

“Tempted, Yet without Sin”

Matthew 4:1-11

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It would be difficult to overstate how absolutely essential this passage about the temptation of Christ is. The whole plan of redemption hangs on Jesus’s response to the intense temptation he faces. Earlier in chapter 3, Jesus began His ministry by saying He “must fulfill all righteousness” (15). Yet if in identifying with sinners, He gave in to temptation and sinned, He would He would forfeit a life of perfect righteousness and would not longer be qualified to offer His life as an acceptable sacrifice to God for our sin. Jesus is being put to the test and if He failed the test, not a single human being could be spared of God’s just wrath against his sin.

Immediately, in verse 1 we discover something that is essential for us to understand if we will have a mature understanding of temptation so as to stand against it. This discovery is found in the dissonance of [verse 1].

Study vs. 1 with me: *“Then Jesus was led...”*

- Who was Jesus led by? The Spirit
- Where did the Spirit lead Jesus? The wilderness
- For what purpose did the Spirit lead Jesus to the wilderness? To be tempted...
- Who was Jesus tempted by? The devil (James 1:13-14)

Doesn’t this verse create a little dissonance for you? Why would the Spirit lead Jesus into a situation where He would be tempted by the devil? Didn’t Jesus teach us to pray, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil (the evil one)? Here’s what you need to understand. The word translated “tempted” here is *peirasmos*. Its basic meaning is simply to test or to prove. The word itself does not have a negative connotation unless it is in a context in which a person is enticed to evil. When that’s the case we translate it as *tempted* in English but otherwise translated it as *tested*. Here’s what you need to understand. When the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness, God’s holy and divine purpose is to test Jesus so as to prove His righteousness and

loyalty to the Father. Yet in the very same circumstance, Satan’s intent is to entice Jesus to sin and forfeit His righteousness by enticing Him to act independently of the Father. It was an essential part of God’s plan for Jesus to not only be tested but directly tempted by the devil to overcome temptation in order to overcome the curse of sin.

Let me put it this way, in every single circumstance 3 things are true:

- God’s will is resolutely set on holy purposes for good.
- Satan’s will is resolutely set on evil purposes for destruction.
- Your will is not absolutely resolute. It is torn between sin and righteousness so that you must make a choice. Will you respond to God’s holy and good purposes for you or will you respond to the devil’s evil and destructive purposes for you.

Here’s the point of application for us: ***Fighting temptation is more than just resisting our sinful cravings. It is equally an opportunity to demonstrate our obedience and faithfulness to God.*** So when you find yourself in a moment of temptation, Satan’s intent is not for your happiness but for your destruction, to entangle you in sin. But God’s will for you in that moment is to seize the opportunity to demonstrate obedience and faithfulness to God that will result in your sanctification (growth in godliness).

So when we pray, “lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one,” we are praying for God’s grace, while under the pressure of testing, to be faithful and obedient to God so as not to succumb to the devil’s enticement to sin. We are not praying for a life free of testing or temptation, but rather to pass the test of obedience and faithfulness to God so that we don’t sin.

Whether the circumstance results in good or evil, spiritual growth for spiritual bondage, depends entirely on our response¹ of either revering God with our worship or worshipping something/someone in His place. The devil can’t make you sin! He can tempt you, but when you resist that temptation and cling to Christ it works for your good and sanctification.

¹ John MacArthur, *MacArthur NT Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, pg. 227-228.

Yet even when you don't give into the temptation and sin, the very fact that your heart was enticed by that temptation probably points to a need for even deeper repentance and transformation in your life. James says, "each man is carried away and enticed by *his own lust*." Shallow repentance only looks at the sin committed on the surface. But deep repentance wrestles with the reality that my heart was drawn to love something that God hates. And so we may need to pray in the same breathe, "*Lord, thank you for the grace to not give in to that temptation yet Oh Lord, how I need you're your redeeming power to transform my heart from wanting what you don't want for me.*"

As we come to verse 2, it seems almost humorous at first glance to say, "after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry." But I believe vs 2 is making a point that is critical to the context of Jesus' temptation. When a person fasts for a long period like 40 days, the first 3 days are intensely uncomfortable. Your body continually harasses you with hunger pains, but around the 3rd day your body goes into a state of ketosis, which simply means that your body begins to draw from your reserves and you don't feel hungry like you did the first few days. But when your body runs out of reserves at about 40 days, it tells you that you are transitioning into a dangerous realm of starvation that can damage your body. And way it tells you this, is by resuming intense cry for food.

Jesus' hunger in vs. 2 is not just a desire for food or mere discomfort like we experience on a day to day basis. It is vital! It is an essential, basic necessity for his body at its critical point of need.

