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Sermon Series: *Common Temptation 3*

To Be Powerful

July 23, 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.

Let's turn, one more time, to Matthew 4, the first eleven verses. Matthew, Chapter 4.

Your Bible ought to just fall open to that place, since this is the third week in a row we've been there. I warned you about that three weeks ago: that we were looking at each of the temptations, or as we said last week, the account of *God's testing* of Jesus. We said that's a better way to consider, not just this event, but events like this in our lives — because *testing* is more comprehensive and serves a greater purpose.

Testing is more than temptation — more than just the enticement to do evil. Testing is actually how God strengthens and purifies His people.

Sometimes God uses the devil in the process, but just the same, God superintends it and is always ready to help, ready to empower us to overcome, ready to rescue us, and always hoping that we pass by choosing His will and way.¹

Every test brings us to a point of decision, to a fork in the road, which means — and this was so encouraging to me to realize — every test we encounter offers us as much a chance to rise as it does a chance to fall.

Every test brings a new opportunity to grow and develop and advance in our journey of purity and godliness, you see?

That's why James writes that Christ-followers should, "*Consider it pure joy whenever we face trials of many kinds, because,*" he says, "*the testing of your faith produces perseverance.*"²

You say, "Joy? Ah, I don't know about that. That seems over the top."

But no, it isn't, because you see, every test is an opportunity for great good.

And since God lets nothing reach us except that which He knows we can handle, every test can, by the Spirit's help, deepen our faith and trust in Christ.

Tests are not always pleasant. I don't have to tell you that. Sometimes they cause great anguish.

But anyone who knows anything about muscles will tell you that it always takes some pain in order for strength to increase.

The whole, "no pain, no gain" thing — that's not just some trite saying. It's true in every part of life, including faith, and it's true even in Jesus' life — as we see here.

His time in the wilderness was no desert vacation.

So, the take-away of this little "sermon within a sermon" is that, instead of dreading them, if we'll embrace the tests that come along with a confidence in God and His power and care for us, we will not only pass the tests, but we'll come out stronger in conviction and trust.

That's just the way God works in these sorts of matters. Jesus understood this. He did not always relish the process of testing, but He did embrace it, and He was strengthened through it.

The first two temptations were different in nuance as related to Jesus' life purpose. We said the first was the temptation to be *relevant* and the second was to be *spectacular*.

Still, they were essentially the same in nature. Satan's challenge — his line of attacking Jesus — all along was one of mastery. "Who will be your master? Who's will will you do?"

Satan's strategy was to plant seeds of doubt into Jesus' confidence in God and in God's ways and plans.

You see, just before this, at Jesus' baptism, God the Father audibly declared His love for, and His relationship and pleasure with, Jesus.

Now, that is the very relationship that Satan attacks, over and over, by saying, "If you are the Son of God," then prove it. Or, then force God, Your supposedly "loving Father" to prove it. Force Him to prove He loves you.

And then Satan, so brilliantly devious, added, "But not just for your own peace of mind, Jesus; you see it could also be good for your mission, because whatever you do or God does in response, that will enhance your standing with the crowds."

¹ 1 Corinthians 10:13

² James 1:2-3 (NIV)

“Turn stones into bread – give the people what they want. Establish yourself as *relevant* to the crowd, and that will prove what you say.”

“Jump off this precipice and let God rescue you. Do something *spectacular*, and that will prove what you say.”

But Jesus saw through both of those temptations and overcame them by answering the devil with the word of God that He knew so well.

So, at this point, I’d imagine that Satan is getting irritated.

Satan is not accustomed to losing, you know. I mean, just look at the state of our world. Satan has won here through the ages far more than he’s lost.

But here, in the wilderness with Jesus, he’s 0 for 2 so far. So, he now changes his approach.

Throwing all semblance of subtlety out the window, Satan goes for broke, un.masks himself entirely and, laying it all out on the table, offers Jesus all he has.

Verse 8 there, “*Again, the devil took Him,*” just like the second temptation, in which he took Jesus to the high point of the temple in Jerusalem.

We don’t know if this is a vision or if there was some actual physical movement involved – like the *transporter* in Star Trek, but either way, “*the devil took Jesus 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.’*”

You know, some people will do absolutely anything to stay in power, won’t they?

