

S e r m o n s o n
Matthew

The Temptation of Christ
Matthew 4:1-11

With Study Questions

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Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. ³Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."⁴ But He answered and said, "It is written, '*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God!*'"⁵ Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: '*He shall give His angels charge over you, and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone!*'"⁷ Jesus said to him, "It is written again, '*You shall not tempt the Lord your God!*'"⁸ Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, '*You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve!*'"¹¹ Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him (Matthew 4:1-11).

Preface

As I was enjoying the beach one afternoon I found myself engaged in a relatively civil conversation with a friend regarding the merits of the Christian faith. Another acquaintance who overheard the dialogue thought he would put the kibosh on the discourse with an incontrovertible declaration regarding the amount of evil that has been perpetrated in the name of religion. He, no doubt, had events like the crusades and the inquisition in mind.

I chose not to point out how logically fallacious it is to dismiss all religion because of bad religion. There are bad books, but not all are bad. There are bad restaurants, but not all are bad. There are bad Americans, but not all are bad. His logic was bad regarding this issue, but that doesn't mean he's unreasonable all the time. Just because there is bad religion doesn't mean great things haven't been done in the name of religion (which is certainly the case).

So, I sought to disarm this indictment by simply agreeing with him. Surely some of the most evil things in the history of the world were done by those whose lips and tongues formed spiritual sentences. This shouldn't take Christians by surprise. The Devil's assault upon humanity's champions was never put forth from the perspective of atheism but rather a warped and twisted theism.

And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light (2 Corinthians 11:14).

In Eden the serpent never suggested there was no God. He was much more cunning than that. "Hath God indeed said" (Genesis 3:1) was his diabolical strategy. The improper representation of God has been a common practice of our fallen race from time immemorial. Although only the thinness of peanut chaff (the brown skin that surrounds the nut) separates the industry known as Hollywood from the nation known

as Sodom, the invocation and thanking of God is a regular occurrence at its award ceremonies.

Satan's temptation of Christ was not predicated upon God's non-existence. It was an argument between master theologians. The devil, as he did in the garden, will utilize the words of God in his solicitation to do evil. Let this be a warning to Christians that great evil can be done by those with Scriptures in hand.

Similar to in the garden, we see a three-fold attack starting with what is apparently benign—fruit in the garden, bread in the wilderness. Then a promise of safety—you shall not die in the garden, you shall not be hurt in the wilderness. Then it all crescendos in an all-out assault—you shall be as God in the garden, worship me (Satan) in the wilderness. John teaches of this three-pronged attack.

For all that *is* in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world (1 John 2:16).

Major Themes

As we examine the intricacies of these temptations there are three major themes I would like us to consider: 1) What was the devil's method of temptation? We should be aware of this for it is continually present in our own lives. 2) What was the methodology of Christ as He resisted the assault of the devil? We should certainly seek to imitate Him. 3) Why would the Father suffer His Son to be tempted? After all, as we shall see (especially as it is recorded by Mark), **"the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness"** (Mark 1:12) to be tempted. Is this not just the opposite of what Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:13)? Let us examine the temptation of Christ.

Led By the Spirit

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1).

The astute student may see a difficulty straight away! Does not James teach us that God doesn't tempt anyone (James 1:13)? The difficulty can be answered by explaining that what Satan means to be a temptation, God means to be a test; since the word *test* can be used in either sense.

But the difficulty disappears altogether when we realize that God is not the one doing the tempting, the devil is. Let the wise Christian be continually armed and comforted with the understanding that God uses the wicked actions of evil people (and here, the devil himself) for His own just, wise, and holy purposes. As Joseph explained to his wicked brothers, **"you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20)**. D.A. Carson clarifies,

The devil was the agent and tempted Jesus to misuse his position; but his hostile purpose was put to the service of God's testing of his Son.¹

But we still haven't answered the question, why? Why would the Spirit lead (drive) Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted? I believe this is the most important question to be answered. We will save this answer for the end, after observing the entire confrontation.

Stones Into Bread

¹ Carson, D.A. (1994). *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition*. Rev. ed. of: The new Bible commentary. 3rd ed. / edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970. (4th ed.) (Mt 4:12). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press.

And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.³ Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."⁴ But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:2-4).

Similar to Moses (Exodus 34:28) and Elijah (1 Kings 19:8), Jesus fasted for forty days. During times of great need or distress, fasting can be employed to turn one's thoughts more directly to God. Forty days was quite unique and we never see anyone but these three do this (and then but once).

One of Satan's many names is *tempter* for he solicits evil behavior from men. To those who scoff at the existence of Satan, one need merely ask for a more plausible explanation for the genesis of evil. Recognizing that all things (save God) are essentially the effect of some cause, an explanation for the cause of evil must be forthcoming. Yet apart from the biblical explanation of a "father of lies" (John 8), no answer suffices.

