

“Evil Is Hunting”
Matthew 4:1-11
November 12, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage features the second appearance of Satan in Matthew’s Gospel. The first occurred when Satan worked through Herod (Rev. 12:4) in his attempt to murder Jesus through killing all the male children of Bethlehem less than two years of age. Satan is still trying to destroy Jesus, but this attempt is not as blunt. He is revising a strategy from the distant past that had already proven itself effective, when he tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden. What better way could there be to hurt God than to turn His Anointed One against him by getting him to doubt the goodness and truthfulness of God? Everything is at stake in this wilderness encounter. If Satan can turn this one, God’s purposes will be thwarted for good. God’s precious image bearers will have been lost forever, and even God’s own Son will be a casualty of the great battle. But if Jesus remains faithful, he will bring righteousness to many just as the first Adam brought sin to many through his disobedience.

Evil not only hunts Jesus, but us as well. Our fight, according to the apostle Paul, is **“against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”** (Eph. 6:12). Since Satan tempts us in the same way as he did Jesus, this passage is helpful to us in revealing his schemes. To be unaware of his schemes makes us far more susceptible to his evil purpose to destroy us. In his book, *Tempted and Tried*, Russell Moore uses the analogy of cows being led to the slaughter to describe Satan’s schemes. Cows used to be prodded and pushed into the slaughter house. With good reason, they would resist efforts to herd them to the place of their destruction. Then someone figured out how to make the cows happy on their journey from the cattle truck to the slaughter house. Moore describes the process like this.

In this system the cows aren’t prodded off the truck but are led, in silence, onto a ramp. They go through a ‘squeeze chute,’ a gentle pressure device that mimics a mother’s nuzzling touch. The cattle continue down the ramp onto a smoothly curving path. There are no sudden turns. The cows experience the sensation of going home, the same kind of way they’ve traveled so many times before.

As they mosey along the path, they don’t even notice when their hooves are no longer touching the ground. A conveyor belt slowly lifts them gently upward, and then, in the twinkling of an eye, a blunt instrument levels a surgical strike right between their eyes. They’re transitioned from livestock to meat and they’re never aware enough to be alarmed by any of it.

Lest we be caught unaware of Satan’s devices, let’s look now at these three temptations.

I. Temptation to Doubt God's Goodness

Like Israel after their deliverance from Egypt, God leads Jesus into the wilderness, the place of hunger and deprivation. Jesus fasts for forty days, after which what must be the greatest understatement in the Bible says, **“he was hungry.”** The devil comes to him at that moment of suffering and weakness. He comes to tempt Jesus to sin. **“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread”** (v. 3).

What exactly is this temptation? It is the same as the temptation Adam and Eve encountered in the Garden of Eden—the temptation to doubt the goodness of God. We heard in the previous chapter the voice of God sounding from heaven about Jesus after his baptism, **“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”** (3:17). After forty days of fasting, it is as if Satan is saying to Jesus, “What kind of father would treat his child this way? Are you sure he’s for you? I think you would be better off taking matters into your hands. You have the power; just turn these stones into bread. It’s just bread. You deserve to have bread, and if your Father really loved you, he would provide it for you.” In other words, it was a temptation to doubt God’s goodness.

We live in an age that sees doubt as a virtue. Ours is an age that says, “Question everything, doubt everything.” We fear being naïve and gullible, and think it is a sign of intelligence and sophistication to hold ourselves apart and doubt. It is not a virtue to doubt God. I’ve long appreciated what G. K. Chesterton said about this. “When men cease to believe in God they do not believe in nothing; they believe in anything!” Remove our core confidence in the goodness and faithfulness of God and we become more gullible.

Satan’s temptation to Jesus to doubt the goodness of God comes first because this is the root of so much other sin. We know this sin well. If you have a series of bad things happen to you, what is your first instinct? For most of us, it is to question the love of God for us. Satan is behind this assault on our sonship. If he can get us to doubt God’s love for us, he has succeeded in turning our hearts away from God. To be away from God is to invite all manner of destruction in our lives.

