

THE THREE TEMPTATIONS OF CHRIST
Matthew 4:1-11

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Jesus has just been baptized. God has declared Him to be His Son. His ministry was inaugurated. But now God's Spirit was leading Him into the wilderness for a time of testing. God Himself was not tempting Jesus, but in the wilderness God knew that Jesus would be tempted by the devil.

As Jesus left the Jordan River where He had been baptized, He climbed the barren hills which marked the ragged edge of the Rift Valley. He knew deep down in His soul that the time of testing lay ahead of Him. His ministry had begun – the audience had gathered – the strains of the opening overture were echoing in the Jordan Valley. As He ascended into the wilderness, the curtain had risen on a great cosmic drama.

Things are never the same after a wilderness experience. You will be shaped for better or worse. Jesus was coming to just such an experience in His ministry.

A time of testing. Jesus was alone, with the exception of the wild animals, as Mark reminds us. But it was not a wild beast that Jesus would have to face – it was much worse than that. Jesus would face a formidable foe in the person of Satan himself. Whether he came to Jesus in a personal form, or whether he haunted His dreams at midnight, the reality of his presence would be overwhelming and terrible, and Jesus would have to deal with it.

Jesus fasts 40 days and 40 nights. It is the appropriate way to begin His ministry – focused upon God, devoting Himself to communion with God, separating Himself from worldly distractions, sharpening His spiritual sensitivity and perception, testing His ability to deal with adversity, preparing Himself for the great adventure of ministry upon which He was being launched.

As Jesus is throbbled by pangs of starvation, the tempter takes the stage. Odd – Satan thinks he has caught a hungry man at his weakness, his point of vulnerability, when, in fact, he has come to Jesus at His greatest point of spiritual focus.

I'm not sure Satan completely understands spiritual things. Oh, he is a formidable adversary alright, but he focuses on material things which certainly distract us. And when we live our lives pretty much in the material/physical world, he is very successful at challenging us. But those filled with God's Spirit actually have advantage over Satan.

But Jesus is praying and fasting – making sure that His ministry will take the shape that God would have it take. What would be the center of His ministry? How would He measure success? How was He going to secure the loyalty of His listeners? Jesus knew options existed – the question was how was He going to choose among them?

Jesus' questions are our questions. If we are going to live our lives doing ministry – and all of His true followers surely will – how are we going to do ministry in a way that pleases God? Satan tries to divert Jesus' ministry down an unsatisfactory route.

I. (MIRACLE) THE FIRST TEMPTATION WAS TO REMOVE HIMSELF FROM A DIFFICULT SITUATION BY AN ACT OF DISOBEDIENCE.

Verses 1-4

It was a genuine conflict. No prearranged outcome. The same tempter who found a fatal spot of vulnerability in Adam and Eve now took aim at Jesus. God had led Him into the wilderness and God would supply His needs, even though – to a starving man – God must have seemed unduly delayed. The voice from heaven at His baptism had said, “This is my beloved Son.” Notice Satan's words – “If You are the Son of God, remove yourself out of this difficult situation.”

We have that same temptation.

With an act of disobedience, most of us can remove ourselves from difficult situation.

Amy is 16 years old. She has seen the positive sign appear on a home pregnancy test. Her parents will be devastated. She'll never just be “one of the girls” again at the high school. She hasn't told anyone yet – no one except her best friend Rebecca. She knows that eventually she'll have to tell. The secret, of course, can't be kept forever. Is there any way out of the shame, the embarrassment the guilt, the unalterably changed life? One trip to the doctor's office and things would be taken care of. No embarrassment, no shame, and no one could ever have to know.

Amy is tempted to remove herself from a difficult situation by an act of disobedience.

Fred is 27. He and his family are just starting – house payments, car payments – they just got in over their head. It was supposed to work, but who could count on the unexpected expenses – doctor bills for Madison, their 4-year-old daughter and taxes owed – past due. Well, everybody fudges on their expense account. It's a tax free solution. Next year he'd be in a position to balance things back out.

Fred is tempted to remove himself from a difficult situation by an act of disobedience.

Jesus responds by quoting Scripture. God had humbled Israel by allowing them to go hungry in the wilderness and then supplying them with manna. His purpose was to teach them that “man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Jesus knew that to turn the stones into bread would mean placing a personal physical need ahead of obedience to God. God called Jesus, and God calls us, to a reordering of our priorities that places our confidence in Him as the highest good.

II. (MYSTERY) THE SECOND TEMPTATION OF CHRIST = SICK RELIGION

Verses 5-7

Jump Jesus – suddenly Jesus found Himself atop the tallest part of the temple in Jerusalem, 450 feet above the floor of the Kedron Valley. Jump Jesus – everyone will see you and everyone will be amazed – they will follow you anywhere.

