

February 4, 2007

SERIES: The Good News, as reported by Matthew

SERMON: **Getting Victory Over Temptation**

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 4:1-11

SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus

As most of you know, our preaching schedule got a little out of order due to a couple of snow Sundays in January. Last week Josh Black brought a great message on the calling of Jesus' first disciples in Matthew 4, but today I'm going to back up to an event which just preceded the calling of the Twelve—the Temptation of Christ. We broached this subject three weeks ago as we talked about how vulnerable we can be to Satan's attacks immediately after we have experienced spiritual victory. But today I would like to return to the Temptation and focus on how we get victory over it.

British playwright Oscar Wilde once bragged, "I can resist anything except temptation." He seems to speak for a lot of people today. Resistance is not much in vogue in our society. It is much more popular to succumb, or even to turn our temptations into virtues (as has been widely done with homosexual behavior, or living together before marriage, or a woman's choice in regard to reproduction). If there's no organization willing to lobby in behalf of our particular sin, we can always call it a disease (as has been done with addiction to alcohol and gambling), or when nothing else works, we can just blame someone else (as has been done with Big Tobacco). "It's not my fault I've got lung cancer; the tobacco companies did it to me."

But most of the Christian people I know don't like to rationalize their failures. They really desire victory over temptation. They genuinely want to live obediently to God and they are willing to take responsibility for their lives. But *still* they struggle with temptation—sometimes almost to the point of despair.

I want to speak to those people particularly today. And despite my sermon title, I want to make clear right up front that there is no easy answer to temptation, no simple formula that works like a charm for every temptation. I do believe, however, that I can offer you some insight and some help, and the primary vehicle I want to use is the example of Jesus, as recorded in Matt. 4:1-11:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will

bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.¹

In this monumental struggle between the Son of God and Satan, we are given clear and applicable insights into the devil’s strategy against Jesus (and against His people) but we also receive insight into the way of victory over the Tempter. Side by side we are shown the way of danger and the way of escape, the way that leads to defeat and death and the way that leads to victory and life—in short, the way of Satan and the way of God.²

Jesus experiences the full range of human temptation.

One of the tendencies we must constantly fight when we study the life of Jesus, as we’ll be doing for many months to come, is to think of Him as other-worldly, almost an alien, one who is so far beyond us that we cannot connect. But the whole purpose of the Incarnation was so Jesus could become one of us in order that He might lead us to God. He is certainly *more* than a godly example to us, but He is no *less*. We can and must learn from Him how to handle temptation.³

Temptation is tough. When we introduced the temptation of Christ we noted several factors that made His temptation unusually so. First, it came hard upon the heels of His baptism, at which time He was anointed by the Holy Spirit and crowned by His Father with the greatest affirmation possible—“This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.” All of us know how vulnerable we are when we have just been to the mountaintop. Jesus no doubt experienced that, too.

We also noted some of the circumstances that made His temptation particularly difficult—He was alone for six weeks in the desert and desperately hungry following a 40-day fast. Furthermore, He was faced with a supernatural adversary—the Devil Himself.

This morning I want to go further and highlight the fact that Jesus experienced the full range of human temptation. He was “in all points tempted as we are,” the writer of Hebrews tells us. Perhaps you are responding to yourself, “Good luck! He wasn’t tempted to click a computer mouse and have a voluptuous woman appear.” Or, “He wasn’t tempted to go to a casino boat and dump his hard-earned money onto a blackjack table.” Or “He wasn’t tempted to shop til He dropped at one of a dozen major malls within driving distance of home.”

True, but friends, when you really stop and analyze these particular temptations, they differ from His only in respect to the details. In regard to the root issues involved—lust, risk-taking, and greed for possessions—Jesus experienced all of them. There is no category of temptation we face that He did not face. There is no intensity of temptation we face that He did not face. He felt every struggle you or I feel. He, too, wrestled with the rush of adrenalin and the voice that says, “Just do it—no one will see, no one will know!”

Do you know how tough Jesus' temptations were? The author of Hebrews describes them as "suffering." Hebrews 2:18 says, "Because he himself *suffered* when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." I like that, because I also suffer with temptation. It's agonizing at times. It's dreadful.

