



## **Matthew 4:1-11** **What is Temptation?**

Last week we saw the ministry of John the Baptist. He was out in the wilderness, calling people to repent, to stop living life however they wanted, and to live for God instead. And while he was doing that, we saw Jesus also came out, not to repent, because He didn't have any sin to repent of, but to endorse John's ministry, to approve of what he was doing, and to identify with those who were saying, "Yes, I want my life to be lived for God."

But what often happens after you make a declaration that you want to live for God? Things get hard. Your change, your choice, and your commitment are challenged. And that's what we see happen with Jesus this morning.

If you read your Bible much it's a fairly familiar story, it's mentioned in three of the four gospels. But here's the thing that has been fascinating to me as I considered the event this week: it's the form this conflict took.

When Jesus and Satan meet in the wilderness we find a fight scene unlike anything a human author would ever conceive. There's no duel with light sabers, or a martial arts match, there are no flying kicks, gravity-defying gymnastics, or grappling of any kind. There are no wizard's wands or casting of spells as invisible forces collide and cast off sparks.

No, when the most powerful fallen angel that has ever been created faces off with God in human flesh they never even touch each other. Satan chooses to attack with questions of allegiance and provocative suggestions, which Jesus counters with the truth of Scripture and trust in God. This is a battle of souls and the conflict takes the form of temptation.

**Matthew 4:1** Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. **2** And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry.

So, what is temptation? We all experience it, and different things tempt different people, but I'm not asking, what is tempting *to you*? I'm asking *what is temptation*? What does it mean to be tempted?

And the answer is: temptation occurs when we are confronted with a real opportunity to do what God says we should do, to believe what God has said, or pursue another option.

You see, no temptation is ever just about the specific thing we're enticed by in the moment. No, the true nature of all temptation is actually deeper down, below the surface – it is a choice to follow God or not. Think about all the things that have tempted you and you'll see it's true. God has said one thing, and then you are faced with the chance to do or believe something opposite – which will you choose? That is the core of temptation. And that's

what Jesus was being challenged by as well – would He do things the way the Father directed, or would He take personal shortcuts?

The message for you and me is: there is a real devil in this world, there is real temptation, but there is also a very real Jesus, who has fought temptation for us and won, and who offers to stand with and strengthen you today. Your whole life can change this morning as we study God's Word if you will receive and believe what He has to say.

So look with me at the first thing Satan throws at Jesus:

**Matthew 4:3** 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.*'"

We already read that Jesus has been out here fasting – that means He didn't have anything to eat - for forty days, and Matthew adds, "afterward He was hungry." I always chuckle when I read that like, well, duh. Who wouldn't be? But actually, this is a profoundly significant theological point. You see, Matthew is reminding us: Jesus is fully God, but He is also fully man. He was God in human flesh and human flesh gets hungry. Human flesh gets tired. Human flesh has all kinds of appetites and desires. In athletic training we even talk about how you should 'listen to your body' because it talks to you.

Matthew is making sure we understand, when Jesus was out there going through all of this, He felt exactly what you or I would feel. He really was hungry. He really was physically weak at this point, and have you noticed that we are most susceptible to temptation when we're hungry, tired, stressed, or under the influence of other substances?

Now think about the contrast: Adam needed to avoid the first temptation of Satan in the Garden of Eden where everything was perfect and beautiful, he had an amazing wife and a full belly. Jesus is out here in the wilderness, alone and hungry. He's at the place where you and I would be most likely to snap, and He faces off with the devil himself.

Which is another important lesson: Satan likes to strike when we are weakest and will customize his temptations for our situation. He never decides to hold back a little because you're having a rough day, or have a lot on your plate. No, he takes advantage of you being down and goes after what could seem like legitimate excuses.

Satan is tempting Jesus to do something that seems so innocent – you're hungry, so do something about it. Make some bread; eat. Jesus should be hungry after 40 days, but He's fasting because this is where God has led Him. This isn't about whether Jesus can actually do it, whether He can actually turn rock into bread – later He will multiply a few loaves and fishes to feed 5000 people.

This is a temptation to take matters into His own hands, to decide this has gone on long enough and now it's time to eat. Satan is suggesting to Jesus: "God doesn't care what

happens or He's forgotten about You, He's not doing anything for You – You're hungry, you have the ability, do what needs to be done here, take care of Yourself."

And that's why Jesus says, "No." He's here to do the Father's will, not take care of Himself. As He'll tell the disciples one day, His food is to do the will of the Father who sent Him (John 4:34).

The flesh must always serve the spirit. We live in these physical bodies and so we feel the desires, the 'needs' of the flesh with great intensity at times, but we must always remember, we are more than just animals – we have a soul that lives forever, we are more than just tissue and nerve endings - we have the ability to control our actions and not just give in to every impulse and desire.

