

“Temptation”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Matthew 4:1-11

February 26, 2023

This morning is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a 40-day journey between Ash Wednesday which we remembered last week and Easter Sunday which we will celebrate on April 9th. Lent is a time of remembrance and repentance. We’re called to remember that, were it not for the intervention of Jesus Christ, we would, at the end our lives, return to ashes, never to live again. We’re also called to remember that our salvation through Jesus Christ came at a great cost to our Lord. His body was tortured and He hung on a cross in order to save us from eternal death. In response to this amazingly costly salvation, we Christians use Lent as a season to examine our lives and reorient ourselves back to the way of Jesus, our Lord. We do this through confession of sin and through repentance. The truth of the matter is, we’re all sinners. You and I both fall short of the Glory of God. But here’s the thing. It isn’t the case for any of us that we wake up in the morning and think, “Gee, now how am I going to offend God today? I wonder what I can do to really test His patience.”

We don’t do that. Well, I hope we don’t do that. Yet nevertheless, during the course of our day, we’ll do something that we ought not do. Maybe we’re envious when we see an especially nice car. Perhaps we look on someone with lustful thoughts? Maybe we tell a lie in order to get our way. But how did we get there? As I said, none of us set out to do wrong. The fact of the matter is that whenever we lapse into sin, the entry point is always temptation.

When I think of temptation, my mind races to an unusual image. A glowing red neon sign which announces that which makes me smile even now. “HOT DOUGHNUTS NOW” it says, beckoning me off East Franklin Avenue in Gastonia into our local Krispy Kreme for many, many unneeded calories, carbs and sugars. Yet there I am in that drive-through line more often than I’d like to admit. Temptations strikes and I, too often, yield.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. One of the great blessings available to us is our knowledge that our Savior has shown us that overcoming temptation is, in fact, possible. Temptation is part of the Christian life, so we look to Jesus’s Temptation in the Dessert to see some of the ways it’ll appear and the means and methods by which we can avoid its icy grip.

Hear now the Word of our Lord recorded in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses one through eleven: *“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, He was hungry. And the tempter came and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’ But He answered, ‘It is written Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ Then the devil took Him to the holy city and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to Him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written He will command His angels concerning You’ and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike Your foot against a stone.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Again it is written, ‘You shall 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 glory. And He said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if You will fall down and worship me.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Be gone, Satan! For it is written ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.’ Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to Him.”* This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Before we start examining the actual text of this passage, a few things need to be said about its location within the overall Gospel of Matthew because its location reveals much about when and where temptation will strike most prominently in our lives. Jesus is sent out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the Devil immediately following His Baptism. If we look back just one verse into the end of chapter three, what we find is Jesus emerging from the waters of the Jordan – *“And when Jesus was baptized, immediately He went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on Him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’”* With the temptation coming right on the heels of this glorious moment in which God’s voice intruded into the world, announcing the goodness of His Son, Jesus, we must notice a couple of things.

First, temptation often strikes following a spiritual high. This may surprise us. Oftentimes we think that it is only when we’re down and out, so to speak, that temptation will interject itself into our world. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, time and time again, what we see is that the greatest lapses back into sin come

on the heels of a spiritual breakthrough. Perhaps we puff up with pride in those moments and, as I said last week quoting Proverbs 16:18 – *“Pride comes before destruction.”*

Secondly, that just because we’re growing in our relationship with Jesus Christ does not mean that we will avoid being tempted. Jesus was, after all, led into the Wilderness to be tempted. Now, this is an important thing to note. Jesus will not ever lead us into destruction, but, sometimes, we will be tested. Great spiritual growth frequently comes through making it through a difficult season of tempting. As we emerge from it, we become spiritually stronger. Thomas Malthus, an 18th century English cleric and philosopher once wrote – *“The ordeal of virtue is to resist all temptation to evil.”* What Malthus means is that if one is going to be a virtuous Christian, if one is going to be Christian, we must endure the temptations that we’ll face precisely because we are striving to do God’s Will. Because you see, it’s what immediately follows the temptation that proves the point. Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness is immediately preceded by the beginning of His earthly ministry in the Gospel of Matthew. Just prior to beginning His ministry, Jesus is tempted by the Devil. And it only makes sense? It is precisely because of what Jesus is capable of doing that the Devil comes to Him. After all, why would Satan waste the effort of tempting someone who isn’t going to do anything to thwart his plans?

