

“Temptation and Resistance”
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Matthew 4:1-11

Lent is a solemn season, but we can take pleasure in savoring the story of how Jesus beat Satan like a dirty rug. We face the same opponent as he did, day after day, with much less success resisting temptation than Jesus, but if we pay careful attention to the tactics employed by both Jesus and Satan, we can resist temptation more often, and that will lead to a better life, not only for us, but for everyone around us.

First, notice how Satan doesn't arrive until the end of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness. Never go for anybody when they're strong. Strike when they're weak, depleted, starving hungry after forty days of fasting. It's hard to think straight when a person's gone that long without food.

Temptation will strike you most strongly when you are weak and where you are weak. Wee Willie Keeler, a great baseball player in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, advised hitters “to hit them where they ain't.” In other words, exploit the holes, the gaps, the weakest points in a defense. Over an 18-year career, his batting average was .385. If you don't know baseball, know this: that's as good as it gets.

What makes that little power play even easier for Satan is that our culture despises weakness so much that people try to hide their weakness even from themselves. If a person is too proud or too ashamed to acknowledge their weak points, Satan will exploit that every time. When we fail to admit where we are weak, not only can that weakness not be fortified by God's grace, but we will succumb to temptation and commit sin *without even being aware of it*. If you refuse to look at the weak spot, you'll never spot the incursion. Satan's sneaky. He doesn't want

you to notice, because if you do, you might feel remorse, and if you feel remorse, then you might repent. Satan's a pro, and he hits a lot better than .385.

Even worse, though, is how our society defines strength: wealth, political power, reputation, prestige, fame, physical prowess. Nothing is intrinsically wrong with any of these things, but if we think **that** is what makes us strong, we're compromised. Satan is a master of attacking perceived strengths and twisting them into tools for our destruction. Those with power are susceptible to corruption. People who rely on popularity for their strength depend on the fickle opinions of others, instead of depending on God alone. Plenty of rich people are miserable, terribly fearful that somehow they'll lose it all.

Jesus was poor, powerless in the political realm, a public non-entity, and at the moment of the first temptation, incredibly hungry. Yet he was strong enough to resist temptation. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Jesus' strength, resilient enough to resist temptation when he was very vulnerable, came from his relationship with God. That's where our greatest strength comes from, too: our faith relationship with God. God will help us shore up our weak spots, if we admit weakness and know where it is. Satan knows where our weak spots are. Shouldn't we?

But, you know, it was about more than the hunger and the bread. Satan taunted him. Prove who you are, Jesus. That's a reasonable enough request. Everything Jesus did or said once he emerged from the wilderness was geared toward revealing who he was as the Messiah. That's the problem with temptation. It seems so reasonable. Your fast is over. Turn these stones to bread and eat. No harm, no foul. That's so reasonable. But Jesus saw the trap. Satan

wanted Jesus to prove who he was by using his miraculous power for the first time for his own benefit.

That's not what Jesus came for. That's not who he was. Jesus came to use his miraculous powers to help and heal and feed and serve others. Jesus came to make miracles happen for God's glory. Had he turned those stones into bread, Jesus would have betrayed who he was. Would he still have been the Son of God? Sure. Would his power have been corrupted? Absolutely. Temptation can seem so reasonable, so right. Examine your inner motives carefully before you act, and do nothing that will betray who *you are* as a **child** of God.

For temptation number two, Satan tried to lure Jesus into performing a circus trick. Jump from the tallest point of the Temple and angels will catch you, if you are the Son of God, and this time Satan even threw in a couple of Bible verses to add to the appeal. What could be wrong with Jesus fulfilling biblical prophecies? That's what he came to do, right?

Satan abuses scripture with such elegance. Think of the violence that has erupted, propelled by reading scripture wrongly. Slavery was justified for centuries in this country based on Bible abuse. Misogyny, the oppression of women, their belittlement, their exclusion from leadership in the Church, is practiced to this day in the majority of Christian communities because of rotten readings of the Bible. Lord knows what else we're getting wrong.

