

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 17, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS:
THE TEMPTATION (2)**

Matthew 4:1-11; James 1:13-15

Last Sunday we began a new series of messages entitled “Travels with Jesus.” You may have some interesting traveling companions as you go through this life. I hope God brings into your life traveling companions who inspire you, who come along side to encourage you, who walk with you during difficult, even painful seasons in your life, who embody the grace of God that comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. (Like you and me.) I hope God blesses you with traveling companions in life who help you to pursue God with your whole heart. I hope you will be this kind of traveling companion for those God brings into your life.

You will also have traveling companions in life who frustrate you, who test your patience and love. At some point in your life, you will most likely have traveling companions who are just difficult people. Some people are like that. Some people are just hard to get along with. You can probably think of a difficult person – or more than one – in your life right now.

Regardless of what traveling companions you may have in this life, there is no better traveling companion than Jesus. There is no better travel guide and guardian for your journey through life in this world. As I mentioned a couple weeks ago, we are not in the land of the living on our way to the land of the dying; we are in the land of the dying on our way, by God’s grace, to the land of the living.

Wherever your travels in this life may take you, don’t go anywhere without Jesus. Don’t go anywhere without Him. And do not ever forget His promise to be with you always. Before He ascended into heaven, He said to His followers: “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). He *is* with us and *will be* with us always – in all our experiences, in all our travels, in all our tests and trials and troubles and temptations, in all our joys and sorrows, in all our successes and failures – He is with us in and through the person of the Holy Spirit, who is God with us here and now.

The first stop in our travels with Jesus in the Gospels took us last Sunday into the wilderness (or desert) of Judea, where the Holy Spirit sent Jesus to be tested and tempted by the devil. As we look again at Matthew’s account of Jesus’ showdown with the devil in the desert, the first thing I want you to see and understand is that the devil is real. And so is temptation.

The devil (*diabolos* is the Greek word for “devil” in the New Testament) is not a myth. He is not a fiction or a fable. He is not some kind of impersonal force. The *diabolos* is for real. His name is Satan, which means “Adversary.” He is a real spiritual being who is the sworn enemy of God, the sworn enemy of Jesus, of the church, and of every believer – every person – who knows God and loves God and seeks to walk with God by faith in Jesus.

The devil is real. He is powerful. But he is not all-powerful. He is not omnipotent. He is not co-equal with God. God is omnipotent. The devil is not. As powerful and influential as Satan is, he is not equal in power or stature or authority to God. The devil is your enemy – an enemy you and I must take seriously – but he is a defeated enemy. His final defeat was assured at the cross where Jesus died for us. The devil’s defeat was assured in the death of Jesus and His resurrection from the dead. The devil is still hard at work in this world, and there may be times (like now, perhaps) when we wonder if he has been or will be defeated, but God’s Word assures us that, while the devil remains a foe to be taken seriously, he is ultimately a defeated foe. Satan will not win. He will not usurp God’s throne. In God’s perfect time, Satan will be banished from God’s world. Forever.

In the meantime, we must do battle with him. People who deny the devil’s existence or discount his efforts to ruin us spiritually (and in any other way) do so at their own peril. Because Satan is real and powerful, we’ve got to take him seriously *without* living in fear of him. As followers of Jesus, we don’t need to fear the devil, because the Bible assures us that the One who is in us – God the Holy Spirit – is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

The devil is real. He is not a figment of our imagination. He was not a figment of Jesus’ imagination out in the desert. Later on, Peter would compare the devil to a roaring lion prowling around, looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).

Temptation is real, too. It happens to everyone. No one is immune. No one is exempt. Not even Jesus. Maybe that’s the reason why Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us about the temptation of Jesus. Temptation is inevitable. It’s not just “bad” people who are subject to temptation. “Good” people get tempted, too. People who love God get tempted. People who love God’s Word and read it daily get tempted. Pastors get tempted. So do elders and deacons and Sunday school teachers. And missionaries.

Temptation is inevitable. No one is exempt. It is not an “if” but a “when.” Everybody undergoes temptation of one kind or another. In fact, we undergo temptations of lots of different kinds – like Jesus, who experienced three specific kinds of temptation during His time of testing in the wilderness.

