

# TEMPTED FOR YOU

Matthew 4:1-11

First Sunday in Lent (Series A)

February 26, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 4, verses 1 through 11. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 4, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

<sup>4</sup> But he answered, "It is written,

“ ‘Man shall not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple <sup>6</sup> 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.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' " <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. <sup>9</sup> And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." <sup>10</sup> 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.’ ”

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Let's talk about temptation. We face many temptations. And we give into almost as many.

We face different kinds of temptations. Some are quite obvious. But most of them are more subtle. And usually we don't think about those ones. When we talk about temptation, we might think more of the obvious ones. We think of temptation as being those moments when we kind of want to do something, but we know it's wrong, and we say, "I know shouldn't, but I really want to." It's like what you might see on a TV show sometimes, where there's a miniature angel on one shoulder, and a miniature demon on the other, and they debate with each other. You know

there is a clear difference between right and wrong, but you have an internal debate anyway. Those are obvious temptations.

But those obvious temptations are a very small minority of what we actually face. The vast majority of our temptations go unnoticed. When we give into temptation, we probably don't even know we're giving in to it. It might be something that we don't give much thought to, or, more likely, we actually think we are choosing the good.

As we look at the Bible, we see that this is the way the devil works. He knows that it would be risky to make a frontal assault. If he were to lay everything out the way it really is, we might notice that he's just trying to destroy us. We might do it anyway, but this is too risky for the devil. In reality, the devil is much craftier.

Consider the way he tempted Adam and Eve. He didn't say, "Hey, I know this fruit is really bad for you, and it's going to cause you to die, but you know you want it." Give the devil some credit. He may be a fool, but he ain't stupid. Instead of tempting them to just eat something bad, he made it look good. He said, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:4-5). Do you see what he did there? For one thing, he lied. He just flat out lied. He also made God look evil, as if he was withholding something good from them. But the clincher is that he made the evil thing look good. He made them think that if they ate, they would become like God. Now who wouldn't want that? Wouldn't that be a good thing? So Adam and Eve didn't think, *Hey; this is a temptation*. Instead, they saw it as an opportunity for self-improvement.

And if we look at the three temptations Jesus faced, the third one is pretty obvious. It's not too hard to figure out that worshipping the devil is bad. But we might look at the first two and say, "What would be so bad about that?" Turning a stone into bread doesn't sound so bad, and it's not so much different than something Jesus did later. And doing a trust fall off the temple doesn't sound sinful either, I mean, assuming the angels are actually going to catch you.

The devil doesn't usually come at us with obvious temptations. Instead, he sneaks in the back door. He disguises himself as an angel of light in order to make good look evil and evil look good.

It's kind of like those email or text message scams that say, "We've detected a new login to your account from an unknown device. Click here to verify your account." By the way, I hope you know not to click on those. And whatever you do, do not enter your username and password. They disguise themselves as the real thing, when they're really the ones trying to steal your info. That's the way the devil works, except he's much better at it. He disguises himself to look good, and he disguises his temptations as good.

So what does this mean for us? It means that, almost certainly, there are many temptations we have given in to, believing we were actually doing the right thing. And it is likely that there are many things we have believed, which are actually false and evil.

So, what are we to do? Consider how Jesus dealt with the devil's temptations. With each one, he quoted Scripture to resist and dismiss the devil. And in Ephesians 6, when the apostle Paul teaches us "to stand against the schemes of the devil," among the many pieces of armor, he names "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:11, 17). And Psalm 119:11 says, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." If we don't know what God has spoken, and if we have not committed ourselves to believing it, we will inevitably believe some lie of the devil instead. And we will not even know that it is a lie, nor will we know that it is evil. We will believe that it is true and good.

