

Overcoming Temptations • Matthew 4:1-11

You know that thirty-something who is obsessed with pornography? He seems to be on a never-ending, never-satisfying journey through the one and a half million pornography websites available on the Internet. If you listen to his soul it will whisper a secret you may not know.

You know that couple who is always trying to get more? Their lives seem to be totally defined in terms of things. They are always buying what they cannot afford. They define themselves and their worth by designer logos, expensive cars and an overpriced home. If you listen carefully to their souls they will whisper something you may have never expected.

You know that woman who is always in your face? She always has a complaint, is easily angered, is a real grouch and is so overbearing and demanding. As much as you don't want to listen to anything else she ever has to say, it might be good to listen to the quiet voice that speaks from deep inside of her.

You know your friend who drinks too much? He showed up drunk at your party. He said he would come to your son's basketball game but he didn't show up. He said it would never happen again, but he just got another DWI. Have you ever heard the whisper of his heart?

It is the same whisper in all of those hearts. It's a whisper in so many of our souls. It says, "This is not who I want to be! I don't want to be unkind. I don't want to be greedy. I don't want to be controlled by pornography. I don't want to be an addict. I don't want to be a grouch. I don't want to lie. But I have caved in to temptation so many times that I have turned into someone I never wanted to become.

As we look in the mirror and see what we do not wish to see, Jesus appears behind us. Some of us are embarrassed. Some of us are defensive. Some of us feel judged and want to run away because his being there makes us feel so guilty. We know we

have failed so many times. We just don't want Jesus there. But Jesus isn't there to judge. He's there to help. As strange as it may seem, he understands; he really does understand. We are told in Hebrews 2:18, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." And adding to that in Hebrews 4:15-16 we read:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

When it comes to this whole issue of temptation and caving into temptation, let me tell you up front that I am not here to criticize failures or condemn bad habits. I will not exhort you to avoid temptations to sin. I just want to tell you about Jesus.

When Jesus was about 30 years old, he faced 40 of the toughest days of his entire life. For six weeks he lived alone in the Judean wilderness and didn't eat. It's a desolate place, the Judean wilderness, with few inhabitants, little water, scorching heat and lots of rocks. Let's read what happened in Matthew 4:1-11:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of

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the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

It all started really well. Jesus was a good person seeking to do the right thing. He went into the desert because he was led there by the Holy Spirit. I don’t know if Jesus had any idea where the Spirit was leading him. My guess is that he didn’t have any idea what he was getting into. So often we assume that if we are good people and are led by the Holy Spirit life will be easy. Hardly do we think that the Holy Spirit of God will lead us to a place where we will encounter the devil.

Jesus didn’t eat for almost 1000 hours. Some of us say we are starved if we don’t eat for four hours! He went without food for 40 days and 40 nights. Fasting has always been an important spiritual discipline for godly people and there are multiple reasons to explain Jesus’ unusually long fast. Whatever the reason, it is surprising he survived.

A healthy 30 year old male in modern America consumes about 4000 calories per day. But let’s assume that Jesus needed only 2500 calories per day to maintain his body weight. That would mean that in 40 days and 40 nights he would lose 40 pounds. If he started out weighing 150 pounds, at the end of almost six weeks his weight would have dropped to 110 pounds or less. He was starving to death.

Deserts are hot and dry. Water is difficult to get. While Jesus must have had water to drink during those six weeks, it would have been a con-

stant challenge to stay hydrated. (I once rode in a truck that broke down south of the Sahara Desert along the border between Burkina Faso and Mali. It was 120 to 130 degrees in the shade. In an hour my skin was dry and the beginning effects of dehydration were evident. Constant drinking never seemed to be enough.)

All of this is to say that Jesus was weak and weary when Satan launched his first temptation. You might say it is a satanic strategy to attack during weakness and vulnerability. But maybe that’s not the answer. Perhaps it is just life. Maybe it’s just that there is no good time to face life’s hardest issues or highest temptations.

At least in Jesus’ story it seems that Satan’s suggestion was reasonable and simple. “The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’”

Certainly there is nothing wrong with a hungry man getting a loaf of bread to eat. And there is no sin in Jesus performing a miracle. Often in Jesus’ story we are told about him eating bread and twice he miraculously made bread for thousands of hungry people to eat. If nothing else, this was an acknowledgement by the devil that Jesus had the supernatural power to turn some of the limestone rocks that are scattered all around the Judean wilderness into loaves of bread.

Jesus must have wanted to do it. I can’t imagine him not wanting to do it. What would you do? Wouldn’t you perform a miracle and eat the bread?

So, then, why wouldn’t Jesus? Apparently Jesus did not want to be controlled by anyone who was evil. This whole issue of not letting someone who is evil make him do a good thing, of not allowing Satan to get his pitchfork in the door, of not taking orders from anyone but God was an interesting dilemma. Jesus, even though he was hungry, tired and weary, would not allow his physical needs to take precedence over his spiritual needs. So he answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”

I think Jesus wanted to, but he didn’t. It’s hard to say “no” to what feels good when you are sick and tired. It’s hard to do what is right when there seems to be such a fine line between right and wrong.

