

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 24, 2021**

**TRAVELS WITH JESUS (3):
TEMPTATION**

Hebrews 2:10-11, 14-18

We've been talking about the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). Today I want to talk about some of the more common temptations *we* experience and how to combat them. Let's look at what the Bible says in Hebrews 2 about the temptations Jesus suffered, and what that means for you and me. It is printed in your bulletin and will be on your screens both at church and at home.

Let's give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God's Word from Hebrew 2.

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From the temptation of Jesus in the desert of Judea, we learn at least three things:

1. THE DEVIL IS REAL.

We learn that the devil is real. Satan is not a fictional character made up by Jesus or the biblical writers to explain the presence of evil in the world. The devil is not a figment of someone's religious imagination. Jesus knew the devil is real. Chuck Swindoll says: "Whoever lives under the impression that Satan doesn't exist is living in a dream world" (Swindoll, *New Testament Insights: Insights on James, 1 & 2 Peter*, 247).

Jesus took the devil seriously, and so must we. We must not underestimate his power and intent to inflict great harm on us through temptation, deception, lies, manipulation, and evil of all kinds. As it says in 1 Peter 5:8: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour." The devil is your enemy. And he is as dangerous – even more dangerous – than a hungry lion. In *The Message*, it says: "The devil is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping." Swindoll says: "Like wanderers in the wild savannahs of Africa, we must always be aware that someone is hunting us.... Satan prowls and pounces when we least expect it" (Swindoll, 249).

If you underestimate the devil, if you fail to take his existence and power into account, you will be in deep trouble. You will be an easy mark.

At the same time, we must not overestimate the power of Satan. He is God's enemy and ours, but he is not God's equal. He wants to be sovereign, but he is not, and never will be. He does not have the power to make you do anything. To say "The devil made me do it" is a cop-out. He can't make you do anything. He can tempt you. He can entice you. He can prod you. He can give you opportunity. But he cannot make you do anything. You always have the option to say "No."

You can't blame everything that is wrong with the world on the devil. Much of the suffering and heartache in the world is simply due to the fact that we live in a sinful, fallen, broken world, a world in which both people and structures are opposed to God. The devil exploits this sinful, fallen, broken condition to serve his evil purposes, but he is not all-powerful. And, as I said last Sunday, though he is a powerful enemy, he is ultimately a defeated enemy – because Jesus assured the devil's doom through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. So we can say as Martin Luther did:

The prince of darkness grim,
 We tremble not for him –
 His rage we can endure,
 For lo, his doom is sure.
 (Luther, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*)

The devil is real. But he is not almighty.

2. TEMPTATION IS REAL.

The second thing we saw last week is that temptation is real. It comes to us in all kinds of shapes and sizes and colors and flavors and settings. It is an unavoidable fact of life. Sometimes, as in the case of Jesus, it comes as a frontal assault from Satan himself. Sometimes, as we saw in James 1:14-15, it comes from within us, from our own selfish, sinful desires. James describes the anatomy of temptation like this: “Each of us is tempted when we are lured and enticed by our own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.”

In his book *Temptation*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German pastor and theologian who was executed in a Nazi concentration camp just a few weeks before the end of WWII in Europe, wrote about how this works: “With (seemingly) irresistible power desire seizes mastery over the flesh.... It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire, or ambition, or [pride], or desire for revenge, or love of fame and power, or greed for money.... Joy in God is ... extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, He loses all reality, and only desire for [what we want] is real.... Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.... The lust thus aroused envelops the mind and will of man in deepest darkness. The powers of clear discrimination and of decision are taken from us. The questions present themselves: ‘Is what the flesh desires really sin in this case?’ ‘Is it really not permitted to me, yes – expected of me, now, here, in my particular situation, to appease desire?’ It is here that everything within me rises up against the Word of God” (Bonhoeffer, *Temptation*, 33).

Temptation is real. It is unavoidable. No one is immune. Not even Jesus. Temptation happens to everybody. *But* – this is a big *But*, so listen up and pay close attention: *Resistance is not futile!* If you're a Star Trek fan, you know way better than I that one of the favorite sayings of the alien cyborgs in Star Trek is: “Resistance is futile.” Maybe that is true in the Star Trek world. Or maybe not. But it is definitely *not* true in our experience of temptation. In fact, the

Bible gives us this explicit counsel for dealing with the tempter and the temptations with which he attempts to ruin our lives:

James 4:7-8: “Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.” *Submit* to God. *Resist* the devil. *Draw near* to God. In *The Message* it says: “Let God work His will in you. Yell a loud no to the devil and watch him scamper. Say a quiet yes to God and He’ll be there in no time. Quit dabbling in sin. Purify your inner life.”

1 Peter 5:9: “Resist him (i.e., the devil who is on the prowl like a hungry lion), standing firm in the faith.”

Resistance to the devil is *not* futile. Resistance to temptation is *not* useless. Giving in to sin is not a necessary or foregone conclusion. You can successfully resist temptation and defeat the devil. But you can’t do it alone. You can do it only in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit at work in you as you humbly and willingly submit to His sovereign and gracious rule in your life. You can do it only as you surrender to the leadership of God the Holy Spirit in your life. *He* is able, more than able, to do immeasurably more than you could ever ask or think or hope or dream or imagine, according to His power that is at work in you (Ephesians 3:20). You are *not able*. But *He is able*. He is able to give you the power, strength, and will to say “no” to temptation and to tell Satan to take a hike.