It is absolutely essential to understand that it is not a sin to be tempted. Temptation itself is not a sin. The Bible makes that clear when it tells us that Jesus was tempted in every way – with every kind of temptation under the sun – but He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Tempted? You bet He was. But He never gave in to temptation. He never sinned. Not a single time. The temptation to sin is *not* sin. When you tempt others to sin, or give in to temptation yourself, that is sin.

Temptation happens to everyone. It is a “when” not an “if.” Remember what the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 10:13, a verse I mentioned last Sunday: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And *God. Is. Faithful.* He will not let you be tempted beyond what

you can bear. But *when* you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (*emphasis added*).

Temptation is inevitable. But it does not come from God. The Bible is very clear about that. Listen to what it says in James 1:13-15: “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, *nor does He tempt anyone*; but each person is tempted when, by our own evil desire, we are dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (*emphasis added*).

The kind of death that James has in mind here is spiritual death, the death that comes from being estranged or separated from God as a result of our sin. As Paul says in Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” That’s the bad news of the gospel. But the good news is contained in the second part of the verse: “The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Even when you give in to temptation, for everyone who turns to God with a heart of true repentance and trusting faith, there is forgiveness with God (Psalm 130:4). Grace is available to sinners who give in to temptation. Always.

When you are tempted, don’t try to pin the blame on God. Temptation doesn’t come from Him. Does God allow us to be tempted? Yes. He allowed His own Son to undergo a time of severe testing in the wilderness. He allows us to be tempted not to trip us up (which is what Satan hopes to do) but in order to test and strengthen our faith, so that we may serve Him more faithfully and more fruitfully for His glory. But God Himself tempts no one to sin. It is absolutely contrary to the nature of His holiness, His righteousness, goodness, and love, to tempt anyone to do evil.

Bear in mind that while temptation comes from our own sinful desires, sometimes the devil seeks to exploit those desires, those ungodly passions or ambitions or fears that reside within us. The tempter doesn’t usually attack us where we are strong. He hits us where we are weak (morally or spiritually). Satan knows what buttons to push in your life. He knows where you are most vulnerable to attack. He may even quote Scripture to you, and then apply it in a twisted or self-serving way, as he tried to do with Jesus in the second of the three temptations in the wilderness.

Last Sunday I mentioned the 4 resources Jesus had at His disposal in the desert that are also at our disposal when we are tempted. Those 4 resources are:

- Prayer
- The assurance of the unfailing, steadfast, unchanging love of God the Father
- The presence of the Holy Spirit
- The Word of God

All of these resources that were available to Jesus are also available to us. The one that takes center stage in the desert is the Word of God, to which Jesus appealed every time the devil tried to trip Him up. On each occasion when He was tempted, Jesus’ response to Satan was: “It is written” (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). The Bible is our first line of defense against the strategies, tactics, and attacks of the tempter. The bottom line is that the more of God’s Word you know,

the more you weave it into the fabric of your life, the more you take it in and then work it out in your life, the more spiritual insight and power you will have to fight temptation. There is simply no substitute for the regular, even rigorous, reading and the daily, disciplined digestion of God's Word.

I don't know how Jesus could make it more clear to us that we need God's Word and we need to rely on God's Word if we are to successfully resist the devil and defeat him in his efforts to lure us into sin and even, if he could, to ruin us spiritually.

Let's look at each of these temptations in the desert and how Jesus responded to them. The first was to turn stones into bread (Matthew 4:3), which, as we said last week, is not a temptation any of us has ever experienced, because it is not something we have the ability to do. But Jesus *did* have the ability. He *could* do it. The devil wanted Jesus to use His power as God in the flesh for His own personal benefit, to meet His very real physical needs. He wanted Jesus to use supernatural means to satisfy His hunger. After 40 days of fasting, Jesus was, after all, very hungry. And there was nothing to eat there in the desert. Jesus, however, refused to put His physical needs – specifically, His need for food – above His spiritual commitment to obey the Father and to trust Him to provide for His needs. So, when the devil nudged Him to go ahead and turn the stones into bread in order to satisfy His hunger, Jesus said: “It is written (in Scripture): ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” That statement comes from Deuteronomy 8:3. In *The Message*, it says: “It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God's mouth.”