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We see many examples of this in our world today. And I suppose the world has always had them. The devil has been very successful in the area of sexual temptations. And this is kind of scary, because sexual temptations are the one category where he probably doesn't need to be crafty, but he is anyway. He has made us believe that as long as two people love each other, or even just as long as it's consensual, it's good. But this has only left people broken and lonely. It leaves children in broken or incomplete families. And this has led to great increases in depression, loneliness, substance abuse, crime, and a host of other things. And it's not like people think that what they're doing is wrong. They think they are doing right. Or we might look at the evil of abortion, which, from a biblical, Christian perspective is so obviously evil. But not everyone sees this. Those who defend it believe they are giving freedom and opportunity to women, when they're actually causing death, and they're leaving women with pain and grief. Or in the recent phenomenon of transgenderism, those who advocate for it believe they are helping people find freedom in their identities. And even as they promote it among children, they believe they are helping children understand who they are or find a sense of belonging. They sincerely believe they are helping them, even though it's causing more confusion, it's sterilizing children, it's mutilating their bodies, and it's setting up a lifetime of depression.

Now my point is not to try to fight all these battles at once. I'm not foolish enough to think that will actually work. But my point is that the people on the other side of these issues sincerely believe that they are doing the right thing. And I hope it will help us look at them with compassion and empathy instead of hatred and mockery. I also want us to see that this is the way the devil works, so that we can recognize it in our own lives as well. He does not often tempt us in obvious ways. He does not make evil look evil. Instead, he makes good look evil, and he makes evil look good. So we give in to evil ideas, and we do evil things, all the while believing that we are doing the right thing.

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We should obviously be watchful of this. But that won't be our solution. We have already given in to many temptations, so we are guilty. And there will, undoubtedly, be more. The big solution is not us overcoming temptation, but Jesus overcoming temptation in our place. And that's what we see in his temptation in the wilderness. Jesus did this for you.

In the previous month or two, during the season of Epiphany, we talked a few times about how the first four chapters of Matthew present Jesus as the new and greater Israel. I'll review just a little bit. There are a number of indicators of this. The first thing that clues us into what Matthew is teaching is his statement after Joseph, Mary, and Jesus return from Egypt. When Jesus was a young child, the evil King Herod wanted to murder him, so they fled to Egypt. After Herod died, they returned. And Matthew says, "This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet [Hosea], 'Out of Egypt I called my son'" (2:15). The interesting thing is that in Hosea, God was talking about the people of Israel and how he brought them out of slavery in Egypt. This was the big deliverance story of the Old Testament. It's how God adopted Israel as his own people. But in Hosea, the LORD goes on to complain about how Israel was rebellious. Even though he loved them, they turned away from him. So it seems kind of strange that Matthew would apply that passage to Jesus, but what he's doing is indicating that Jesus is the new Israel. Then the events of Jesus' Baptism, followed by these forty days in the wilderness, correspond to Israel crossing the Red Sea, and wandering in the wilderness for forty years. At Jesus' Baptism, God the Father speaks from heaven, declaring, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17). That again reminds us of that passage from Hosea. And finally, all three of Jesus' temptations echo temptations Israel faced in the wilderness. The difference, of

course, is that they failed at every temptation, and Jesus succeeded. What we see from all this is that Jesus is the new and greater Israel. He came to succeed where they had failed. He fulfills the Law in Israel's place, and, thus, he becomes the light to the nations that Israel was called to be, but never lived up to. So it's not just Israel that benefits from this, but the entire world.

When Jesus resisted the temptations of the devil, he did it for you. In fact, every righteous thing Jesus did, he did it for you. He did it in your place. We often talk about how Jesus took your sins in his own body when he was nailed to the cross (1 Peter 2:24). But it's not just that he took those sins away from you; he also gave you his perfect righteousness in return. We heard this verse on Ash Wednesday, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:20). Jesus became sin, and you became righteousness. There's a blessed exchange or a trade that took place. It's a very lopsided trade, and Jesus is okay with that. He trades his righteousness for our sin. So his victory over Satan becomes yours.

Now I've kind of thought before, and this was a bit of a nagging thought for me, though I never said it out loud, "What's so impressive about Jesus resisting the devil's temptations? I mean, he is God after all. Is it really that big of a deal?" But that's a silly way to look at it. It would be like saying, "What's so impressive about Hank Aaron hitting 755 homeruns? I mean, he's Hank Aaron, after all." And of course Jesus was never going to fall for the devil's temptations, but it's still impressive, just like everything God does is impressive.