When Satan prefaces his petition with "if" he is not questioning the Sonship of Christ. The word can also be translated *since*. Satan is rather buttressing Jesus' station and depending upon it to nurture a sense of self-inflation. Surely Jesus had the right to do as He pleased! Self-entitlement is rampant these days. Television commercials appeal to this with their clever "because you're worth it" slogans. If Jesus wouldn't operate with an "I have a right to it" disposition, how much less should we?

In the Clint Eastwood movie *Unforgiven*, a young gunslinger is seeking to comfort himself after having just shot his first victim. He takes a shot of whiskey and comes to his conclusion, "Well he had it coming to him." Eastwood's response reveals the writer's awareness of man's depravity. He says, "We all got it coming to us kid."

We learn that Christ, after fasting forty days, was hungry. Satan's first temptation is simply to get Jesus to eat. What is so harmful about making bread? Jesus in due time would get his food. But He would not exercise His Spirit given gifts in order to serve Himself. There was an expressed purpose for Jesus' miracles, which was to testify that what He said was true (Mark 2:10).

Jesus had a mission and He would not follow the counsel of the ungodly (Psalm 1). Eating bread, like eating fruit in the garden, is not inherently evil. But Jesus, unlike Adam and Eve, would patiently wait for His Father to provide. He would not play this game with Satan but instead responds with a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3. **"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'"**

One thing we learn here is that Jesus was no liberal when it came to the word of God. He quotes it as if it was self-evidently and authoritatively true. But what is Jesus' meaning in this quotation? He probably does not mean that if you study your Bible and pray, you'll never need to eat. What He probably does mean is that you don't have to make a deal with the devil if you're hungry. He, no doubt, understood what Paul would write years later that **"my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19)**. Calvin expressed it well.

The precise object of Christ's reply is this: We ought to trust in God for food, and for the other necessities of the present life, in such a manner, that none of us may overleap the boundaries which he has prescribed. But if Christ did not consider himself to be at liberty to change stones

into bread, without the command of God, much less is it lawful for us to procure food by fraud, or robbery, or violence, or murder.²

Throw Yourself Down

Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, 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 shall give His angels charge over you,' and, 'In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'" (Matthew 4:5-7).

One commentator states,

"But what is this I see?" exclaims stately Bishop Hall. **"Satan himself with a Bible under his arm and a text in his mouth!"** Doubtless the tempter, having felt the power of God's Word in the former temptation, was eager to try the effect of it from his own mouth (2 Corinthians 11:14).³

The word of God is so powerful, so sound, that even the misuse of it can be productive—unfortunately it can produce disaster. The devil's quotation from Psalm 91:11-12 is incomplete. The passage actually reads,

For He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. ¹²**In their hands they shall bear you up (Psalm 91:11, 12).**

"To keep you in all your ways" is conveniently left out of the devil's quotation. The devil was not interested in reminding Jesus of His moral obligations. Small portions of Psalms are often sung in worship in a very repetitive manner. "How can this be harmful?" it is asked, "We are quoting Scripture." But if we don't understand the meaning or context of the Psalm it becomes quite meaningless. We begin to attach our own sentimental context to the words. How often do we hear pagans quote "Judge not lest ye be judged" in defense of some deplorable behavior?

What was the devil's aim in seeking to get Jesus to do this? It seems as if he was seeking to turn the supernatural aspect of Christ's ministry into some kind of carnival—"Dive off the high tower into the small pool. The people will be so impressed and you will prove that God loves you and will protect you!" Today we have people who handle poisonous snakes, trusting God will protect them from the venom. People refuse medical treatment trusting God will heal them. When I was a high school youth pastor one girl's prayer request was that God would give her the answers to the test she would take the next day because she hadn't studied. All these actions reveal a blatant misunderstanding of the purpose of miracles.

Jesus would in fact do mighty deeds. But for the expressed purpose of glorifying His Father in heaven and confirming His own ministry not for some foolish test; hence His response...**"You shall not tempt the Lord your God."** Here we see Christ exercise the hermeneutic of *analogia de fide* (the *analogy of faith*—checking Scripture with Scripture).

It is not popular in today's "peace at all costs" Christian culture to engage in debate—especially debate regarding the meaning of a text. Elder Bill Parkinson recounts his

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels: Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

³ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Mt 4:6). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

frustration when, while he was on staff with a parachurch organization, he questioned someone's statement about God only to receive the answer from another staff member, "What is truth?" as if to say, it is a meaningless pursuit. Jesus did not say, "Let us change the subject and not talk religion—we'll never agree!" He engaged.

"You shall not tempt the Lord your God" from Deuteronomy 6:16 was the text Jesus chose. God may do wonderful and miraculous things. He may choose to simply let you fall to your death. Either way it is an act of impertinence to demand, and infidelity to require, that God perform signs in order to make you feel good about your relationship with Him.