What we've seen so far in vs 1 and 2 are both the physical and spiritual contexts of Jesus's testing.

Physical Context:

- **Danger and discomfort of the wilderness**—Adam and Eve failed the test in the best of circumstances, in the comfort of Eden surrounded by every kind of food. Yet Jesus has to pass the test in the worst of circumstances—at the point of starvation in the wilderness which

was dangerous, rocky, hot, barren and desolate. We know from Eden is that bad circumstances aren't to blame for our vulnerability to temptation, yet they can intensify it. By the way, its wise for parents to not coddle their kids. Oh, be compassionate, be caring, be tender. But don't coddle. Making life as easy as possible will only weaken their ability to do what is hard and make them soft to the pressure of temptation.² The good news is that because Jesus stood the test in the worst of circumstances, He can come to our aid in any circumstance.

- **Alone**—*the place you are most vulnerable to temptation is where you are alone*
- **Severe physical need and weakness**—Not just tempted to pursue a physiological desire, but tempted to pursue what His body desperately needs. Hunger not only weakens us physically but also makes us more vulnerable to moral and spiritual weakness.³

Spiritual context:

- Tested by God
- Tempted by the devil—face to face encounter with the devil himself (3x's back to back at a peak point of weakness in his humanity)
- The whole plan of redemption hangs on Jesus' response to the test

It is in this context, that the temper comes to proposition Jesus. Like a spiritual boxing match between God and evil, Satan will challenge Jesus to 3 rounds of temptation. Yet God will use this fight against the ultimate rebel in the universe as a test to prove His Son's perfect righteousness and fitness to reign as King.

1. Round 1: **The temptation to serve self** (vs. 3-4)

[vs. 3-4] In the last verse of chapter 3, the Father had just declared, "*this is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.*" Now the devil plays off that truth ("if you are the Son of God"), probably not so much questioning Jesus' sonship as attempting to turn the truth of His Sonship toward self-serving ends. *We are often tempted to take what is holy and use it to selfish ends.*

² Recommended reading: "*How to Not Raise an Addict*" by Mark Shaw

³ John MacArthur, *MacArthur NT Commentary: Matthew 1-7*, pg. 88.

You Can imagine how this might have played out: *“You are the Son of God! You don’t deserve to be hungry. You not only have every right to provide for yourself, you have the power to do it. So just turn these stones to bread.”* What’s wrong with that? Satan is suggesting that Jesus should use His divine sonship to His own advantage. He’s subtly trying to distract Jesus from waiting on the Father and trusting the Father to provide for His urgent needs. He’s tempting Him to work independently of the Father. He’s subtly pressing Him to self-will over the Father’s will (which includes the Father’s timing in providing for His needs).

The very heart of sin is a desire to live independently of God. In a sense to be our own god. This was precisely the temptation in the garden of Eden: *“You don’t have to listen to God. You can be like God knowing good and evil for yourself.”* It was a call to independence. And is this not the very sin for which Lucifer was cast out of heaven: *“I will make myself like the Most High”* (Isa 14:14). Lucifer made himself out to be his own god, his own sovereign in a declaration of independence from God (Ezek 28). And now Satan is tempting Jesus to also function independently of the Father, just as He tempts us everyday to do our own thing unmindful of the ways of God.

What’s the opposite of a sinful heart of independence? It’s a heart of righteousness that lives in constant relationship of loving submission and trust before God. This is the heart of righteousness that Jesus must maintain by never living independently of His Father. And so Jesus responds to the tempter by saying, *“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’”* (4).

Here Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3 where God is reminding the Israelites that the commandments of God are for our good and for our prospering. Listen to what He says: **[Deut 8:1-3]** Jesus is standing where Israel stood (in the wilderness). He is being tested as Israel was tested. Do God’s commandments lead to life or to death (*“that you may live”*). And what is the lesson that comes out of all of this? *“Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord”* (Dt. 8:3). Does life come from food or from God?

Here’s the life principle you need to take hold of: ***No need exceeds your need to be right with God (obedience).*** Obedience to God’s word is more essential to your life than food is essential to the body at its most critical point. It would be better to risk starvation than to disregard the clear teaching and commands of Scripture.

Notice that Jesus began His rebuttal with the same three words each time He was tempted: *“It is written”* (4, 7, 10). He responds with *truth*. Not with a subjective approach to truth like a spiritual impression or what God seems to be saying. He responds with the objective, written truth of Scripture. Don’t overlook this. ***Temptation is always some form of deception aimed at the mind and heart and therefore must be combated with the truth of Scripture.*** Too often we just try to avoid the temptation. But if you want to start winning the war against temptation, you need to take the dagger of truth from God’s Word and pierce it in the heart—not only exposing the deception of the temptation itself but also confronting the lust in your heart that is drawn to it.

