June 21, 2015

“The Temptation of Jesus”

Matthew 4:1-11

**FCF**: Confusion about temptation

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus withstood all temptation, showing Himself to be the Son of God.

(magnet) We can and must look to Him in our own temptations.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

I’ve been reading in the book of Proverbs lately. Quite bit of the book is devoted to a father’s exhortation to his child to seek wisdom, his warning of the ruin that comes from folly, and a graphic portrayal of the two ways set before us. Especially in chapter 7, which tells the story of a young man travelling through town, naively hearing and heeding the smooth words of a temptress. Sadly, he discovers too late that this path is a trap which leads to his destruction.

Taken broadly, the story begs questions worth our considering today. What do we make of our impulses and desires? Think of the classic “deadly sins” – pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust. Should they be slavishly obeyed? Just a slight reflection tells us this is the road to ruin. So what can we, what should we, do about that? What do we make of temptation?

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 4:1-11

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Stories of temptation are stories of testing. Whether historical or fictional, such stories have certain common ingredients. The actors: the tempter and the tempted. The action: stages of manipulation, allurement, and then either a succumbing or a resisting. The areas: a blinding desire for otherwise good things such as sex, money, and power. Which is how we come to have the accounts of such as David and Samson, Achan and Ahab, Saul and Absalom. All stemming from the first such tale of temptation – the Fall of Adam and Eve as recorded in Genesis 3. All finding their resolution here in the Gospels in what is often called “the temptation of Jesus”.

There’s a lot going on here in Matthew’s account. Chiefly, we need to see that Jesus withstood all temptation, showing Himself to be the Son of God. The implication for us? We can and must then look to Him in our own times of temptation. That’s the essence of the text.

I’m going to be using a different kind of outline today. That is, not integrating the applications throughout the message but, instead, weighting them towards the end. Put another way, what I want to do is address three questions. First, what exactly is temptation? What are we talking about? Second, what is going on here with Jesus’ temptation? And why is it significant? And, third, what do we need to learn from His temptation? What does it tell us?

1. **THE NATURE OF TEMPTATION**

So, first, what can we say about temptation in general? What is its nature?

1. *What It Is*
2. Not necessarily seduction

For starters, despite the common modern understanding, temptation is not necessarily seduction.

1. But testing

It can include that but temptation begins with the idea of testing or trying. In fact, that’s another way of translating the word used here. It’s what a metal worker might do with a tool or weapon they’ve made. Yes, the aim might be to entrap, to damage faith, or provoke to rebellion. That’s Satan’s. But the aim might also expose what’s there – to refine, strengthen, and prepare. So testing, in general, means to prove and measure whatever or whoever is the subject of the test.

1. *Why It Comes*

That’s something of a definition. But what of its source? How and why does it come?

1. Observation

Consider our text again (READ Matthew 4:1-2). This is important. After the Spirit descended upon Jesus, He led Jesus into the wilderness to then be tempted by Satan. That’s worth noting.

1. Implication

The implication? Remembering our definition of testing, we can say that the Father purposed to test the Son. How? By allowing Satan to tempt Him. God is over all of this. Satan is an instrument in His plan. The test came from God. The result, Jesus’ response, will then be His own. The level of devotion of the Son to the Father will then be made known for all to see.

I could say something in terms of application here but I want to save that to the end.

1. **THE TESTING OF JESUS**

So let’s move to the second point. What’s going on here with Jesus’ temptation?

1. *The Focal Question*

The focal question is this. Will He prove to be who He has been declared to be?

1. Echoes from the past

There are echoes here from the past. Jesus’ 40 days of fasting and Israel’s 40 years of wandering. Which was also in a wilderness into which God had led them. Why? To test them.

1. Tied to the present

But Jesus’ temptation is tied to the immediate present as well (READ Matthew 3:16-17). How would Jesus respond? Would He show Himself to be who He had been declared and equipped to be? Would He entrust Himself to the Father and submit Himself to this plan of redemption?

1. *The Three Tests*

That’s the question. Which brings us to the tests, this exchange between Satan and Jesus.

1. The first test

(READ Matthew 4:3-4) In the first test, Satan says, “So, you’re the Son. But surely that doesn’t mean you should have to deny yourself like this.” In response, Jesus refuses to ease His trial. He has laid aside His glory for this task. Instead, He will rest content in His Father’s provision.

1. The second test

(READ Matthew 4:5-7) In this second test, Satan, hearing Jesus quote from Scripture, uses it himself. “God says He’ll protect you. Well, let Him show it.” Jesus, however, refuses to test God, to demand a miraculous intervention. Rather, His would be a humble trust and obedience.

1. The third test

(READ Matthew 4:8-10) In the third test, Satan drops all the pretense and shows what he’s after. “You’ve come as a king. I offer it all. Just bow before me.” Jesus refuses to take the shortcut. His crown would mean a cross. His loyalty and devotion to His Father would not be moved.

1. *The Conclusion*

Which then brings us to the conclusion, the epilogue (READ Matthew 4:11).

