

Matthew 4:3-4
(Deuteronomy 8:1-3; 1 Corinthians 10:1-5, 11-17)
“Believing God’s Word”

Introduction

Oscar Wilde said, “I can resist anything except temptation.” Sadly, most of us, even most Christians, are more like Oscar than like Jesus. But it need not be true of you and me.

As we began last Sunday to study the Temptation of Jesus, we noticed arising from the setting of the text two strong words of warning and two strong words of encouragement. We were warned that there is no spiritual experience so exalted that it puts us beyond the reach of temptation. Jesus had been baptized in water, the Spirit of God had descended upon him and a voice from heaven declared him to be God’s dearly loved Son. Yet, he was immediately led by the Spirit into the desert in order to be tempted by the devil. We were also warned that there is no place so desolate that we can escape temptation. The good news is that it is not a sin to be tempted. The bad news is that to be human is to be temptable. Our Lord taught us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” But, in this life we struggle against the world, the flesh and the devil.

However, we also heard two strong words of encouragement: first, that there is no place, no situation, no experience, so desolate that God’s grace cannot find us and deliver us from evil. And the second word is like the first: there is no temptation so subtle or so strong that we cannot triumph over it by the power of God’s Spirit working through God’s Word.

Jesus went into the wilderness to do battle for you and for me, to set us free from bondage to sin and futility, from fear and death. In our text, we will look this morning at the first temptation, which is really the essence of every temptation. In fact, these three temptations are not so much three different temptations as three aspects of the way that you and I are tempted over and over again to strike out on our own, doubting God’s love for us, and trusting our own ability somehow to bend God to serve our own purposes.

Body

1. The Point of Attack:

The attack is dangerous because it is personal: the attack is against Jesus himself, not against someone else. We are most vulnerable to temptations directed at us, rather than at those around us.

The attack is dangerous because it is concrete: the temptation was felt and experienced physically. Jesus was *hungry*. This wasn't a discussion about world hunger. Jesus had not eaten in over a month. So, too, I am not too very shaken by the needs of others. My problem is with the things that I think I need for a meaningful life:

What is your greatest perceived need just now? What is the area of your life that brings you the greatest sense of God's blessing and love, or the area where you feel the most thwarted and unloved by God? In either case, that is probably where you are most vulnerable to temptation.

2. The Purpose of the Attack:

The true purpose of temptation is not always apparent at first. We would not be ignorant of Satan's schemes. (And if you don't believe in the devil, you are all the more vulnerable to his attack.) The purpose of temptation is always below the surface, and always, finally, the same, though it takes a thousand different forms.

To awaken doubt: not to doubt the existence of God – at least not yet – but to doubt two things.

To doubt the truth of God's Word: This can strike in many directions. There are so many promises God gives us in his word: his promises to forgive sin, to provide for our needs to give us peace in trouble, direction in our confusion, power over sin, an eternal inheritance.

More specifically, to doubt the reality of our relationship with God as his dearly loved children. Too often we miss this central lesson from this first temptation. The essence of it was not about turning stones to bread, but about the insinuation: "If you are the Son of God...." At Jesus' baptism, God spoke from heaven and declared, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased" (3:17). Now Satan challenges, not only God's Word, but also his declaration of loving relationship. *This is at the heart of temptation: the attempt by Satan to make us doubt that we are God's children, and that he loves us.*

To incite rebellion: if he first only seeks to awaken doubt, it is with a view toward inciting rebellion against God.

It is to suggest that we need God's gifts more than we need him, and to suggest that we seize those gifts and use them to meet what we believe are our needs.

It is to incite us to seek autonomy, self-rule.

In the end, its aim is to separate us from God, who is the source of life, and so to destroy us. Make no mistake: what presents itself to us as the satisfaction of our deepest desires is actually an invitation to misery and death.

3. Defending Against the Attack:

Recognize the purpose of the attack. Be ruthless with yourself. Don't fall for the fakes and feints of the enemy. He aims to destroy you. Be on your guard.

Recognize that you haven't the strength to resist him, but you have a friend on your side who is stronger than your enemy.

The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him.
His rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure.
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth.
The Spirit and the gifts are ours, through him who with us sideth.

There it is, in Luther's great hymn: the Spirit and his gifts are ours through the one who sides with us, Jesus Christ, who triumphed over Satan in the wilderness, and will triumph over him still in ever desert place that we go through.

Recognize that the Spirit's weapon of choice is always the written Word of God. "It is written, 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" As we learn to live on God's Word, as we understand it, trust it, rest in it, then we realize that, in Jesus Christ, God says of us, "This is my child whom I love. I am well pleased!"

Conclusion

You and I face this form of temptation, sometimes subtle and other times overwhelming, every day of our lives. If we do not learn to deal with it from the truth and power given us by God's Spirit through God's Word, then we will live lives of defeat and failure, God's children perhaps, but enjoying none of the present benefits of the victory already won by Christ over temptation, sin and death.

But the victory has been won, and is the birthright of all who are in Christ Jesus. So seek the power of the Holy Spirit through a life of gratitude, manifested in an increasing obedience to Christ, as you follow him into a life of joy and peace.