Temptation is also varied. The Apostle James makes that clear: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials (temptations) *of many kinds*, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2). Now, we may raise our eyebrows about his advice here—to consider our varied temptations pure joy. But we know better than to question the fact that temptation comes in many varieties. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to temptation. The Evil One has so many tricks in his bag that if he can't trip you up with one temptation, he's got three more well-suited for the job.

Temptation is both common and unique. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man." This is easily misunderstood. It does not mean that everyone experiences the same temptations. The phrase "common to man" means literally, "human." In fact, the Greek word is *anthopinos*, from which we get our English word, "anthropology," or the study of mankind. It's another way of saying that "No temptation is *superhuman*." We can never excuse ourselves by saying that "a superhuman temptation hit me, and that's why I succumbed"—never! It won't fly.

However, this does not mean your specific temptations are common to everyone else. As a matter of fact we are all unique in the way temptations affect us. I have never in my life been tempted to smoke, but some of you struggled with an addiction to tobacco for 30 years or more. I have an absolute revulsion to gambling and I wouldn't put a dime in a slot machine (or bet on an office pool) if I was all alone and knew for sure no one would ever find out—I just despise gambling. But some people have cars that seem to automatically steer themselves to casinos. I am never tempted to cuss someone out because I never heard cussing in my home, but for some of you it was as common as saying "hi."

But I am tempted by things some of you are not tempted by. (And some of you would love to see the list, wouldn't you? Others of you know it too well). My temptations are different from your temptations, but they're all human; none are supernatural.

Jesus, too, experienced temptations that were common, in the sense of being human or normal. He faced a superhuman tempter but no superhuman temptations. But His temptations, while human, were also unique—uniquely designed by the Evil One to fit Jesus' own nature and situation. It wouldn't be a temptation to you or me to have someone command us to turn stones into bread, because we can't do that, but He could.

Let's take a few moments to look at the three specific temptations Jesus faced.

1. Jesus is tempted to use His power and position for personal gain. Verse 3: "The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'" I

wonder if the Devil was present at Jesus' baptism (or observing from afar) and heard God say, "This is my Son, whom I love," because the focus of his challenges seems to be on Jesus' identity as the Son of God. Both of the first two temptations actually begin with the statement, "If you are the Son of God. . . ."

Now why would it have been a temptation to Jesus to turn stones into bread? Well, was He hungry? Absolutely, He was famished. Was the fast He was on required? No, there is no requirement in the New Testament to fast at all, much less for 40 days. Is there anything wrong with eating? No, of course not. So what's wrong with using one's power to make a sandwich? Nothing, so long as it is in God's will and in God's time. But that's not the case now for Jesus, and He knows it's not.

You see, when Christ left His glorious position in heaven to become a man, He voluntarily surrendered the independent use of His divine attributes. That is made so clear in Philippians 2, where we are told that Jesus, though in His very nature God, did not cling to the prerogatives of deity, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. He humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross.

But what we need to understand is that Jesus, in order to become the perfect sacrifice, had to be perfectly obedient and submissive to His Father throughout His life. Even here at the beginning of His earthly ministry, for Jesus to seize control of His power and position and use it for His own benefit would have been to deny the entire mission He undertook in the Incarnation, which was for God to become a man and offer Himself as a perfect substitute so that we could have a right relationship with God.

2. Jesus is tempted to test His Father. It says in verse 5: "Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down.'" And the Devil even appeals to Scripture (he's not above that, by the way, when it suits his purposes). He quotes Psalm 91:11,12: "For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus is taken to the temple in Jerusalem, overlooking the Kidron Valley some 450 feet below. And from there the Devil tempts Jesus to take a swan dive from 40 stories. He says in effect, "Before you go any further in Your mission, You'd better be sure Your Father can be trusted. The Bible says God will catch you, but given what lies ahead, a test run would sure be wise." The Devil tries to get Jesus to doubt God's protection and to create some unnecessary situation where God has to prove Himself.

3. Jesus is tempted to accept glory without suffering. Satan now drops his pretense and makes one final desperate effort to corrupt Jesus. He finally reveals his supreme purpose—to induce Jesus to worship him. He had first suggested what Jesus ought to do for Himself. Next he suggested what the Father ought to do for Jesus. Now he suggests what Satan could do for Jesus—in exchange for what Jesus could do for him.⁴ Verse 8: "Again, the devil took him to a very high

mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’”

In effect the Devil says, “You can skip this whole suffering thing and everything that has been promised to you in the future can be yours *now*. You only need to submit to *my* will instead of the *Father’s* will.” He’s offering Jesus a short cut. And I imagine it is very, very tempting—glory without suffering, a kingdom without a cross, a crown of gold instead of a crown of thorns.