A parent births a child, clothes a child, feeds a child, shelters a child, provides medicinal care for a child, nurtures a child, etc. How immature and inappropriate for a child to demand fireworks or Disneyland in order to prove their parents love for them! When the child tempts the parent this way, he may find that the parent has discovered, not the need to provide for them Disneyland, but to provide a spanking.

The Father's plan for the ministry of Christ truly included the miraculous. Satan was seeking to get Jesus to misuse something that had a specific and glorious design. Jesus, for the second time quotes the word of God. I might point one other thing out at this juncture. The Scriptures clearly teach their own effectiveness in the restraining of sin.

Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You (Psalm 119:11).

But it is not merely the memorizing and parroting of verses that provides this shield against sin. Jesus knew what the verses meant. He had meditated on them. He prayed in a manner consistent with them. He had appropriated the truth and calling of them in His own life, as should we.

Worship Satan

Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory.⁹ And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Matthew 4:8-10).

We are not told exactly how the devil showed Jesus all the nations so I will not offer any suggestions. Up until the time of Christ there was only one nation of God, Israel. One of the promises attached to the coming of Jesus was that the blessings of God would extend throughout the entire world (Genesis 12:1-3). Little doubt there is that until the time of Christ the entire world lay under the sway of the wicked one (1 John 5:19). That would soon change.

The devil's offer is quite similar to the Father's offer in Psalm Two where He says to His Son,

Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession (Psalm 2:8).

Jesus loved the nations. He desired to rule them, not as some sort of world conquering despot, but to bring them life and redemption. How desperately Adam and Eve desired to be as God! Could the devil count on that same desperation in Christ who strongly desired to redeem the nations? The terms and conditions of Jesus being granted this office were quite different when coming from the Father. The devil would

give this gift to Christ if Jesus would prostrate Himself before him and worship him. That baptism that caused Jesus such distress could be by-passed (Luke 12:50). The Garden of Gethsemane and cross at Calvary could be avoided if He would merely do the devil's bidding. Jesus could do an end run around the passion of the cross.

But unlike Adam and Eve Jesus knew that this was a lie and the redemption would be a false redemption. Interestingly enough, Jesus does not even honor the offer by asking how this could be done. For there was a non-negotiable that stood above all things in the mind of Christ as it should stand above all things in our minds as well. **"You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve."** If there is a promise made that requires the compromising of this, the promise is from hell.

Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him (Matthew 4:11).

The devil left Him. How wonderful that must have felt—even though it was temporary (Luke 4:13). James writes,

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7).

If you have ever wondered how one resists the devil in such a way as to get him to leave, we have just observed it in Christ. The angels came and ministered to Christ. No doubt similar to Elijah, they fed Him (1 Kings 19:5).

Conclusion

We still have not answered our most important question. Why was Jesus tempted? For one, He was tempted that He might sympathize with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). He was tempted that He might come to the aid of those who are tempted (Hebrews 2:18). It is not mere political slogan that Jesus feels our pain and can identify Himself with our weaknesses. He is no ivory tower savior who sits on the side of the mountain spewing proverbs.

But perhaps more importantly He was tempted that He might fulfill all righteousness. The first Adam would not be our champion. He was sent into the field of battle to represent our race and he lost. Sin, death, thistles, thorns, sweat, and pain were the consequences. Jesus, the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45), would face the same enemy and reign victorious.

Jesus would be barraged by the devil. The eye of the evil one, in an effort to undermine the redemptive work of Christ, would be fixed upon Christ and Christ would indeed be our champion, for we could not face the devil alone. By Christ's victory He obtained a victory for us. Here we merely read that the devil was unsuccessful in causing Christ to stumble. Soon it would be the devil who would, not only stumble, but also fall to his doom. As Paul expresses that Jesus,

Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it (Colossians 2:15).

From this account we learn how to properly fight temptation. But more importantly we learn to trust the only one who could crush the enemy of God's people, Jesus the righteous.

Questions for Study

1. Have evil things been done in the name of religion? Does this mean all religion is evil (page 1)?
2. What is the three-pronged attack we read of by John (page 2)?
3. Did God tempt Jesus (page 2)?
4. Is there truly a devil (page 3)?
5. What was the devil appealing to when he said, "if (since) you are the Son of God" (page 3)?
6. Why would have it been wrong for Jesus to turn stones into bread (page 4)?
7. How did Jesus respond to the devil's temptation (page 4)?
8. Why do you suppose the devil wanted Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple (page 5)?
9. How do we see people tempting God today (page 5)?
10. How were the nations a temptation to Jesus (page 6)?
11. How does one resist the devil (page 6)?
12. Why was Jesus tempted (page 7)?