2. Round 2: **The temptation to test God** (vs. 5-7)

[vs. 5-7] Jesus had just established the written Word as the measure of righteousness (right standing with God)—that to obey God’s word is more essential than food itself. So now the devil cunningly attempts to use the written word to lure Jesus into a trap. How is that possible? How could Satan use God’s word as a trap for sin? He does it by taking the words of Scripture out of context to twist and distort the intended meaning of Scripture. The devil is misusing Scripture for the purpose of manipulation.

The devil is quoting from Psalm 91:11-12. Psalm 91 is about how God Himself will keep you from evil. He has the power to protect you and keep you from falling prey to evil. It’s a Psalm that calls us to trust in the Lord and His deliverance from the snares of evil and trouble of every kind. Whatever may happen, the Psalmist assures us that in the end God will repay the wicked and deliver His children because of His faithfulness.

But instead of using Psalm 91 as an encouragement to trust in God’s faithfulness and protection, the devil abuses the words of scripture as a

means of urging Jesus to put God to the test. *“Has not God said that He would send his angels to bear you up and keep you from harm? Why don’t you prove that the words and promises of God will really stand up to the test?”* Do you see how crafty this is? The promises of God are true and trustworthy, but Satan is encouraging Jesus to test God by presuming upon his faithfulness. This is the temptation of presumption.

How many times do we find ourselves here. We know that we are sinning. In fact, we have premeditated and plotted out our sinful escapade, all the while presuming upon God’s grace. We assure ourselves by saying, “God will forgive me,” give no consideration to the very real possibility of His discipline.

Jesus responds by quoting Deut 6:16 and pinpointing what this temptation is really about: *“It is written, You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.”*

When Moses spoke these words in Deut 6, He was referring back to a time in Exodus 17:1-7 when the people needed water and they tested the Lord, saying, “is the Lord among us or not?”

This manner of testing is the opposite of trusting. Psalm 91 is about trusting the Lord—a call to faith, to trust God in the face of danger—that’s when the promises will be proven true. Yet Satan is using Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus to presume upon God’s faithfulness by putting Him to the test. But Jesus calls His bluff.

How often do we presume upon either God’s faithfulness or His grace by not walking by faith. We just live our lives not giving consideration in the moment to God and His rightful influence on us or our situation. Romans 14:23 says that *whatever is not from faith is sin*. Anything we do outside of an abiding relationship of trust and obedience to the Lord is sin. It is sin to go throughout our day not being consciously aware of the Lord enough to live in response to Him. But Jesus wouldn’t even make bread apart from His Father’s blessing. Jesus never lived independently or unconsciously aware of his Father and therefore was without sin. You must understand that sin is not just about what you do but how you fail to relate to God in loving faith and submissive obedience.

3. Round 3: **The temptation to exchange the glory of God for a lesser glory** (vs. 8-10)

[vs. 8-10] Not the devil cuts right to the heart of the matter. No more craftiness. Just a straight proposition: “worship me (bow to me) and I will give you all the kingdoms, all the glory of this world.” The heart of this temptation is glory by an easier way, without the cross. “You don’t have to go through the humility and suffering of the cross! Just worship me and I’ll give it all to you.” ***The heart of temptation is always about worship and what you worship is what you will serve.*** Every time you yield to temptation you are worshiping something or someone in place of God and giving the thing or person power over you in a way that replaces God’s rightful authority over you. (Its not wrong to be under other people, but its wrong to replace God’s authority over you with their authority over you).

Jesus responds again from Deuteronomy 6:13-14: *“Go, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.”* That is heart, the essence of righteousness. To worship the Lord God and serve Him only. That is what a right relationship with God looks like, continuous awareness and responsiveness of faith and obedience to the Lord.

So now we can understand how everything that is not from faith is sin. Because anything done outside of a relationship of serving God is a violation of righteousness which is defined as worshipping God and serving Him only.

Now notice how the passage ends in vs. 11: “The devil left Him; and behold, angels came and began ministering to Him.” Even though Jesus was at an extreme moment of need, He waited on the Father who now faithfully provides for His need. James 4:7 – ***“Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee...”***

Conclusion:

- We see what righteousness looks like in real life—unwavering faithfulness and loyalty to God in all of life, to worship and serve Him only. (the goal of your life is abiding!)

- We discover that the essence of sin is living independently of God (whether subtly or blatantly)
- Here's the take home: ***Just as Jesus' righteousness was proven genuine as He faced temptation, so our character will be revealed by either giving in to temptation or by following Jesus' example of overcoming temptation with the authority of God's word.***