Jesus responds to temptation by orienting His thinking around Scripture and tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit.

I trust you’ve noticed the obvious—that Jesus responds to each and every temptation with Scripture. But we would make a mistake if we assumed that quoting the Bible in some mechanical way is the essence of His response. The mere quoting of Scripture is not what drives the Devil away.

Jesus quotes the Bible, but He does so in full understanding of the context and in full submission to its authority. He sees in the Scriptures the full and complete revelation of God’s will for Him. He recognizes that there is nothing He will face that does not have an answer, *at least in principle*, in the Scriptures. And I would like to challenge you with that same truth: There is nothing you will face—no temptation, no challenge, no ethical dilemma, no option, nothing that does not have an answer, at least in principle, in the Word of God.

Now if that’s true, what logical conclusion should we draw from it? Of course, we must *know* the Word of God if we’re going to face the issues of life with God’s answers. If He is my Creator, if He knows me best, and if He has revealed the answers to life’s issues, then I am a fool not to search for those answers! Fortunately, God has not sent us on a quest for a Holy Grail or an Ark of the Covenant—some mysterious entity that always seems to be just out of reach. He has placed His Word squarely in our hands and given us every tool we need to discover what it means. In his farewell address to Israel Moses spoke these words:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deut. 30:11-14)

And, friends, the single most important reason why this church exists is to help you discover what God says about the issues of life and then to respond to Him with obedience and worship. Every other purpose pales in comparison. And I’m not just talking about the purpose of our preaching—I’m also talking about the purpose of Children’s Ministry, Youth ministry, ABF’s, Men’s Ministry, Women’s Ministry, LBI, CBS, BSF, you name it!

The second thing Jesus does in resisting the Devil is to tap into the power of the Holy Spirit. The

Holy Spirit led Him into the desert to be tempted, but the Holy Spirit didn't abandon Him there. As a matter of fact, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of conception. Throughout His life He relied on the power of the Spirit as He performed His miracles and taught God's truth. We, too, need to yield ourselves to the Spirit—not in some trance-like state, but consciously yielding our minds and bodies to His control. That's exactly what is meant when Eph. 5:18 says, "Be filled with the Spirit."

Now having considered the two main tools Jesus employed in resisting the temptation—Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit—let's examine the specific responses He gives to these three temptations.

1. He refuses to substitute short-term gain for long-term obedience. He responds to the first temptation to satisfy His ravishing hunger (turning stones to bread) by quoting Deut. 8:3: "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" There are plenty of people who try to live on bread alone—if not literal bread, then symbolic bread like salary, perks, bonuses, awards, promotions, etc. But what they discover eventually is that they are not really living but just existing.

If you want to really live, you've got to rely on spiritual food. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work" (John 4:34). The essence of Jesus' response seems to be that short-term gain, such as a sandwich in the desert, is no substitute for long-term obedience, or as Eugene Peterson describes the life of faith—*A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Later in this same discourse Jesus will say, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things (including food) will be added to you." We are *always* better off to obey God and to trust in His gracious sustenance than to impatiently and selfishly provide for ourselves in ways that disobey, or in any way compromise, His Word.

2. He refuses to "force" God to rescue Him from a foolish decision. To the temptation to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple (and to the Scripture that Satan quotes), Jesus responds, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" There is a real difference between risky behavior and faith. Once in a while I hear church leaders suggest something very risky and justify it by calling it faith. Followers are often expected to buy into the dream solely on the basis of the vision and charisma of the leader. And once the project is launched the message is often communicated that God's people are responsible to step in and salvage God's reputation.

I think a great corrective has been offered by Henry Blackaby when he suggests that rather than asking God to bless our vision and our work, perhaps we ought to find out what God is already blessing and get on board with that. On the contrary, Satan is tempting Jesus to set the agenda independently. He says, "Do something risky, call it faith, and then challenge the Father to step up and rescue you." Would God have done so? Would He have rescued Jesus? The question is almost illegitimate, and certainly hypothetical and therefore unanswerable. But should Jesus try to find out? Absolutely not.