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So let's look a little closer at the three temptations. The first thing the devil says is, "If you are the Son of God ..." He says that with both the first and the second temptations. He's calling into question what God had just declared at Jesus' Baptism. He's challenging Jesus to prove it. This is how the devil makes evil look good. Wouldn't it be a good thing for Jesus to prove it and shut the devil up? It kind of seems like it would be. But Jesus isn't there to prove anything to the devil. Remember, he's there to succeed at the temptations Israel failed at. Israel had failed at this when they found themselves with no food in the wilderness. And instead of trusting God to provide for them, they grumbled against him (Ex. 16). So Jesus resists the devil's temptations, and he trusts in his Father to provide for him at the proper time. To us, it might seem like a small matter, as if it wouldn't really be that bad for Jesus to just turn a stone into a loaf of bread. But Jesus won't do it. Even in the small matters, and even when it feels like his life is on the line—remember, he hadn't eaten in forty days—he refuses to sin. Even if it only seems like a little sin, he won't do it.

The second temptation has to do with testing God. The devil took Jesus to the top of the temple and told him to throw himself down. Again, this almost seems like a good thing to do. This would seem like a great way for Jesus to demonstrate his faith. I mean, imagine if you could do this. If you could jump off a building and have angels catch you on the way down, wouldn't that prove that our faith is true? And wouldn't that be a good thing? But true faith doesn't make up its own good works. It lives in obedience to God's commands and trusts him to take care of the results. Jesus sees that this is really a temptation to test God. And this is another temptation that Israel fell into. On one instance, when they found themselves in a place with no water, they quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink" (Ex. 17:2). The problem here wasn't so much that they grumbled, but it was more like, "Okay, if God is really among us, let him prove it." They were testing God. That is, they were demanding that he prove himself to them. But where Israel gave in, Jesus stood steadfast.

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The third temptation might seem like the most ridiculous one. The devil promised to give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, if he would fall down and worship him. Again, Israel failed at this a number of times, most notably when they built a golden calf and worshipped it (Ex. 32). This is the one that is most obviously sinful, but it's also one of those "Doesn't the end justify the means?" things. This is the sort of thing that we would rationalize. *Yeah, worshipping the devil is bad. But maybe I could just pretend to worship him, like I don't really mean it. Then I would gain all the kingdoms of the world. And think of all the good I could do with that.* But this temptation assumes a lie. It assumes that the devil actually possesses the kingdoms of the world. Now, to a certain degree, he does have some control or possession over the kingdoms of the world, but it's not absolute. Absolute power belongs to God alone. He's the one who truly possesses the kingdoms of the world, and he grants authority to whom he chooses. When we give in to "ends justify the means" temptations, we're assuming that God either cannot or will not do good to those who wait for him. But Jesus trusts that his Father will give him all the kingdoms of the world, and he doesn't have to sin in order to get them.

This temptation really gets at the heart of Jesus' ministry. He does eventually wrestle the kingdoms of the world away from the devil, but that wasn't the time for it. The time and place for it was at the cross. The devil's power is that he can accuse. He accuses us of sin, and he accurately argues that, because of our sin, we deserve to die. So Jesus wrestled this power away from the devil when he made atonement for sin. When Jesus died for all of those sins, he took away the devil's right to accuse. That is how Jesus gained the kingdoms of the world. He purchased them with his blood. So on that day in the wilderness, Jesus resisted the devil's temptation. He stood firm, and he waited for the proper time and place.

The devil left Jesus, but not forever. There were other temptations. The last temptation came as he hung on the cross. The bystanders mocked him, and, just as the devil had tempted Jesus to prove himself in the wilderness, at the cross he spoke through his children. The bystanders said, "If you are the Son of God, come down now from the cross" (27:40). That sounds just like the devil's temptation. And, of course, this temptation also comes from the devil. But Jesus held fast. In the wilderness, despite his extreme hunger, he trusted his Father to take care of him. And at the cross, despite the intense pain, the cruel mockery, and the weight of all the sin of the world, Jesus trusted his Father to vindicate him.

And he did it for you. This was all for you, because we have not resisted the devil's temptations. We have given in more times than we even know. So the devil accuses. And he would be right, except for this: Jesus did not give in. He was steadfast in the midst of temptation, even to the point of death. So the devil's right to accuse is taken away, and you are innocent. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.