

This Week's Thoughts For Study

Matthew 4:1-11

Facing Temptation

When you read the story of Adam and Eve being tempted in the Garden of Eden, did you ever just shake your head and say, "Why?" They're in a beautiful place; they don't have to work; plenty of food; they're going to live forever; no one is fighting, arguing, being difficult, and yet apparently it's not enough! As mind-boggling as that seems, if we are totally honest, we have been in similar situations when we've been tempted to do something to disobey the God and have done so; faced a choice where we knew the right course of action and done just the opposite, said something or said nothing, and the result has been pain, harm, sin against our Lord's teachings, against our fellow man, against the well being of our own souls. Today, we are reminded that temptation is not a thing of the past or something that we don't need to worry about anymore. It is something that is a part of our everyday existence in a fallen world, and it is something we must face head-on. Most of us can resist the obvious temptations: the open cash drawer when the store clerk has his back turned; the shiny new car left with the keys in the ignition outside the grocery store; the young man or woman who has had too much to drink or possess some disability – we wouldn't think of taking advantage of them. Some things are easy for us to turn away from and say, "No!" to. But other things keep our heads turning back and keep our eyes distracted. The devil knows just how to trip us up, too. He knows our weaknesses. We, too, like Adam and Eve, are drawn to what looks pretty, what is pleasing to the eye, but what is ultimately not good for us spiritually and is not in line with what God desires for our lives. It may be the drink that we rationalize with, "Just one won't hurt!" or the banned substance that we wanted to try, "just once." For some of us, looking at something online we know is not healthy for us. Whatever it is that trips you up, you need to put your guard up extra high.

In this week's scripture we read Matthew's version of the temptations dangled by the Devil before the newly baptized Jesus. At Jesus' baptism a heavenly voice proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Immediately Jesus is led into the wilderness "by the Spirit," not for a few quiet days of rest and reflection, but so that he might "be tempted by the devil". What is tested in the first two temptations and by Jesus' helpless presence on the cross is this Son of God's unswerving loyalty to his Father. The great significance of this temptation narrative is not that Jesus withstood these trials, but that in them Jesus' true nature and identity as the "Son of God" are celebrated. His fidelity to God and unshakable commitment to carrying out God's plans are what reveal Jesus' genuine "Son of God" identity to the believing reader. As the Devil tries to sabotage the unique quality of this relationship between God and his son Jesus, he begins with a seemingly small, even harmless test of Jesus' power. What is so wrong about Jesus miraculously transforming stones into bread as the Devil requests? The temptation Jesus faces here has nothing to do with filling his stomach and everything to do with fulfilling his call to obedience and fidelity before God. Neither is the issue here that this request is for Jesus simply to provide for his own needs. The problem, the temptation offered here, is that God's Spirit had taken Jesus into the wilderness for a period of divinely ordained fasting. If he would override God's will by creating bread in this wilderness, Jesus would participate in an act of willful disobedience against God. Such behavior, even about such a small act, would undercut Jesus' identity as the obedient, loyal Son of God. In the second trial, the Devil takes Jesus to the "holy city," Jerusalem. In Psalm 91:11-12 the psalmist proclaims that God will send "angels ... to guard you in all your ways" And that angelic hands "will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone"

Before tempting Jesus, Matthew records that the Devil carefully sets Jesus "on the pinnacle of the temple." Once again Jesus refuses to take the Devil's bait. As Jesus successfully rejects each of the Devil's temptations, he demonstrates again and again that this Sonship, unlike that of Israel, was to be characterized by perfect obedience. The final temptation the Devil offers is the most devious. Feeding himself and taking a grand-standing high dive off the temple would serve only to call attention to his own needs. But if the Devil

could really offer Jesus the keys to secular power, the dreams and ideals of a redeemed and rejuvenated relationship between Israel and God might actually be achieved here on earth, in Jesus' own day. But to gain this secular power, the Devil insists that Jesus must acknowledge and worship the Devil. As before, Jesus utterly rejects this satanic offer by squashing him with a biblical word. He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." In the face of this rebuke, the Devil leaves Jesus, and the promised angels of Psalm 91:11 swoop in to minister to the needs of the tired, hungry Jesus.

Everyone is tempted. Probably you won't ever be offered ultimate power over the kingdoms of the world; but how many in public office have told the little lie or obscured the truth for what they thought was the greater good? Whether or not I cheat on what I've given up for Lent isn't terribly significant in the great scheme of things; but it does say something about the value I put on commitments made as part of a spiritual discipline and perhaps about promises I make to my Lord. How can we say "No" to the powers and principalities of this world? By saying "Yes" to the ultimate power and authority, God. In fact, the necessary no cannot be invoked without the affirming yes. Jesus said no to the Devil because he had already said yes to the Father. Jesus said no to the seductive words of the tempter because he said yes to the authority of Scripture. You say to your child, no, you cannot play in the street. That necessary no is only possible because you, as a loving parent, have already said yes to your commitment to safeguard the health of your child. You say no to drugs because you have said yes to clean living. You say no to revenge because you have said yes to forgiveness. You say no to temptation because you have said yes to self-control. You say no to Satan because you have said yes to the Spirit. Hebrews 4:15-16, says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." His triumph over the devil becomes our triumph today because of the cross. Christ's death on the cross, even more than his resistance to temptation in the wilderness, strips Satan of the power of his tricky, tempting ways. Because of the cross, we have the confidence of knowing that the power of Jesus is within us to face temptation and we will come out as winners.

For the Week Ahead

What are the things that particularly tempt you? Wealth, popularity? Fame? Success? What are you willing to do, how far would you go to obtain them? What would you be willing to sacrifice; family, friends; core values?

How do you resist temptation? Do you try to do it yourself or do you seek help, spiritual or otherwise?

How did Jesus respond to the devil's temptations? Was his answer or approach, the same as your would have been? Why or why not?

Pray without ceasing!