In my years of Christian ministry, I have seen scores of people encounter great tests just as they stood on the precipice of going something for Jesus Christ. And again, contextually, it only makes sense to me. Just like with Jesus, the Devil knows the feats in Christ we’re capable of and it is at the moment when we’re about to launch into those things that He will tempt us. He will try to lead us away from the pathway Jesus has set us on. Temptation can strike at any time. Immediately following a spiritual high, as we walk with Jesus and it will certainly come as we stand poised to do great things for the Lord.

So, we thank God for what Jesus was able to do there in the wilderness. There, in the wilderness, famished and alone, Jesus withstands no less than three powerful inducements to stray away from the path His Father set Him on. And again, in these three temptations, we see three very common means by which we, too, are led away from God. Remember, Jesus has been fasting for 40 days. Although Jesus is fully God, He is also fully man and so to go so long without sustenance would make Him exceedingly hungry. The Devil, knowing this, suggests, *“If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* Hungry and alone, Jesus is tempted with immediate physical gratification of a legitimate need but at the cost of not doing His Father’s will. Oh, how easy the path of least resistance always appears!

I can so easily recall the days before the internet, I know some of you might not believe such a time existed but, let me assure you, it did and, in some ways, life sure has been made easier. Just a few weeks back, I needed to get a new social security card. Now, just 10 years back, achieving such a thing would’ve required at least a half-day of traveling, waiting in lines and filling out forms. And, really, who in their right mind wants to spend a day at a governmental office doing that? With the internet though, I was able to verify my identity, order and pay for a new card to be sent to my home. So, in some ways, it’s really a good thing.

But in others, it has created more havoc. Take, for example, a recent study by the folks at Google who showed us that most of us get really annoyed when an internet page won’t load within a half-second. We are, to be sure, becoming more and more impatient through technology’s ability to tempt us with instant gratification.

At heart, the Christian life is quite far afield from the realm of instant gratification. In some ways, our lives in Christ are spent denying ourselves the quick fixes of the world in order to prepare ourselves for the joy of eternity in the Kingdom with Jesus Christ. We labor now, we forgo things now, because we know that what awaits us is a far greater blessing.

I was just talking with my kids about this the other day. That the best things in life take time and effort. It’s just the way things are. Take, for example, the closing of the Toys ‘R Us. With the advancement of internet shopping, there just wasn’t room in the market for those large stores packed to the gills with all sorts of toys. Now, I just click on Amazon, type in the toy I want and boom, it arrives at my doorstep, usually within a day or two. Fast and easy. But what did we lose? Well, I don’t know about you, but for myself and my kids, the joy of the Toys R Us was the joy of finding some new toy or game you didn’t even know existed. Sure, it meant having to get into a car, wait in lines and walk around a bit, but it always resulted in unexpected fun.

So too is it with the Christian life. When we choose immediate gratification, we often miss out on the best things life has to offer. 1st Peter chapter 1 puts it this way – *“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the*

revelation of Jesus Christ.” The Christian life is spent in toil and labor so that when Jesus arrives, we will hear those words our hearts long to hear more than any others. *‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’*”

The second temptation endured by Jesus Christ relates directly to His special relationship with God. *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You’ and ‘On their hands they will bear You up, lest You strike your foot against a stone.’”* This temptation is the appeal to a special relationship with God to do something God would not have you do. Sound familiar?