In other words, there is more to life than food. Food *is* important. In fact, it is essential. When Jesus says that we don't live by bread alone, He is not saying that food is not important, or that we should not be concerned for people who are hungry. What He is saying is that it is not the only thing we need in order to live life to the fullest. We need food for our bodies. Everybody needs food – and we should act compassionately, lovingly, and generously to do what we can to help provide food for those who don't have enough to eat. One way to do that is to support ministries like Koinonia in the Franconia/Rose Hill/Kingstowne community. We don't want anyone in our community, or anywhere in our country, or anywhere in the world, to go to bed hungry. We want everyone everywhere to have enough to eat. But there is more to life than a full stomach.

In fact, from the perspective of eternity, it is better to have an empty stomach and a full heart than a full stomach and an empty heart. Here is how Douglas Sean O'Donnell put it: “To die hungry with the gospel in your heart is to die with the hope of everlasting life. But to die with your mouth stuffed [and] your belly filled, but your heart cold to the gospel is to die everlastingly. Better to die with an empty belly and a full soul than with an empty soul but a full belly. Do you remember the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man? Jesus makes this very point. Lazarus dies hungry but goes to heaven; the rich man dies full but goes to hell” (Luke 16:19-31) (O'Donnell, *Matthew: All Authority in Heaven and on Earth*, 87-88).

We need food to live. But we need more than food that sustains our bodies. We need food to nourish and sustain our souls. This is the food that comes from the Bible. From the Word of

God. In the Thursday *eNews* this past week, I shared with you a few thoughts from an article by Rosaria Butterfield on “Get(ting) More from the Bible This Year” that was posted at desiringgod.org. Butterfield says: “The word of God meets the needs of sinful (people) like nothing else can. For a Christian, the word of God is inextricable from our identity in and union with Christ. The Bible gives us power” -- power for living – “and it does so by imparting to us the same power that raised Jesus from the grave. And,” she goes on, “the Bible is pure and true as well. Its truth restores the soul, comforts the afflicted, emboldens the weak, and corrects the sinner.... (T)he word of God is not to be trifled with.... (T)he Bible,” she says, “is a fruitfully dangerous book. You are to wield it as a surgeon’s knife to your well-worn thoughts and precious feelings, because truly, as you read it, it is reading you.”

A fruitfully dangerous book. I don’t think I’ve ever heard the Bible described that way before. It is dangerous in the sense that you cannot take its message seriously without changing your life. You cannot take its message seriously without *God* changing your life. It is fruitfully dangerous in the sense that by allowing God to speak His word into your life and by building your life on the foundation of God’s Word, your life will be more fruitful in regard to things of the spirit than you could ever imagine. And you will find God’s Word to be both a sword and a shield to protect you when you are tempted.

In the second temptation, the devil himself resorted to Scripture in an attempt to get Jesus to do something spectacular (taking a leap from the highest point of the temple) so that God would, as promised in Psalm 91, step in to save Him. It would validate Jesus’ identity as the Messiah and be a huge PR success. Jesus simply said: “It is written.” Then He quoted Deuteronomy 6:16: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” It is always wrong to try to force God’s hand, even if you think it is for a good cause.

In the third temptation, the devil offered Jesus the world. Literally. But there was a catch. All Jesus had to do was to bow down and worship Satan. In essence, he offered Jesus a shortcut to His kingdom, a way to avoid the suffering and humiliation of the cross. The thing is, if He accepted Satan’s offer, Jesus would gain the whole world but forfeit His own soul. And He would forfeit our souls as well. To accept the shortcut Satan proposed would short-circuit the plan of salvation. It would sabotage it. It would derail it. It would nullify it. Which is what the devil hoped for. But Jesus was not buying what the devil was selling. In no uncertain terms, Jesus said: “Away from me, Satan! Get lost!” Then He quoted the Book of Deuteronomy again. He said: “For it is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only” (Deuteronomy 6:13).

Not once. Not twice. But three times Jesus answered the temptations of the tempter with the truth of God’s Word, which is available to us in the temptations we experience in our travels through this life.

I’m not finished talking about what the Bible says about temptation and how to resist or combat it. So we will come back to this again before we move on to the next stop in our travels with Jesus. We will talk next time about some of the more common temptations to which people succumb these days.

When you are tempted (remember, temptation is not an “if,” it is a “when”), you don’t have to surrender to it. You don’t have to give up and give in. You have the Word of God to protect and guide you. You have the privilege of prayer. You have the presence and power of the Holy Spirit at work in your life. And you have the promise – the assurance, the certainty – of God’s unfailing, steadfast love for you. May God give you the grace and power to resist and overcome every temptation you face this week.

Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. Amen.