Sometimes temptation will come along in your life and it will feel like the most natural thing in the world. It will seem like a legitimate answer to a need or desire you feel. But does giving in to it, does following that suggestion or desire, lead you closer to God or father away? Does it line up with what God has called you to do or be? You'll know the answer. The Holy Spirit will bring conviction of the right thing to do, but you'll have to choose it. Because, remember, temptation is never just about the issue you're facing, it's really a choice to trust and obey God or not.

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.'*"

So now we find Satan quoting Scripture right back at Jesus.

Suddenly they are in Jerusalem at the Temple, this is most likely in a vision, and Satan tells Jesus to jump off the highest point to what would be a certain death and show what God will do for Him. He's taunting Jesus trying to get Him to show off what He can really do, like pulling up next to a guy in a sports car at a stoplight and revving your engine.

And Jesus could do this – right before His crucifixion He says He could call on His Father and more than twelve legions of angels would come to His defense ... but He doesn't do it. Why? Because He knows the way the Father wants things done. He is trusting and obeying the plan they made for the salvation of men.

There will be times when Jesus miraculously escapes dangerous and life-threatening situations, but those happen *in the course of His normal ministry*. Satan was tempting Jesus to show off, to prove, unnecessarily who He was and what God would do for Him.

The point for us is: don't just presume upon God's ability to protect you in every flippant choice you make. Don't rationalize your way into stupid choices and assume God will bail you out. But we do that sometimes, don't we? You get into a relationship with a person who says they believe in 'god.' They don't go to church, they don't read their Bible, they pray every now and then, but they believe in 'god' so it's OK, right? Don't put yourself into that kind of situation and then expect God to bless your relationship.

Don't get yourself into some business partnership or contract and assume God will bail you out. Don't buy or lease some stupid car so you can show off to everyone and assume God will bless you and provide because you're taking a leap of faith and expecting your Heavenly Father to bless you. Don't presume upon His grace.

But, DO trust Him to provide for you and protect you when you're doing the things He has called you to do. God's will, done God's way, will never lack God's supply. Think of all the things the apostle Paul miraculously survived *in the course of normal ministry*. And what about you or people you know? God still shows up and does amazing things in our lives, keeps us from things we thought were going to destroy us, or brings blessings we never could have foreseen, but *He* determines when and how to do it, we don't force His hand.

So again, this is not a question of whether it was possible for Jesus to jump and land safely, one day He's going to walk on water and calm the storms. This was a question of whether it was necessary, right here, right now, in the natural course of following and serving 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. 9 And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me."**

This time Satan offers Jesus something that seems *almost* right – didn't Jesus come because God so loved the world? And here the world is being offered to Him. But, it's going to require compromise. Satan is suggesting to Jesus that there is another way. The way God wants you to do it is hard, so here, let me show you another way.

Friends, remember, temptation is never really about the issue immediately at hand. What is most important here: the kingdoms themselves, or HOW they are supposed to be received? It's HOW they're received. This isn't a question of whether Jesus wants the kingdoms, it's a question of how committed is He to following God's plan for how they should be acquired.

On the night before His death on the cross Jesus will go to the Garden of Gethsemane and pray, asking the Father, is there any other way to do this? The answer is no. And so, He heads obediently to the cross because it's not really the kingdoms God is interested in, it's the people of the kingdoms, people like you and me who have been separated from a Holy

God by our sin – our repeated choices to do what we want to do instead of what God commands. And in order for us to be reconciled with Him justice needed to be served, our wrongs needed to be identified, confronted, and dealt with. So, in His mercy, God Himself, the King of kings, stepped down from His throne, and came to our petty little kingdom and received the punishment our crimes deserved. That’s what the cross was all about.

This temptation wasn’t about whether Jesus would receive the worship of the world’s kingdoms – one day every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, and people from every tribe, tongue, and language will gather around His throne to worship – the question was: how will that come about? By doing the hard thing that God has ordained, or taking the quick and easy way Satan is proposing?

Friends, the easy way is rarely the right way. And now Jesus makes His choice, once again choosing what God has clearly said.

*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.*

This isn’t totally over; Luke tells us that Satan left Him “for an opportune time.” Satan has not given up, he will come and taunt and tempt Jesus again and again all the way up to the cross, but Jesus will never waiver in His allegiance: He is the Son of God, here to do the will of God sacrificing Himself for the people of God.

He has chosen to do God’s will, God’s way, and look at how God supplies.

He refused to throw Himself off the temple and be saved by angels, but now angels attend to Him. And that word, attend, is often used in connection with food – as in, attendants would serve food to their masters (Matt 8:15, 25:44, 27:55, Acts 6:2; Elijah in 1 Kings 19:67). So, Jesus refused to turn rocks into bread, but His natural hunger is still being supernaturally met.

Satan took him to a very high mountain and offered all the kingdoms of the world and He refused to take the shortcut. But at the very end of this gospel, in Matt 28:18, Jesus will stand on another mountain and announce the coming of a new, eternal kingdom declaring, “All authority has been given to me...” only this time it’s all authority IN HEAVEN and on earth something Satan could never offer.

So, what can we learn from all of this? Quite a bit.