Faith is not demonstrated when we test God.

Faith is demonstrated when we trust God.

3. Jesus rejects illegitimate means to a legitimate end. He responds to the temptation to accept the kingdoms of this world and their splendor just for worshiping Satan, with these words: “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” The goal of receiving the kingdoms of the world was a legitimate one for Jesus. In fact, that was something the Father had already promised Him. In one of the great Messianic Psalms, God says to Christ: “You are my Son . . . Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession” (Psalm 2:7, 8). (We sometimes use that as a missionary verse, but it is not a promise to us, but a promise to Jesus!). The problem with this temptation is not the legitimacy of the end; the problem is the illegitimacy of the means.

God not only has the end in mind (in this case giving Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth); He also has sacrificed the means, and the means for Jesus is the Cross. Anything that short-circuits the Cross is illegitimate. Look at Philippians 2:8-11:

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him (cross first, then, exaltation) to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The fact is that most temptations we face have at their root legitimate ends. They appeal not to bad desires but to good desires but in illegitimate ways or at inappropriate times. Charles Durham writes,

Back of every theft there was somewhere a desire for ownership that became misdirected. Behind every act of gluttony there was once a pleasure in good food that God gave. Beneath every instance of adultery has been a desire to be loved, to experience closeness, to know the warmth of human touch and to have satisfied a sexual drive that was conceived in God's mind. Even behind an act of violence is somewhere a good desire that has been frustrated and unmet until twisted into criminal form. This does not justify any sin; it merely shows more clearly what temptation really is.⁵

Years ago I heard a speaker say, “It is never right to do wrong to do right.” Jesus set the standard for us by rejecting illegitimate means to a legitimate end.

Jesus discovers the rewards of resistance—Satan leaves, angels come, and our salvation is safe.

Verse 11 says, “Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.” Again we must be careful not to draw the wrong conclusion here, and assume that just speaking the words, “Away from me, Satan!”, will automatically remove the Devil or his henchmen from our lives. Jesus had the power to banish Satan with His word; we don’t.

God’s *modus operandi* for us, as given in James 4:7, 8, is to “resist the Devil and he will flee from

you,” but never forget the immediately preceding words: “Submit yourselves, then, to God.” And the words that immediately follow are, “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” The promise of victory over Satan is sandwiched between the requirement to be obedient to God and the exhortation to be intimate with God. The disobedient or distant believer has little leverage over the Evil One.

Not only does Satan flee, but angels come, and they minister to Jesus. I assume they feed him (and what a meal that must have been!), give him water, encourage His spirit, and protect Him while He sleeps. I believe in angels; I really do. I believe in guardian angels—for God’s children and for churches. They are God’s servants to protect believers and to comfort those who refuse to yield to temptation.

But there is a third major reward as a result of Jesus’ resistance—our salvation is safe. One of my former colleagues, Paul Stolwyk, preached on the parallel passage in Luke a number of years ago and said,

What is this showdown in the desert all about? Is the Devil just trying to make Jesus’ life miserable? Or is there something at stake here? What hangs in the balance? What is at risk? What would have happened if Jesus had given in to the temptations? If Jesus stumbles, what’s the big deal, no one is looking.

What is at risk is you and I. This showdown is for the souls of people. We hang in the balance. Your coworker is in the balance. Our neighbors are in the balance. The people of Tatarstan are in the balance. If Jesus caves, it’s over. If Jesus stumbles, the New Testament ends right here. We will be left with another good person like Gandhi or Mother Theresa. We won’t have a Savior.⁶

Jesus’ experience demonstrates to us some of the keys to victory over temptation.

Know what God expects. This goes back to what I said earlier about knowing Scripture. It is through Scripture that we learn the character of God and the expectations He has for our lives.

Know the Enemy. Learn about the Evil One, his henchmen, his tactics, and the specific ways in which he tends to work on *you*.

Know yourself. One of the keys to dealing with temptation is know when and where you’re vulnerable. If you are more susceptible to temptation when exhausted, make sure you get the rest you need. If you struggle with lust, engage a filtering service on your computer. If you struggle with alcohol, don’t stop at a bar on the way home. I understand that the Wizard of Id cartoon is written by a Christian. He certainly has a lot of insight into human behavior. In one of my favorites Bung the drunk goes into the tavern and asks for a soda. “I’m on the wagon,” he proudly announces. The bartender replies, “If you’re on the wagon, why do you come *here*?” The cocktail waitress who overhears the conversation butts in and answers for Bung, “He comes here so that when he falls off, he won’t have so far to walk.” Unfortunately, that attitude describes a lot of people. Know yourself.