People frequently see what they want to see in scripture, to back up their preconceptions and preferences. Perhaps more accurately, people see what Satan wants them to see. And nobody is immune; nobody. In fact, the people who think they are immune from the temptation to read scripture wrongly generally tend to be the people who succumb to the temptation more often than others. They don't see their weakness, which in this case is their self-righteousness.

Jesus slapped back with a verse of his own. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” That’s pretty straightforward. Ironically, Satan demanded proof, but he already knew who Jesus was. That’s why Satan came after him in the first place. What better victory for the Prince of Darkness than to cause Lord of Light to falter? Satan kept challenging Jesus by demanding proof, because if Jesus ever took up the challenge on Satan’s terms, then he would have acknowledged Satan’s right to demand proof.

When a person, or when a personification of evil like Satan, demands proof, they place themselves in a position of judgment and superiority. They set the terms. They make the rules. They’re in charge. Satan’s existence is predicated on his judgment of God, a false judgment, born out of arrogance and envy and hatred. We must resist the temptation to judge God. God gives the tests. He doesn’t take them. We can ask honest questions without restraint. We can be angry with God. God has even given us the freedom to turn away from Him, which is a bad idea, but we cannot judge, because to do so assumes our superiority over God, which is where we lose touch with reality.

What is more, like Jesus, we must resist the temptation to prove ourselves to anyone. When we strive to prove ourselves, we succumb to another person’s judgment and place ourselves under their power. Now that sounds radical, and it is. Yes, there are moments in life when we must submit to another person’s evaluation and criticism. We can audition and apply and interview and compete, and for better or worse, accept the results. In our relationships with others, we have responsibilities and can be held accountable for our actions. However, only God has the right to judge. What’s the difference?

Evaluation and criticism and accountability are about what you do. Judgment is about who you are. Only God has the right to demand that we prove who we are to Him. When we

submit to the demand of any other person or entity to prove who we are and accept their judgment, we make that person or entity our God, and that's idolatry.

Finally, Satan offers Jesus the world, literally. That must have been tempting. No need to recruit and train loyal but somewhat thick disciples. No need to enter confrontation with the religious elite. No need to deal with the crowds, cavort with the sick and the outcast. No need to suffer torture and crucifixion. Oh, yeah, Satan saved the best for last, but of course, there was a catch. Jesus had to fall down and worship him. Did I mention idolatry before?

Unlike the other two, this one isn't subtle at all. It's a *quid pro quo* that even one of those thick disciples could have figured out pretty quick. If you accept command over the world from the hand of Satan who presumes to be its ruler, which is a lie, but then bow down to worship him like a god, who winds up on top? Satan does, and you get nothing, because he's got nothing to give.

To be frank, this is not one of Satan's better efforts. It's too transparent, tissue-paper thin. The Father of Lies, at his best, makes you think that you're getting the better end of the bargain. Jesus saw right through it, told Satan to leave, and quoted scripture again, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

What we learn here is *caveat emptor* and *cui bono*, Latin for "buyer beware" and "who benefits," respectively. If something seems too good to be true, it's usually coming from one of three places: an overactive imagination, which is mostly harmless; from God, which is wonderful, or from Satan, which is potentially disastrous. You have to figure out which one, but you don't have to do it alone.

Pray. Seek counsel from discerning people you trust. If you think this once-in-a-lifetime, too-good-to-be-true opportunity is from God, embrace it with gratitude, and you'll

know because there will be peace in your heart. If you think the offer on the table is from Satan and that you're being tempted to sin, you'll probably feel a deep unease in your soul. Tell him to leave in the name of Jesus, and if he persists, rebuke him with scripture, like Jesus did. Scripture truthfully spoken to Satan is like garlic to a vampire, but you need to have faith, because vampires aren't real, but evil is terribly real.

If you're really on the fence, humbly consider this: does accepting the offer worship and serve God? That, by the way, is the whole purpose of your existence. Jesus knew that, not just in his head, but in his heart and his bones and his soul. So when tempted in that weak and vulnerable moment, Jesus resisted, and walked out of the wilderness ready to renew the world. May God grant us grace to imitate his example: to beat down Satan under our feet, to spread the good news of the coming Kingdom of God, and to use whatever power we are given in the service of others for the glory of God. Amen.