That is power’s wild allure.

We see it in politics, in business, in families, and sometimes, tragically, in the Church.

The appeal, the draw of the power that comes from being in charge: it drives people to lie, cheat, steal, even to kill.

They’ll try anything; they’ll promise anything; they’ll give everything, just so they can keep the power they have.

That’s when you know, by the way, that your power, or your position, or your title, has become an idol to you: when you’ll do anything, even that which you know is wrong, to keep hold of it.

Satan does that right here.

Now, Satan has no eternity – we know that. Satan is a “dead man walking,” if you will. You can read about his end in Revelation 20.

But Satan does have today – and He has the world today.

According to Paul in Ephesians, he’s “*the prince of the power of the air,*”³ which means that he does have a degree of power in our world, and he knew that if he could get Jesus to fall, he could keep hold of that power even longer.

So, he pulls out all the stops and offers Jesus all he had to offer: authority over the world, vice-regent beneath him, if Jesus would bow down and worship him.

On one hand, it’s ironic – and somewhat comical – to think that we have a “prince” offering here to give authority to the One who was born to be King.

But that is what Satan does – even to us. He offers us a trade: he’ll give us the temporary if we’ll give him our eternal. Temporary pleasures, satisfactions, happiness: he offers us the fulfillment of momentary urges, if we will give Him things eternal – peace, contentment, joy, purpose, and even relationship.

He offers us the temporary because that is all he has to offer, and he hopes we’ll be so drawn in by the lure of the now that we will mindlessly trade the certainty of the eternal for it.

It’s a terribly crummy deal, when you stop to think about it.

But that’s just what Satan does *not* want us to do: stop and think about it.

He wants us to act right now: to act on emotion, on passion, on our lusts that can still rise up and capture our better thoughts.

And toward that end, he suggests all sorts of false deadlines and limitations – just like those online and on TV today who try to sell us something.

Do it now. The offer is passing by. You have to grab it while you can.

More often than not – not always, but more often than not, when we feel that sort of urgency to do something we’re not entirely sure is even right, that’s probably the devil.

You might be being tempted.

In the same vein as Jeff Foxworthy’s redneck jokes: if you hear a little voice in your ear that is saying, “Ah, the Bible doesn’t really mean that,” you might be being tempted.

If the thought crosses your mind, “Does God really care that much about this little sin?” you might be being tempted.

If you think the heat of hell might not be so bad, since you spent last week in Phoenix, you might be being tempted.

That’s how he works. And Satan tried all that on Jesus.

He said, “Listen, all the suffering that You know is coming over the next few years: why put Yourself through that? I can make your life far better!”

“Give up on eternity. Choose the now!”

“Do what you want to do!”

“Choose power over impotence.”

“Choose authority over servitude.”

“And make your choice now!”

That was the devil’s final pitch to Jesus. Just as it was his pitch to Eve and to Adam: “You can be like God!”

Just as it was his pitch to the escaped nation of Israel in the wilderness: “You can’t trust God – those nations will crush you if you try to do what He says.”

³ Ephesians 2:2 (NKJV)

But, praise the Lord, the *difference* is that *Jesus overcame the devil's lie—for a third time.*

Verse 10, "*Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" And so, the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*"

You see, Jesus is the living counterpoint to Israel. He's the reversal of Israel's disobedience in the wilderness.

Jesus crossed the sea of baptism, spent 40 years in 40 days, and in His victory, became the last of the true Israelites—the One who will accomplish what God wanted the nation to do.

But even more than that, Jesus is the living counterpoint to Adam and Eve. They gave in to the temptation to be like God: to call the shots for their own lives.

Jesus, instead, chose to let God be God and to let Him call the shots.

Israel wanted to be her own master.

Adam and Eve wanted to be their own masters.

Jesus, however, affirmed that *God the Father* would be His master, and in doing so, He overcame the devil's temptation and passed the test.

Just a few chapters later in Matthew 12, Jesus tells the Pharisees, "*No one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his goods without first tying up the strong man.*"⁴

That's exactly what Jesus does here. By overcoming the temptations that Adam and Eve, and then Israel, nationally, could not, Jesus entered the house of the devil, the strong man, and tied him up.

And so, we—all who receive Jesus and follow Him with our lives—are the goods that Jesus has plundered.

