If you are *really* \_\_\_\_\_, then you would \_\_\_\_\_?"

Do you know who you are in Christ, or do you feel the need to constantly try to prove it?

If you're struggling with temptation today, if you feel the weight of testing in your life, maybe in one of these ways or maybe in some other way, would you be willing just to say to the Lord, "Lord, I need Your help to overcome this in my life. I want to be found worthy and made holy, but the test is hard. I need Your Holy Spirit to help me."

If that's where you are, just admit that to God today. Invite Him into your struggle and then watch and listen for His voice. He'll lead you out of the forest, out of the wilderness of temptation.

Closing Prayer:

Lord, you know the temptations we all face. Some are common to us all, like these that Jesus faced, but others the enemy seems to personalize just for us. He special-orders things that hit us right at our weakest point.

But, Father, you know all this already. You know where we're weak, so in times of testing especially, we appeal to You. We invite You, we ask You, to fill us with Your Spirit and strengthen us with Your word that we might stand against the temptations and pass the tests, so that where we are now weak, in and because of You we can be strong, pure, holy and wholly yours, we pray. In Christ's name, Amen.

Closing Song: *Lead on, O King Eternal*

Benediction:

If you don't know Jesus today, you can know Him. You can be forgiven of your sins and begin a relationship with Him that restores your relationship with the God who made you. So, if you don't know Jesus today, I'd encourage you — urge you — to talk to someone here today who does know Him, and let them pray with you and begin that relationship

For all here in Jesus, may the Lord give us confidence in our identity in Him, the faith to always believe Him with or without seeing the spectacular, and the assurance that we are His and are deeply loved.