After 40 days Jesus must have been a whole lot more than hungry. He must have been lonely. Some people start feeling desperate after 40 min-

utes. Can you imagine being alone for 40 days? Not even prisons keep inmates in solitary confinement that long lest they go mad.

Jesus was a people-person. He was always surrounded by a crowd. He talked to people and touched them. He sat with them and sailed with them. He loved to ask questions, to teach truth, to hang out and to just be with people. After 40 days alone even Satan must have looked good as someone to talk with.

It is amazing how vulnerable loneliness makes us to temptation. Lonely people sometimes make awful choices, choices they would never agree with in a more rational moment. Just to be touched; to be talked to; to be acknowledged. Lonely people sleep with people they should never be with. Lonely people commit crimes that run against every value they ever espoused. Lonely people will join a gang or tell a lie just to be loved, to be accepted or to be popular. Some even choose a lifetime in a desperate and difficult marriage rather than be alone and lonely outside of marriage.

Satan tempted Jesus with popularity at his loneliest moment. He took Jesus on a quick trip from the desert to the city of Jerusalem to visit the temple. The temple was actually one of the amazing wonders of the ancient world. It was a magnificent structure made of white marble and decorated with glistening gold. Satan took him to a place called the Pinnacle. From the high point of the pinnacle to the bottom of the Kidron Valley was 450 feet. That's 45 stories. Satan offered a deal to Jesus. He said, "*If you're the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.*"

It was a second compliment. If you are the Son of God you can perform a miracle to create bread. If you are the Son of God you are going to be safe because God is going to take care of you. And Jesus must have wanted to do it. If he jumped off the temple it would prove he was the Son of

God and that was a lesson Satan needed to learn. He could free-fall toward the people who gathered to watch what appeared to be a suicide jump and then have angels swoop in at the last minute to save him before he hit. The crowd would be dazzled and applaud. They would want to touch him and be near him and talk to him. He would be the center of attention. He would be lonely no more. It sounded like a plan!

Do you ever get that "I'll show them" feeling? You know: I'm going to teach the bad guys a lesson! Jesus must have felt that way. But, no, Jesus answered him, "*It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'*"

In other words, Jesus didn't need to prove anything. He was the Son of God whether he took the plunge or not.

I'm afraid I would have jumped. But Jesus didn't!

Then came what may have been the toughest test of the three. "*The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'*"

Here was an offer that must have been exceptionally difficult to refuse. You know the frequent questions about why God allows all the problems in our world. If there is a God, why does he allow crime? If there is a God, why do young children become sick and die? If God really is loving and powerful, why are there earthquakes, tidal waves, wars and terrorism? Why are there all these things if there really is a God? And here Satan offers a deal to Jesus—you, Jesus, can rule the world and get rid of all these things.

Actually, this offer was in keeping with Jesus' goal in life. He cared deeply about people. His mission was to save our world from the consequences of sin. The plan was for him to die on the cross, but here was a very desirable and much easier way.

The problem was that Satan demanded worship as a prerequisite. Worship acknowledges superiority. Jesus must have thought about saying yes. But it would have been a disaster if he did. It

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was an example of the end justifying the means. But, the truth is that it never would have worked. Satan would have accepted the worship and kept the rule of the world for himself. God can be trusted to keep his word, but Satan cannot. So Jesus said, “*Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’*”

So, what is the point of all of this? The point is that Jesus knows what it is like to be tempted when weary, when lonely and when caring enough to want to do good for other people. The point is that he struggled with doing the wrong thing and decided to do the right thing. The point is that he understands our struggles with decisions and temptations.

Maybe you are thinking, “No, he doesn’t. There is not an outside chance he could really understand. So don’t tell me he does. Don’t tell me Jesus understands the pressure at school to take drugs or to do sex. Don’t tell me Jesus knows how I feel when I need one more drink or four more pills in order to get through one more day. Don’t tell me he comes close to understanding how much I hate the person who has hurt me so deeply. Don’t tell me he feels my depression or thoughts about taking my own life. Don’t tell me he knows about the abuse I’ve suffered and the thoughts I think.”

That is exactly what I’m telling you. Jesus, the Son of God, “*who has been tempted in every way, just as we are*”, is not our critic; he is our cheerleader. He is not our enemy; he’s our friend. He is not our judge; he’s our defender. He is not out to get us; he’s on our side.

When we click the mouse, when we touch the liquor bottle, when we feel the greed, when we don’t want to forgive, when we want to get even, when we feel like lying, when we are ready to steal, when we want to cheat, when the temptation is so strong it is like gravity itself pulling us into sin—Jesus is there . . . Jesus understands . . . Jesus is on our side saving us from sin.

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