Let me put it a different, more culturally resonant manner. “It’s better to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission.” It’s a funny phrase and does bear a degree of truth in it but it can hardly be considered a Christian’s go-to move, so to speak.

What Satan asks Jesus to do is to test the nature of His relationship with God. Temptation can appear at our doorstep in a highly similar manner. Perhaps we know something is wrong, know it deep down in us. Perhaps there’s even a scriptural citation against the very thing we’re contemplating. Sometimes though, isn’t it the case that’s when we hear the words in our hearts. I’m just going to do this...God will forgive me after all. In a way, that’s presuming upon the relationship you have with God. Testing Him when it isn’t remotely necessary.

I remember this one time, when I was about Benjamin’s age, I had this awesome blue plastic gun which shot these multi-colored plastic discs. It was the kind of toy you might not see anymore because those discs shot with a great velocity. Well, one day, my mom came into my room. Unsurprisingly, she wanted me to clean my room and to do it, right then as I’d been postponing doing so for a good long time. Her insistence, it made me angry. And, you see, in my hand was that blue plastic pistol, loaded with those discs. When she turned to head out my door, I made a calculated gamble. I decided that, while it may come with consequences, my mom would forgive me. So, I made the decision that I would aim that gun and shoot her with one of those little discs to express my great displeasure at her insistency that I clean my room. It was green. The disc I shot at Mom. No kidding y’all, I can still see that disc spinning towards her back and, I knew something right then and there. I had made a HUGE mistake. Because while I was forgiven, my mom doesn’t even remember it now, there were consequences.

Sin, no matter how we justify it, always brings with it unwelcome consequences. The point being, we’re not to do things that are wrong with the expectation of being forgiven just as Jesus is called not to test God. We’re not to test the relationship with have with God by doing the things He has commanded us NOT to DO. Paul writes about this concern in Romans 6 – *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”* As Christians, we are called to walk in newness of life, not position ourselves first to do what we like and then, with the expectation of Grace, ask for forgiveness. Rather, we seek God’s way first, even though it may be hard.

Finally, Jesus is tempted by Satan with the greatest lure of all – power. *“Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, ‘All these I will give You, if You will fall down and worship me.’”* The idea of exercising greater power than is due us is one of the many great lures of temptation.

Take, for instance, the idea of winning the lottery. Right now, just about every one of us imagines that, if we were to be immediately rewarded with great riches, we’d do amazing good with so great a gift. Truth is, not many of us would. Recent data suggests that, on a whole, most lottery winners are LESS GENEROUS when they win than previously. I mean it isn’t very hard to, let’s say, tithe if you’re annualized income is \$60,000. That’s just \$6000 per year. But now imagine you’ve got \$600 million dollars. To be similarly faithful is now going to cost you \$60 million bucks. So, percentage wise, people tend to become less generous. After all, with more to lose, it’s just a natural reaction to become stingier instead of less. Further, Lord Acton, a 19th century British politician and historian once wrote, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.” Although other thinkers had written similar things, most notably Machiavelli, it’s actually Acton who put the concept into this pithy phrasing.

Again, great power is a great lure to us but we absolutely must remember how Jesus Christ came into the world and how He lived the entirety of his earthly life. HE was, to be sure, the Son of God. He could’ve come

into the world as the most powerful King the world had ever seen, arrayed with riches and might. Yet He came, instead, a babe born to a humble mother and step-father. If Jesus path wasn't one of obvious power and might, we'd be wise to recollect that we shouldn't seek those things either and resist the call of the Tempter to seek otherwise. Jesus, as we know, evades all the temptation to stray from God's path that's thrown at Him. Hebrews 4:15 puts it this way – *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”* There is no experience, no temptation in this life that Jesus, Himself, hasn't endured for you.