God has promised in His Word that when you are tempted, He will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10:13). Sometimes a temptation is so strong that the only way to resist it, the only way to stand up under it, is to get out of there. To run for your life. Maybe even literally, like Joseph did, when he found himself in a compromising situation with the wife of Potiphar in Genesis 39. The best course is to avoid putting yourself in a situation where you know temptation looms like that hungry lion on the prowl.

Common Temptations

What are some of the most common temptations people struggle with today? I don’t know exactly what temptations you may be most susceptible to, but I think we can come up with a list of at least some of the temptations that are common today.

Maybe you know the “Seven deadly sins” catalogued by theologians centuries ago. They are:

- Pride (conceit, self-exaltation, self-promotion, and thinking of yourself more highly than you ought)
- Greed (the desire and pursuit of more and more wealth or possessions or power)
- Anger (the kind of anger exposed when you lose your temper; anger that produces hate and desires vengeance)
- Envy (the green-eyed monster that is jealous of what someone else has or receives)
- Lust (which usually refers to unbridled sexual desire)
- Gluttony (overindulgence of food, habitually eating too much)
- Sloth (which refers to laziness, or the unwillingness and failure to do what we ought to do)

If you take an honest look in the mirror, you may be able to identify with one or more of these “deadly sins.” But there are other temptations that may be challenging in your life:

- Worry: Are you a worrier?
- Gossip: Do you have loose lips?
- Procrastination: Do you put off until tomorrow (or some other time) what you should have done yesterday?
- Workaholism: Are you addicted to work? Or tempted to work too much?
- Are you tempted to spend too much time on media?
- Are you tempted to spend money on things you can’t afford?
- Lying: Do you deliberately distort or shade the truth?
- Cheating (at school, on your taxes, in your work)
- Stealing
- The excessive use or abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Gambling
- Viewing pornography or any sexually explicit material: For men especially, this is a powerful temptation.
- Sexual sin of any kind (what the Bible calls *porneia*)
- Saying things or posting things on social media meant to tear others down or to inflict wounds
- Taking credit that rightly belongs to someone else (which is actually a form of stealing)

Have I named the temptation(s) to which you are most vulnerable? Some temptations are easily conquered. Some are much more difficult and may require “eternal vigilance” as long as you live. But you must never forget that resistance is not futile. With the help of the Holy Spirit, you can resist the devil successfully.

One temptation that seems to be particularly prevalent in our culture today is the temptation to demonize or delegitimize anyone who disagrees with us politically. The political environment in America has become so polarized that even many professing Christians have succumbed to the temptation to write off other Christians who happen to hold different political views, or align themselves with a different party, or support different candidates.

Robust political engagement is a good thing. Christians *should* be actively engaged in government and public life. Unfriending fellow believers on the basis of politics is not a good thing. At the risk of stating (or re-stating) the obvious, let me remind you that Jesus is not a Democrat. Jesus is not a Republican. Jesus is not the property of one political group or another. Jesus is greater than our politics. You and I must never elevate our political views to the level of an essential of the faith. We must firmly and fiercely resist this temptation. We must not give in to the temptation to judge our brothers and sisters in Christ on the basis of their political views.

Instead, we must rise above our political differences and model for our nation how to live together in unity and love, even when we disagree about political policies or priorities or personalities. As followers of Jesus, we need to lead the way. We need to show our fellow

Americans how to love, respect, and honor one another, even when we disagree. If we can't do it as followers of Jesus, how can we expect anyone else to do it?

3. THE WORD OF GOD

The third thing we talked about last Sunday is the primacy and power of God's Word in dealing with temptation. The Bible is not the only spiritual weapon at our disposal. But it is our first line of defense when Satan attacks and tries to trip us up. Whatever temptation(s) to which you are most vulnerable, God's Word can help you to resist and overcome, if you will apply its truth to your life.

In looking at the temptations of Jesus in the desert, we saw that Jesus relied on the Word of God to resist the devil. At the risk of sounding like a broken record or a repeating CD, I want to say again that there is no substitute for the Bible in dealing with temptation in your life and mine. Jesus relied on it in His dealings with the devil. If it was good enough for Him, it sure is good enough for us! You cannot benefit from the Bible when you face temptations if you don't know what the Bible says. You must read God's Word and hide it in your heart so that you may not sin against Him (Psalm 119:11). You must let God's Word dwell in you richly (Colossians 3:16); you must let it have the run of the house in your life (*The Message*). You must build your life on the solid rock foundation of God's Word (Matthew 7:24-27). You must allow God's Word to renew your mind and shape the way you both think and act. You must make the reading of God's Word a regular, daily part of your spiritual regimen. As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3: "There is nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us" (2 Timothy 3:15-17, *The Message*).

Resistance to temptation is not futile. You are not doomed to fail. We've heard a lot about "The Resistance" in our country in the last 4 years or more. You can be part of "The Resistance" against temptation and sin in all its forms, against the devil in all his ways. Let's be that kind of "Resistance" in the life of our country. If you draw near to the Lord in prayer, He will draw near to you. He has given you His Word to enable you to resist the devil. In the power of the Holy Spirit, you can defeat the devil. Just as Jesus did in the desert. When you are tempted, Jesus can and will help you. He has been through it. He knows what it is like. He knows how to resist the devil, standing firm in the faith.

When you fail, when you fall short, when you give in to temptation, remember that God is merciful and gracious. He is a forgiving God. He does not treat us as our sins deserve. Nor does He repay us according to all the evil inclinations of our hearts (Psalm 103:8, 10). So you can take heart.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always. Amen.