Jesus responds to this temptation by reference to God’s word. As a matter of fact, he responds to all three of these temptations by telling Satan, **“It is written.”** Jesus didn’t rely on some special resource from God that was available only to him. He relied upon a resource available to every one of us—the word of God. Quoting from Deuteronomy 8, Jesus replies, **“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”** We could dwell on this verse for an entire sermon, but we only have time to point out a couple of things about it. Note the word “alone.” God knows that

you need bread (Mt. 6:32). Jesus teaches us to pray for it (Mt. 6:11) and God promises to give it to us (Mt. 6:33). If you are suffering some financial hardship, take comfort from this word “alone.”

But notice the main point of this verse. Our primary need is to feed on God’s promises, and this is the essence of life. The church father, Jerome, said plainly, “If anyone is not feeding on the Word of God, that person is not living.” When everything seems to be going wrong in your life, how are you going to stand against the devil’s lies as he tempts you to doubt the goodness of God? Take refuge in the promises of God, which are your life. That’s what Jesus did. He looked back to God’s word just spoken to him, **“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”** You might be thinking, “That’s well and good for Jesus, but God has never spoken those words from heaven about me.” Let’s think about this. God has said that Jesus is precious to him. But we also know that Jesus has been given to us that we might live. The Father has given what is most precious to him, the life of his beloved Son, that you might have life. Paul words it like this. **“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”** (Ro. 5:8). That is the word of God by which we live.

In the most recent issue of *Christianity Today*, I read of a family in Puerto Rico who did just this. After being devastated by Hurricane Maria, this is what happened.

After the worst of Hurricane Maria, Luis Paz and his family sang in the dark while they sopped up floodwater from their home in Puerto Rico. With each bucket filled and towel rung out, they repeated, ‘In the Lord, in the Lord/We hope in the Lord.’

During hours of singing and cleaning, he and his wife started to laugh. ‘I don’t know how it happened, but the Lord gave us a wonderful peace,’ said Paz, a doctor and evangelist whose own surname means peace in Spanish. ‘He was with us. I know now what the disciples [meant] when they saw the Lord was with them through the storm.’

II. Temptation to Pervert Scripture

Satan’s second temptation is a natural follow-up on the first one. If Jesus wants to quote Scripture, Satan will play along. He knows the Bible quite well, and proves himself adept at using Scripture against God and his purposes. He takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple for this temptation. It is helpful to pause and think about the location of this temptation. The devil is active not just in the wilderness, but in the temple (and the church) as well. He took Jesus to the high point of the temple. The Spirit had led Jesus to the place of suffering, and Satan leads him to the place of worldly success. Someone has said, “Pinnacles of the temple are places of temptation...therefore they who would take heed of ‘falling,’ must take heed of ‘climbing.’”

At the temple's pinnacle, Satan dares Jesus to throw himself off and then reminds him of God's promise in Psalm 91. **"He will command his angels concerning you. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."** It is the temptation to demand a miracle based on reasons that appear spiritual. In effect, Satan is saying, "As the Son of God, you deserve a miracle from him. It is an easy thing for God to send his angels to protect you from this fall. Look! Don't the Scriptures promise this? Trust God and jump." Jesus responds by saying that testing God is not trusting God.

Satan loves to destroy God's people by quoting the Bible in a way that really amounts to misquoting the Bible. How many times have people justified sin by saying something like, "God wants me to be happy, and this will make me happy." That is the voice of the Tempter misusing Scripture with a half-truth. The half truth is that God does indeed want us to be happy. But the rest of the truth is that God knows the path to such happiness, and it comes through surrender to his will.

This points up the necessity of a principle of Bible interpretation called the "analogy of Scripture." It means that when Bible passages are in tension with one another, we need to let Scripture interpret Scripture. Our need is to know the whole of Scripture and to interpret the more obscure and difficult parts in light of the clear. Jesus does that here. Two Bible passages are in tension with one another. Psalm 91 really does promise God's protection, but that promise must be balanced with the command not to test God by demanding his protection in the form we want it at a given moment. Jesus knows from the Bible that God works miracles not to be showy but to provide for his people in a way that builds their faith and brings glory to his name. Satan's suggestions will do neither.