Jesus was tempted in every single way that we are YET HE WAS VICTORIOUS. And, the really cool thing is, that we can St. Augustine in his commentary on the Psalms puts it this way – *“If in Christ we have been tempted, in Him we overcome the devil. Do you think only of Christ's temptations and fail to think of His victory? See yourself as tempted in Him, and see yourself as victorious in Him. He could have kept the devil from Himself; but if He were not tempted, He could not teach you how to triumph over this too. No, we won't be perfect but yes, it can be done and we know this because of Jesus Christ.”*

So how do we do it? I mean, it's one thing to theologically recognize a thing as possible yet have no tangible means to getting it done. Again, we look to Jesus. Jesus was able to overcome temptation and the means He was able to do it by are clear from our passage.

First, Jesus was intimate with His Father as well as His Father's Will. As we read the Gospels, we see Jesus heading off to be alone, in communion with His Father. For us, this means making time to grow and expand our relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ. We do so in prayer and in meditation. I'll do a sermon on prayer later in Lent so I don't want to go into too much detail here but, I wonder, how many of us are dedicated to our prayer life? How many of us spend time on an ongoing basis deepening our relationship with Jesus Christ? That is one of the absolute musts when it comes to avoiding temptation's call.

Secondly, we see Jesus Christ's knowledge of Scripture come into play as He resists Satan's temptations. Again, here's another thing I think highly consequential to a Christian's life – knowledge of the Word. Believe me when I tell you after having read the Bible many times, there is a very clear morality and ethic which emerges through all 66 books of the Bible. By that I mean that there simply is no better way to learn what is right and what is wrong than through dedication to reading and learning more about the Word.

Finally, Jesus' ability to avoid the lures of the world is related directly to his knowledge of His Mission. Jesus Christ came into the world in order to save it. Anything short of that was a deviation from what His Father intended him to do. So, I wonder, do you know what your mission is? Do you know how and what the Lord is calling you to do? Because if you don't, it may be the case that when temptation arrives in all its many guises, you won't realize you're being diverted from what God intends for you to do. As Christians, although the means by which we'll do so is as different as grains of sand on the beach, we are called to reap the harvest for the Lord. We are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ. How often temptations lead us away from that good and holy calling.

I want to close by telling you a story about a couple I encountered years ago while serving at another church. It has only been in hindsight that I realized that they overcame a great many temptations and they did so in a very similar way as Jesus did here in the wilderness. You see, both spouses in this married couple had come from large, wonderful families. They saw having a family as being a means by which they could share God's love and help shape new disciples of Jesus Christ, our Lord. When they first made an appointment with me, their long faces suggested a great struggle. They shared they'd tried for years to have children and were unsuccessful in every attempt. They just couldn't imagine life without being parents to a large, boisterous family. But they were down to their last attempt. They sought prayer for success as well as consolation for the great likelihood of another failed attempt. A few weeks later though, they were back in my office with great and harrowing news. The wife was pregnant. With three children. Of course, with her history, the doctors that told the couple of their success also came with a suggestion. In order for the greatest likelihood of a successful pregnancy, the doctors believed reducing the number down to one. One, after all, would give this couple what they wanted most in the world. A child. But at what a cost? I'm grateful to God that they didn't ask me for advice. Instead, they wanted more prayer as they entered into a time of discernment. Long story short, after looking at the Word and feeling the movement of God in their lives, they came back into my office one Sunday morning after church. They were convinced that these three children were all blessings from God and could not, in conscience, work to eliminate any of them. They understood the risks but felt the hand of God leading

them to keep all of the babies intact. Today, that couple lives in Michigan but they both have remained Facebook friends of mine. They use Facebook much like I do – putting up pictures of their children. The three triplets often grace their page, happy, healthy and with great big smiles. They've been joined by another sibling, a fourth child that came just as easily and naturally as could be. Whenever I see those three triplets though, I stand in awe of their parent's faith. I know how they were tempted. I also know how they followed what they believed Jesus expected of them.

I don't think I can doubt the results, can you?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.