The devil made a new pitch. Wow, Jesus, You have made it clear that bread is not your priority.

You have said that hearing and doing every word that comes from God is your desire. Very well we are at God's great worship center. What better spot to hear and do the Word of God?

Listen to Scripture – here it is:

Psalm 91:11-12

Now, just leap off. Ready...1 - 2 - 3 – leap. What is wrong, Jesus? Did not God promise to send His Angels to catch You?

By refusing to turn stones into bread You demonstrated that You trust God. Now let's see how much You really trust God. Jump.

Lack of Faith, Isaiah 7:10-12

A man was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going. Suddenly he slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the cliff. Realizing that he couldn't hang on for long he called for help. *Man:* Is anybody up there? *Voice:* Yes I'm here! *Man:* Who's that? *Voice:* The Lord. *Man:* Lord, help me! *Voice:* Do you trust me? *Man:* I trust you completely, Lord. *Voice:* Good. Let go of the branch. *Man:* What??? *Voice:* I said, "Let go of the branch." *Man:* (after a long pause) Is anybody else up there?

Satan has misused Scripture, for he has left out an important clause in Psalm 91:11 – “To guard you in all your ways.” God has promised providential care for life as we live it out daily in normal fashion. God never promised to be part of a high-flying, miracle circus. He has not promised supernatural intervention when we decide to jeopardize life in order to prompt Him to action. False messiahs, miracle mongers have long promised dramatic feats to prove their place in God's Kingdom.

Theudas – who promised to split the waters of the Jordan in two or Simon Magus – who vowed he would fly through the air.

Once again Jesus turns to the Old Testament for an appropriate response: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (v. 7). Do not presume upon the goodwill of God by demanding proof. The words come from Deuteronomy 6:16 and refer back to the time when Moses

struck the rock in order to get water to satisfy the grumbling Israelites (Exodus 17:1-7). It is not our prerogative to place God on trial. Faith is simple trust, not “doubt looking for proof” (Barclay, vol. 1, p. 69). *Matthew*, Robert H. Mounce

Jesus did not leap; He did not move an inch.

The temptation was to yield to sick religion.

How can we identify sick religion?

- A. Self-glorifying
- B. Miracle-dependent
- C. Scripture-abusive
- D. God-dishonoring

A. Self-glorifying

Sick religion always is self-glorifying. It’s the kind of religion that caused the Pharisees to call attention to their almsgiving, fasting, and praying (Matthew 6:1-2, 5, 16). Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, fell prey to that malady. They sold a piece of land, gave part of the proceeds to the church, and claimed to have given it all (Acts 5:1-11).

Sick religion drives us to speak when we have nothing to say, to accept a position for the sake of status, and to assert our views because they are our views, not because they are helpful to the church. (*Proclaim*, January-March, 1995, Michael A. Smith)

B. Miracle-dependent

Sick religion is miracle-dependent. The devil drew on popular expectations that the Messiah would appear suddenly atop the temple. He would be a great miracles worker, uniting the people and reconstituting the Jewish state.

The popular idea was fed by the people’s insatiable desire for signs and wonders. Throughout Jesus’ ministry, He confronted and rejected this devilish desire. He began that day on the temple heights.

Jesus knew miracle-dependent religion is as fragile as the last miracle done. It is sick and never can be satisfied.

God performs miracles, but He does not want us to love and follow Him for the sake of miracles. He wants us to trust and love Him because of who He is.

Ask yourself: Does my relationship with God depend on miracles? (*Proclaim*, January-March 1995, Michael A. Smith)

C. Scripture-abusive

Sick religion is Scripture-abusive. Satan cited Psalm 91:11-12 to bolster his case. He abused Scripture by utterly ignoring its original context and meaning. He dishonored Scripture by using it for his own purposes, and he invited Jesus to do the same.

Jesus declined the offer. The Lord cited Deuteronomy 6:16, whose larger context is a sharp warning to fear and serve only God and to be certain to do what is right in God's sight. Jesus' citation and interpretation were true to the context and meaning of the passage.

Ask yourself: Am I submitting to the Scriptures or am I using the Scriptures to support my personal agenda? (*Proclaim*, January-March 1995, Michael A. Smith)

D. God-dishonoring

Sick religion is God-dishonoring. Satan wanted Jesus to use God. We can almost hear him saying, "Take advantage of God, Jesus. Hold Him to His word. Make Him prove Himself. Use Him to get what You want." The temptation to stand above God, to view God as one more tool or resource at our disposal, is inherent in sick religion.