III. Temptation to Idolize Calling

Satan's final temptation strikes at the heart of Jesus' calling to rule the earth. He would give him all the kingdoms of the world immediately. Jesus could begin his reign immediately. He could take the injustices of the world in hand and deal with them, bringing his perfect reign about. There would no longer be any corrupt kings left, because Jesus would be the only King and he would reign in righteousness. Why would Satan be willing to make such a concession? Because it would dispense with the cross. Satan knows enough to know that the cross lies at the heart of God's plan to bring about the world he intends. This is not the last time he will tempt Jesus in this manner. When Peter rebuked Jesus after Jesus spoke of his coming sufferings, Jesus heard the distinct voice of Satan and said, **"Get behind me, Satan"** (Mt. 16:23).

Part of the force of this temptation is in the seemingly small compromise Jesus was being asked to make, in return for the great gain of succeeding in his central calling. All he would have to do is to bow the knee once to Satan. The verb used is in a tense that means a one-time action. But Jesus knew that the end does not justify the means. A result that requires a sinful compromise is not worth having.

Satan attacks each one of us in this same way. He seeks to divert us from the centrality of Jesus' cross and he seeks to tempt us to compromise for some promised benefit in our central calling. I was reminded of that this week in my calling as a pastor. As I was reading through Proverbs, I came across this verse. **"A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion"** (18:2). I read in that verse one of Satan's temptations for me. As a pastor, I am called upon to talk a lot. It is a central part of my calling. But if I exercise that calling in such a way that I compromise in the first part of that verse by taking no pleasure in understanding, then I have fallen prey to Satan's temptations. I have been a fool.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus remained faithful in these temptations, and in the end God sent his angels to minister to his needs, just as Psalm 91 had promised. The second Adam succeeded where the first failed. He continued to trust God and to rely on God's word. And just as the first Adam brought sin upon an entire race, the human race, so Jesus brings righteousness to an entire race.

Let me close by pointing out one of the features of all these temptations. Sin is a grab for power and control rather than a submission to God's control. In all three of these temptations, Jesus was being invited by Satan to take control, to grasp for power. But in every case, he surrendered to God's will and refused to seek to control God. Do you remember Tolkien's ring of power in *Lord of the Rings*? The power of that ring had a corrupting effect on anyone who sought to possess it. Tolkien is making a profound point of Christian truth. We are designed not to take control, but to submit to God's control of our lives. We express that through trusting that he is our loving Father, even when life is going badly, and through obedience to God's will.

Discussion Questions
Matthew 4:1-11

1. Many people today don't believe in the existence of Satan. What harm might be done through this error?
2. Compare and contrast the temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan and that of Jesus in this passage. How have you suffered as a result of Adam's failure? How have you been blessed through Jesus' faithfulness when tempted?
3. In the first temptation, Jesus is tempted to doubt God's goodness. The force of this temptation drew from Jesus' suffering as a result of a forty day fast in the wilderness. Can you remember a time in your life or in the life of someone you've known well when there has been a battle with this temptation to doubt God's goodness?
4. Jesus answered all three temptations with Scripture. What are the most helpful practices you have discovered for benefitting from Scripture?
5. What are some of the key scriptural truths you bring to mind when you are tempted to doubt God's goodness?
6. The second temptation was to pervert and misuse the scriptures. Can you think of ways you have witnessed others doing that? One of the ways we battle this is through a principle of biblical interpretation called "the analogy of Scripture." What does that mean? (see sermon manuscript).
7. Satan's third temptation attacks Jesus' central calling to be the king and ruler of the world. Does Satan really have the authority to grant what he promised here? Note the devil's titles in John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 cor. 4:4 and Eph. 2:2.
8. If Satan continues to attack each one of us in the central area of our calling, what does that look like in your life?
9. All of these temptations involve grasping for power and control instead of trusting God's control of our lives. Can you think of examples from your life where you grasp for control?