Know your resources. And the single most important resource we have—in fact, the *only* absolutely indispensable one—is the indwelling Holy Spirit. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit from conception. We aren't. But we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit from the time of conversion, and we can choose to be filled or controlled by Him.

If you lose a battle (unlike Jesus did), don't go AWOL from the war. You're going to lose some battles, I assure you. There is not a person in the audience this morning who has a perfect record in battling temptation. All of us have won some and lost some. Some have lost more than they've won. A few may be at the end of your rope feeling totally helpless and hopeless. May I offer you a word of exhortation this morning? Don't surrender to the Enemy! Don't give up! And may I offer you a word of hope also? Losing a battle is not the same as losing a war! Proverbs 24:16 says, "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again."

In a powerful article in *Leadership Magazine* an anonymous writer told the story of his incredible battle with sexual lust and his eventual healing by God. One statement stands out to me:

I cannot tell you why a prayer that has been prayed for ten years is answered on the 1,000th request when God has met the first 999 with silence. I cannot tell you why I had to endure ten years of near-possession before being ready for deliverance. . . . But what I can tell you . . . is that God did come through for me.⁷

And He will come through for you. Remember the verse I mentioned way back at the beginning? 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man." Here's the rest of it: "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." God will not allow the juice to be turned up higher than you can stand. Not only that, He will provide a way out. You may not choose to take it, but it's there. Count on it. Because He is faithful!

The Lord's Table. It is our privilege to receive the Lord's Supper this morning. I want to go back to something I said earlier this morning, when I described the third temptation as one in which Jesus was tempted to seek glory without suffering, a kingdom without a cross, a crown of gold instead of a crown of thorns. Friends, aren't you glad Jesus refused the Satanic shortcut? It was the Cross that purchased forgiveness for our sins, including the sin of yielding to temptation. It was the Cross that purchased our salvation.

As you receive communion this morning I encourage you to give to Jesus that issue in your life that is your single greatest temptation. Put it under the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. Recognize that His sacrifice is sufficient to forgive, and His power is sufficient to enable you to resist the next time, through the power of His Holy Spirit.

1. Temptation tests our character by offering us choices to live outside the boundaries of God's revealed will. That's exactly what Satan did to Adam and Eve. God gave them enormous freedoms, but He also established one little boundary—one tree out of the myriad of trees in the Garden from which they shouldn't eat. But Satan tempted them to violate that boundary by

questioning God's goodness and his truthfulness. That's also essentially what He did with Jesus in the desert, and it's what he does routinely with us. Adam and Eve yielded; we often yield. But that's not the *necessary* result, for Jesus demonstrated it is possible to resist temptation and be obedient to God.

2. John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, 85.

3. Satan met Adam in the paradise of Eden, where everything good was provided and nothing harmful existed. Adam lost his battle with Satan while in the perfect situation. The Second Adam met Satan in the desolate, forbidding wilderness, where he was without food for forty days. Yet what the first Adam lost in an ideal environment the Second Adam won back in a terribly imperfect environment. What better proof can there be that spiritual and moral failure are not caused by circumstances but by the character and response of the one who is tempted. (John MacArthur, 87).

4. MacArthur, 96.

5. Charles Durham, *Temptation: Help for Struggling Christians*, 29.

6. I might even add a fourth reward: *His model of a godly lifestyle remains intact*. Jesus' lifestyle is one marked by self limitation, acceptance of suffering, and faith. A few years ago, one of the men in our congregation was given the opportunity to move to another city and resume working for the company from which he had been laid off. This position would double his current salary and allow him to finish the years of service necessary to receive a full pension upon retirement. As he considered the choice, he decided to stay where he was because of what God was doing in his life through the ministry of the church and because of the way God was using him in people's lives. He followed Jesus' example and became downwardly mobile. He took a voluntary demotion for the sake of the kingdom of God. He accepted some suffering. He believed God could be trusted. That's radical kingdom living.

7. "The War Within: An Anatomy of Lust, *Leadership*, Fall Quarter, 1982, 45.