You see, we are all born under Satan's domain.

But because Jesus overcame him, if we trust in Jesus, we are freed. Jesus frees the captives.

But let me say, the devil does not give in easily.

The same pitch the devil has used throughout time, he still uses on Christ-followers today.

And in what he says and does, he is not simply trying to get us to commit this or that sin. He's out for more than that.

He's trying to push us off the course we've chosen of obeying God and living a life of service to Him.

In choosing Jesus, we put ourselves on God's path, and the enemy, since he wants our destruction, tries at every turn to push us off.

Now, if we're in Christ, the devil has no power over us except that which we give him. But just the same, he's always trying, suggesting, tempting, hoping to push us off the path of God.

Don't let him push you off.

The temptation to be our own masters and to grasp power for ourselves: overcoming that is the key to

staying on the path and following Jesus all the way into eternity.

Let me give you two closing examples of this.

The first comes from the hymn-like words of the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the Philippians, "*Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be held to, rather He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant.*"⁵

Jesus, the very Son of God, chose to let God be God and to let God order His life on earth.

Was Paul speaking here of this very instance of Jesus overcoming the devil's temptation? We can't know for sure, but to follow Jesus means doing the same: saying with firmest and strongest resolution, "No!" to the temptation for the power that comes from being our own masters and instead leaving that in the hands of God the Father.

And then, one last word about this from Jesus Himself. This an observation from Henri Nouwen.

After the cross, after His resurrection, and just before He was taken back to Heaven, in what we call Peter's reinstatement, Jesus says to Peter, "*When you were young, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.*"⁶

On the surface of it, this seems to be about aging in a broken world, right?

When we're younger, we're physically and mentally able to do as we please and go where we want, but as we age, we wind up depending on others for even the simplest of things.

And while that may be true, that is not what Jesus is talking about here.

What Jesus is talking about here is actually Christian maturity: that to follow in the steps of Jesus means to come to the point where we will willingly be led to places we may not particularly want to go.

Consider the context: Jesus tells Peter this right after He commissions Peter to care for His sheep. It's as if Jesus says to Peter, "and this is part of the job, Peter. This is what it means to be a mature and complete servant. This is part of what it means to really follow me."

To stretch out your arms and be led to a destination not of your choosing: to a cross, for example.

But just the same, to be led there, to a place of powerlessness, by the will of the Master.

Now, this is, in no way, about some emotional or mental weakness where we become just passive victims of the world around us. To be powerless and humble in spirit is not to be spineless and allow others to make decisions for us.

Not at all.

⁴ Matthew 12:29

⁵ Philippians 2:6-7

⁶ John 21:18

What this is about is letting God wield the power such that any power we might want to grasp is given up in deference to love and service.

Powerless and humble in spirit means that we are so deeply in love with Jesus that we'll stretch out our arms and go with Him anywhere He leads us, trusting that we will, with Him, find life – and even abundant life – there, no matter where the “there” is.

For our own good, for the good of the world, and for the glory of God, that is the path that all followers of Jesus are to walk.

The tempter wants nothing more than to push us off that path.

So again, please – follow Jesus' example in this and don't let the enemy push you off that path.

Now, if he *has* pushed you off that path at some point or another, you can correct that today. Just admit it, repent of it, and jump back on as fast as you can.

Because, for all followers of Jesus:

to push away the temptation of power,
to push away the temptation to be our own masters,
to *get* on and *stay* on the path of God for our
lives,
and to pray, ourselves, the words of Jesus:
“Father, not my will, but yours be done...”

For us to do that, you see, that is the hope of our world.

Are you ready to follow Jesus like this?

God hopes we all are – and will help us to do so victoriously.

Closing Song: *Anywhere with Jesus*, vv. 1-2

Benediction:

These words from our text are worth hearing for three weeks, if, for no other reason, they must be Jesus' account of what happened, since no one else was there. It was just Satan and Jesus, and Satan is not going to report his defeat.

May we see the instances of temptation in our lives for what they really are:

opportunities for new spiritual strength and growth,
opportunities to receive new power and
encouragement from God the Father,
opportunities to choose, anew, God's path,
and in doing so, opportunities to both please God's
heart and to change our world.

⁷ Luke 7:22-42