1. Need of rest

Jesus needed rest. He was exhausted. And, the test being finished, He received divine care.

1. Not the end

But, that said, this is not the end. This isn’t “the” temptation or test of Jesus. That will continue throughout His ministry, culminating in the Garden before His crucifixion. It’s only just begun.

1. **THINGS WE NEED TO LEARN**

All that said, what are the things we need to learn, to take away from what we’ve read?

1. *What to Know*
2. Temptation is not sin

Let’s start with something essential we need to know. That is, temptation in and of itself, is not a sin. It can’t be. For we clearly see here that Jesus Himself, the sinless Son of God, was tempted.

1. But it is the occasion for sin

Temptation is not sin. It is the occasion for sin. So guard your heart. As Luther said, you can’t keep the birds from flying overhead. But you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.

1. *When It Comes*
2. When we’re low

We also learn something about when our temptations may come. Certainly, when we’re low – physically tired, emotionally fatigued. Anxious, burdened, and frustrated. Wanting some relief.

1. After a high

It may come when we’re low. But it may also come after a high, a rich spiritual experience. Notice when Jesus’ came. And in such times, we may be too relaxed and drop our guard.

1. *How to Prepare*
2. Jesus’ example

We also learn something of how to prepare ourselves. Jesus’ example is obvious. How did He overcome His temptations? By drawing on texts from Deuteronomy that spoke to lessons Israel should have learned. Drawing on passages He’d studied. How much more do we need this?

1. The sword of the Spirit

The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit (READ Ephesians 6:16-17). The Scriptures are the one offensive weapon in the armor of God. It’s meant to be taken up and wielded well – read, studied, and memorized. And as we do this, the Spirit brings it to our minds in times of need.

1. *Where to Look*
2. Not within

One last thing we learn – where to look when facing temptation. Not to ourselves. Not to some mythical strength within. Not even to another human being and their support. Not ultimately. Why? We face an unholy alliance of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Relying on such weak sources of strength is much like holding to a pixie stick in a tidal wave. It will do you in.

1. But to Christ

No, we must look to Christ (READ Hebrews 4:14-16). Jesus withstood all temptation, showing Himself to be the Son of God. We can and we must then look to Him in our own temptations. He is fully man, genuinely human. He is able to sympathize with us. He understands the struggle in the deepest way because He knows temptation’s power. But He never sinned. Unlike any other person we could turn to, He never fell. Which means we can trust Him to help.

He is fully man. But also fully God and so He is able to help. He is God in the flesh, able to give the mercy and grace we need, in just the way we need, when we come to God through Him.

Jesus withstood all temptation, showing Himself to be the Son of God. What does that mean? What does that mean for us? We can and we must look to Him in our own temptations.

*Illustration:*

April 12th – 14th, 1981 was the first orbital flight of the Space Shuttle *Columbia*, the first true manned spaceship. Here’s the thing. That flight was also the first manned vehicle to be flown in orbit without any unmanned test flights. There was a lot on the line – not just the beginning of the program but human lives as well. Who would NASA put in the cockpit?

The pilot was Robert Crippen, a naval officer, test pilot, and aerospace engineer. But he’d never been in space. Who would be the commander? John Young. Young had the longest career of any astronaut. He flew on two Gemini missions (commanding the first). He was the first person to orbit the moon alone during Apollo 10. He drove the Lunar Roving Vehicle on the Moon’s surface on Apollo 16. And is only one of three to have flown to the Moon twice.

In trying circumstances, you want someone who has been there, someone who can help. In times of testing and temptation, we have that – the ultimate commander, mentor, and friend.

**CONCLUSION:**

The backdrop to all of this assumes a simple reality – we are embodied souls living amidst a spiritual battle. This is just something Christianity takes for granted. But I wonder if we believe it. Life can be so ordinary we lose sight of that – not just of the struggle “against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12), but the deadly stakes as well.

Think of it this way. In Southern Mexico lies the Cueva de Villa Luz, or Cave of the Lighted House. As you make your way to the cave, you walk through a paradise of tropical birds and lush rain forest. Underwater, the cave is fed by 20 underground springs, flowing watercourses which teem with tiny fish. The cave itself is home to spectacular rock formations and beautiful ponds. The environment seems so very inviting. But if you accept that invitation, you’ll soon be dead. Why? The Cueva de Villa Luz is filled with poisonous gases.

I wonder. If we were visiting the area and were warned to stay away, would we? Would we listen and pay heed? Or would we be the naïve tourists, too curious and too arrogant to care?

Temptation pulls upon us. Absolutely. And testing shapes us. If we give in, it may well destroy us. If not immediately, then surely incrementally. For testing shapes us. But if we turn to Jesus, the One who understands the struggle and is able to help, then that same testing can have a whole other effect – strengthening faith, deepening assurance, and encouraging others. Ah, my friends, may we take to heart what we see here. Jesus withstood all temptation, showing Himself to be the Son of God. We can and we must then look to Him in our own temptations.

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