

When Tempted

Matthew 4:1-11

I have a question: Have you ever been tempted? Or maybe the better question is: What tempts you? As all of us desire things we can't ready have, we can all honestly say that we have been tempted at one time or another. Our temptation may differ. Some of us are tempted by food. It is reported that obesity is at epidemic height in our nation. Are your temptations houses or land, or that apartment in a nice area of town that you can't afford? Maybe it is money? The amount of the daily three or daily four or the Mega Millions or the Multi-State lotteries demonstrate that we spend our money on the dream of becoming rich! Maybe your temptation is business ownership, but haven't done your homework or don't want to work hard enough to make it a success. Is your temptation prestige, favor or honor? Do you want people to know you are blessed by God beyond what others can possibly hope to expect – that God always answers your prayers with a “yes?” Do you want others to know you are so blessed that you never become ill and everything you experience is positive? Are you tempted by political power and authority?

I had some friends in college who all had to take a chemistry class. They were enrolled in the humanities, but a requirement of the university was that all of them enroll in and pass a science class in order to graduate in their respective fields. Some way one of them gained access to the mid-term or final examination. They shared the test and made elaborate plans for which exam question each would miss, so there would be no way to prove they had seen the test in advance. For them, the need to pass the examination justified their plans. We have all been tempted and all know what it is like to want to take the easy road to success.

Even Jesus knew the testing of temptation. However, one scholar says there were not really three temptations, but three variations on the same basic theme. The devil has a one-track mind. As from the beginning, he tempts his victims to go for *power*: "you will be like God" [Gen. 3:5]. Evidently he knows there is no surer path to internal contradiction and self-destruction. **Douglas John Hall**

At first glance, Jesus' temptation in the wilderness seems out of place, even heretical. It is almost gratuitous that Jesus was tempted, as we know he would not submit. Much like the inevitability of the cross, the defeat of the devil in his encounter with Jesus was inevitable. Jesus would overcome; yet this scene stands in a central place in Matthew between baptism and ministry, naming the reality of evil in the face of holiness.

Jesus was tempted by bread for his hunger. He was tempted to save himself from danger. Finally, he was tempted to take all the power in the world that the devil could offer. Each time he rejected temptation, he set up for us a way to understand the cross to come. Certainly God can save God's self from death on the cross, and certainly God in Jesus can refuse temptation to sin, but in our humanity we need to see God offer sacrifice and refuse temptation in order to learn the lesson ourselves. **Maryetta Anschutz**

As in the Old Testament (cf. Exod. 16:4; Deut. 8:3; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Amos 3:5-6), temptation here occurs with God's allowance, and it reveals the essential character of the tested one. God's Spirit has brought Jesus into a struggle with the devil in a place and time of God's choosing and allows Jesus' core commitments to be tested by the "one who attacks, misleads, deceives, diverts, discredits, or slanders." In Matthew, the devil seeks to mislead Jesus about the meaning of sonship and the purposes of God.

In the first confrontation, the "tester" encourages Jesus to satisfy his physical hunger by turning stones into bread. The devil's conditional statement does not reflect doubt about Jesus' identity or power. Indeed, it could be translated "Since you are the Son of God." The deceiver attempts to mislead Jesus into using his power for himself rather than trusting the Father to satisfy his need. Jesus sees through the deception clearly—and he refuses. Citing Scripture (Deut. 8:3), Jesus insists that there is more at stake at the moment than food, as essential as food is (e.g., 25:34-40). Jesus will not misuse his power for personal material gain.

The second test focuses on Jesus' vulnerability and need for safety. The devil invites Jesus to make himself secure from injury or even death. He even quoted Scripture to prove that God agreed. Jesus was not deceived. The devil was using Scripture out of context; it does not endorse testing God's protective grace for the sake of self-assurance. So Jesus rebutted the devil with a text of his own (Deut. 6:16) and applied it faithfully in its context. Jesus was, after all, God's Son and full of the Holy Spirit (3:11, 16-17). Jesus did not misuse his power to make himself safe and secure.

The third temptation attempted to seduce Jesus with domination and prestige. The devil offered Jesus control over all of the world's kingdoms, along with their praise and glory, in exchange for Jesus' allegiance. Jesus was not led astray. He rejected the deceiver's misdirection and quoted Scripture again (Deut. 6:13) in its context, saying, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Jesus did not misuse his power to amass clout and esteem. **Robert A. Bryant**

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, the author wrote of a junior tempter-in-training named Wormwood and his mentor Uncle Screwtape. Young Wormwood's task was to darken the heart of his "patient," to train him to love things worldly and reject God, so that Wormwood might finally escort him into what we can only

imagine is hell. The young apprentice was to keep his patient navel-gazing and self-involved, clueless about who he was.

Keep him spiritual and not practical, Screwtape advised, as it is the practical that often brings people to God. Encourage him to pray for tangible, desired ends and so direct his prayers to objects and not to God. Allow the patient to be oversensitive until everything, even his mother, grates on his nerves. Keep his prayers formless, as they are easier to manipulate. Turn his gaze away from God toward himself. Create a subtle conflict when he prays for courage; let him find himself turning boastful. In the final letter, the patient died and went to heaven, leaving Wormwood a failure and Screwtape in a spiral of anger.

The captivating part of the story is not that Screwtape and Wormwood were trying to create an army of ruthless killers; rather they were trying to create a generation of people who are defined by selfishness and insincerity, pettiness and pride, fear and a need to control the things of this world.

This is true of our own temptations. Most of us cannot imagine the devil offering bread after a forty-day fast. We do not know the fear of being held over the ledge at the top of the Empire State Building. We certainly do not know the temptation of being offered all the power in the world. Each one of us, however, understands the temptations Screwtape and Wormwood offered: pride, vanity, selfishness, and apathy. These are just as dark as Jesus' temptations.

Temptation comes to us in moments when we look at others and feel insecure about not having enough. Temptation comes in judgments we make about strangers or friends who make choices we do not understand. Temptation rules us, making us able to look away from those in need and to live our lives unaffected by poverty, hunger, and disease. Temptation rages in moments when we allow our temper to define our lives or when addiction to wealth, power, influence over others, vanity, or

an inordinate need for control defines who we are. Temptation wins when we engage in the justification of little lies, small sins: a racist joke, a questionable business practice for the greater good, a criticism of a spouse or partner when he or she is not around. Temptation wins when we get so caught up in the trappings of life that we lose sight of life itself. These are the faceless moments of evil that, while mundane, lurk in the recesses of our lives and our souls. **Maryetta Anschutz**

After the temptations, Satan departed and divine messengers arrived to serve Jesus' needs. He had come through each temptation through total reliance on God the Father. Jesus is God's Son, with whom God is well pleased (3:17). Clearly, temptation is not to be avoided at all costs (cf. 18:7; 26:36-46; Heb. 12:6). It is inevitable for God's children. Indeed, temptations of materialism, security, and prestige are not foreign to us. When tempted, by whatever form temptation may take, it may be passed through by means of trust in God to provide what is needed (cf. Gen. 22:1-14). The "tester's" power is real, but it is limited. Like Jesus, when we are tempted believers can trust in God's Word and saving power. Victory belongs to those who will follow Jesus through temptation (Heb. 2:14-18; 4:15-16). **Robert A. Bryant**

When you and I are tempted we have an example and advocate. My friends could have studied and been pleased with their desired accomplishment. They are toward the end of their careers and most were probably in positions of choosing candidates to work for them. They could have lived their lives knowing they made the right choice and not wondering whether others did the same. Whose example will you follow when tempted? May God bless you to follow Jesus' example.

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