Jesus declared we were to reverence God and to make certain we lived in submission to Him. For Jesus, this meant the cross. For us it means continuing death to self.

Ask yourself: Is my religion characterized by submission to God or attempted manipulation of God?

What is the lure of sick religion? Why are we so easily deceived by sick religion? What are the lures it dangles before us? (*Proclaim*, January-March 1995, Michael A. Smith)

Sick religion is so luring because it offers immediate gratification. Satan thought Jesus wanted followers more than anything else – but he was wrong. Leaping from the temple and being rescued by angels would certainly produce that result.

Satan offered Jesus the devil's kind of religion. It left self on the throne. If we use our imagination, we almost can hear what Satan might have said to Jesus.

"Now, Jesus, if You keep on going as You have, You are going to lose control of Your life. Someone else is going to be making the rules, choosing Your goals, selecting Your methods for You. You don't want that, do You?"

"Listen to me, Jesus. Grab hold of Your destiny. Take charge of Your life and ministry. You don't need to let anyone lead You down a road that ends on a cross. You can reach people a different, better way. Start now. Jump!"

The promise of being in charge of our lives while being religious and doing good is attractive. It appeals to our need to control. But it is not the way Jesus chose.

Sick religion lures us because we are sinners. We are separated from God and fearful of a genuine encounter with Him. Satan's kind of religion promises to make us religious enough to feel good, look good, and even help others in need. Sick religion also enables us to keep a safe distance from God, so that we are in no danger of His challenging us or changing us. (*Proclaim*, January-March 1995, Michael A. Smith)

III. (AUTHORITY) THE THIRD CHRIST = POWER

TEMPTATION OF

4:8-11

Having failed in his first two attempts Satan now drops all pretense. He takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. In a move that can be understood as nothing other than a naked power play, he offers Jesus all he can see if he will only kneel down and worship him. Jesus is faced with the age-old temptation to act on the basis that the end justifies the means. Had not God promised, “I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (Psalm 2:8)? The way of obedience is long and difficult. Why not come to terms with the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4, cf. “ruler of this world,” John 12:31; 16:11)? Why not compromise just a bit and make the desired end an immediate reality? (*Matthew*, Robert H. Mounce)

We are not immune from the temptation of power. We may seek it for its own sake, for self-protection, or even for the sake of doing good. Power tempts us in all life’s arenas: family, business, society, government, and the church. It is there for the taking.

The price. Coercive power carries a high price. If Jesus was going to accept Satan’s offer, the Lord would have to pay the price.

First, Jesus would have to reject God’s chosen method of ministry: servanthood. In effect, Satan argued that God’s way was untried, senseless, and likely to fail. Why embrace an unproven, painful method when the historically proven strategy of power was available?

Second, Satan required Jesus to turn from God to him. If Jesus wanted to use the devil’s tools, He would have to seek them on His knees before their owner. This reveals a principle we would do well to remember: coercive power is a tool of the enemy. To embrace and use it for any reason is risky and leads to idolatry, to what almost must be labeled as Satan worship.

The refusal and the alternative. Jesus refused the devil’s offer in no uncertain terms: “Begone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’” (Matthew 4:10, NASB).

He made a decisive choice to worship only God. Jesus saw the connection between coercive power and Satan. In order to have one, you had to worship the other. Jesus refused. (*Proclaim*, January-March 1995, Michael A. Smith)

We, too, must make a clear choice to worship only God. We must ask Christ to come into our lives and rule. We must lay aside all claim to the power or right to order our own lives.

We, too, must make a decisive choice to seek only God's chosen means of ministry.

Examine every arena of life – personal, family, and community life. Ask, what would it mean to replace coercive power with servanthood in all of life? What apologies would we have to make? How many long-standing policies and procedures would need drastic revision or discarding? Would our public and private stance toward our enemies have to change? Might we have to give up the engaging game of church politics? (*Proclaim*, January-March 1995, Michael A. Smith)

You and I are almost surprised when Satan leaves so easily, though in fact God's Word offers us the same power. James 4:7, 8 says, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." When Jesus does this, the response is immediate. As the final verse of our text reveals, "Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him."

We could learn a great deal from the way in which the Master dealt with temptation. In the first place, He was able to recognize deception because He was so intimately familiar with the Scriptures. If we are not, sooner or later we will be deceived. Secondly, Jesus set an example by responding to each temptation immediately. We play with temptation for a while, and the longer we do so, the greater its power over us becomes. (*Jesus Meet Him Again ... For The First Time*, Paul Smith)

Temptation will come; the easy way will look attractive – how will you respond?