First of all, temptation can begin outside of us or inside. When it comes from the outside it involves things that try to get our attention and pull us into their sphere. This is what we’ve seen this morning with Jesus: something comes along from the outside and tries to lead us astray.

But it can also start on the inside – we all have desires and thoughts that seem to come

from nowhere, even when we're all alone – horrendous or lustful thoughts can come to mind seemingly unprovoked. It's not a matter of if it will happen – it does happen, to all of us and it arises out of what God calls 'the flesh.' It can be conquered and taken captive, but it's a daily fight. We have to choose, actively, persistently, to prefer and follow God, it doesn't just happen.

You might also find it interesting to know that the Greek word translated here in this passage as "tempted" can also be translated "tested." So, in a given situation we could say that it is a test *for* you or a temptation *to* you; it all depends on how you look at it, and where it came from: every test is a temptation, every temptation is a test. As Joseph told his brothers "what you meant for evil, God meant for good" (Gen 50:19-20). Two ways of seeing the same event.

So, how do you know the difference? Well, as we have seen this morning, temptation begins with Satan and the desires of our flesh or our mind and seeks to turn us away from God or into self-indulgence.

Testing comes from God who allows us to face choices that reveal or develop our character. God doesn't protect us from every thing we encounter in the world. He wants us to be able to choose between Him and things that lead us away from Him.

That's why He gave us the choice in the first place. When God created Adam and Eve, He put them in the world and gave them only one rule – only one thing not to do – do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else was OK, but not that. The tree represented an option – a way to chose "not God." A way to rebel. A way to declare independence, and they chose it.

And so do we. We choose "not God." We all do. In countless ways, big and small, that vary according to our personalities and interests and desires, we choose "not God." Just like we choose to bend and break rules at work, we choose to speed on the freeway, we choose to cut corners here and there – we rationalize it and excuse it and explain it away. We all tend to default to the way we think things should really be done. And the Bible calls that sin. It's what Jesus came to rescue us from.

And it's why He takes each temptation the devil throws at Him and responds with what God has said. That is the final authority for Jesus, and it should be for us. But we're weak, and temptation is strong, and we all break at times. When that happens, we need to run back to Jesus, confess our sins, and receive His forgiveness and press on hopefully a little wiser and on the watch for the next attack.

You're never going to completely avoid temptation. But you also have to know that temptation itself is not wrong. Jesus was tempted and yet He was sinless. It is not wrong for you to be tempted. Whether the temptation comes from the outside, something you were exposed to, or from the inside, some thought or desire that bubbles up uninvited and unwanted, it's not wrong to experience temptation. It's wrong to give in. To take it up, to play with it, and certainly wrong to give in.

Martin Luther once said you can't stop a bird from flying over your head, but you can stop him from making a nest in your hair. Of course, that's not always easy.

CS Lewis has this great observation in his book *Mere Christianity*:

“No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness — they have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means — the only complete realist.”

God knows what it is to be tempted, and He knows who we are and how weak we are at times, but He also gives us this promise in His Word:

**1 Cor 10:13** No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God *is* faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear *it*.

It will not always be easy, in fact, it will excruciatingly difficult at times, you will want to cave in, you will want to quit, you will want it all to go away, but God promises you that you CAN escape the temptation, and grow stronger as a result by clinging to God and what He has declared.

One last thing – all of this happened in the wilderness. When you read your Bible you learn that being in the wilderness is not a bad thing, and it's also not an uncommon thing. The wilderness is was often a place of preparation for what God wants to do next.

Moses was in wilderness before being called to lead God's people.

Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness before entering Promised Land.

The prophet Elijah spent time in the wilderness after his confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel, God spoke to Him there and sent him on to continue his ministry and begin discipling Elisha.

David was in wilderness as a shepherd and again while on the run from Saul before becoming king.

Paul spent time in the wilderness after his conversion to Christianity.

God leads all of His children through the wilderness at some point, and you may even make return trips like David. Don't despise the wilderness where God strips things away, because it is time of clarifying, zeroing in on what really matters.

If you're in the wilderness this morning, maybe it's because God has something great for you ahead, but you need to hear from Him or experience Him in order to have the anchors and maturity you need to move out from here. And, maybe you're not going to leave the wilderness until you get it straight. If so, that's an act of mercy - God won't give you the other thing until He knows you can handle it.

But you need to know that Christ was in the wilderness and fought the temptations, and if you are a Christian, Jesus is in you. You CAN resist, you can endure, in His name and strength.

If you're here and you've blown it, you were faced with the temptation and you failed – you need to know that the whole reason Jesus came was to do for us what we could not do on our own. Forgiveness is possible. If your stupid pride led you to make poor choices, if you got carried away by your natural desires, if you took the easy way out and you regret it, there is a way back. There is a path of repentance made possible by Christ.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Come to Jesus. Tell Him the truth. Ask for forgiveness. Ask for cleansing. Ask for hope and strength to face tomorrow, because the devil will return. You will be tempted again. But you can face it all with Christ at your side as your shield and your strength. Stay in the fight!