

**“Close Encounters: Jesus and the Devil”**

**Sermon Series – Summer 2007**

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**(Mt. 4:1-11)**

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**Preliminary Remarks**

This morning we begin a series of sermons for the summer entitled “Close Encounters.” You will recall that many years ago there was a popular film in the theaters called “Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” It dealt with a visit to earth by aliens from outer space. This summer we’ll be dealing with a different kind of close encounter. It will be a close encounter of the Jesus kind, and while our Lord Jesus Christ came from another world, His contact with people was far from science fiction. His encounters with people changed their lives.

Over the course of the next three months, various preachers on the staff will present messages that deal with Jesus’ encounter with someone in the Gospels, and we will study the lessons we can learn about these close encounters. Today we take a look at the close encounter of Jesus and the devil, and we’ll also examine the temptations Christ faced in the wilderness. We find this close encounter in Matthew 4.

**Introduction**

One Halloween many years ago when our oldest son Nate was in high school, he decided to play a prank on the trick-or-treaters who came to our house that year. He dressed up as a scarecrow with straw stuffed around his hands and neck, and he sat on the front porch with his head lowered and a large basket of candy in his lap. On the basket was a sign which read in large letters, “Please take one!” Whenever kids came up to our house, if they decided to take more than one piece of candy, Nate would come to life and say in a low stern voice, “Only take one!” Sometimes he even grabbed their hand. It freaked the kids out!

Wouldn’t it be great if all of us had someone like Nate around every time we are tempted to do something we shouldn’t do?! Surely it would keep us on the straight and narrow path. Sadly, you and I are left to our own devices to overcome temptation in our lives, but thanks be to God we have a model in Jesus Christ who has shown us the way to deal with temptation, and we have the power of God’s Holy Spirit to overcome it.

You will recall that up to this point in Matthew’s gospel the evangelist has told us about the genealogy of Jesus, the birth of Jesus, the preaching of John the Baptist, and the baptism of Christ. And now, before Jesus begins His public ministry and calls His first disciples, the text tells us that the Spirit of God led Him into the wilderness in order to be tempted by the devil. As we consider these things today, I want you to notice how the three temptations represent: 1) a misuse of God’s power; 2) a diversion from God’s purpose; and 3) a deviation from God’s mission.

## **I. The First Temptation: A Misuse of God's Power**

*"After fasting 40 days and 40 nights, [Jesus] was hungry. The tempter came to Him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread'" (4:2,3).* Just as Israel had wandered with Moses in the wilderness for 40 years, so now Jesus, the prophet like Moses representing the new Israel, experienced similar trials and was tested in similar ways. Israel's "baptism" in the waters of the Red Sea was followed by Israel's confirmation of testings in the wilderness of sin. Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan was followed by His confirmation of testings in the wilderness of Judea. I think it is fascinating to note that it was the Spirit of God which led Him into the wilderness to be tempted. God had a plan and a purpose in it all.

Our Lord's fasting had left Him hungry, and the devil approached Jesus at His point of weakness. This is Satan's most obvious tactic – to hit a person at his/her weak spot first. Jesus' stomach was empty, and so it is to Jesus' stomach that the first temptation is directed.

Notice the devil began by saying, *"If you are the Son of God..."* Doubt is the classic lever of temptation Satan uses for he knows that if he can raise suspicion over God's Word, then we will seek other means of finding out who we are and where we stand with God. Ever since the fall, human nature has resisted God and doubted and distrusted His Word, and the devil seeks to raise a question over the truthfulness of what God has said to us. *If you are the Son of God, prove it.*

At His baptism, Jesus had been given the clear assurance that He was God's own Son and that the Father was deeply pleased with Him, but Satan sought to raise a doubt in our Lord's mind. "Am I really God's unique Son? Is the Father really pleased with me? Why not test the truth of the Voice I heard at my baptism?" The desert was littered with little round pieces of limestone rock which looked very much like small loaves of bread. Why not transform a few into some food? Prove You are the Son of God, and satisfy Your hunger miraculously.

Think about all the ways in which you and I are tempted to take that which is natural and good and twist it into something that is harmful. Our desire for food, drink, sex, sleep, and strength – they all can become means of temptation and sin. The overfed West works to lose weight through dieting while half the Two-thirds World starves. Alcoholism is one of the great killers of our day, and people seek a way to anesthetize their weary lives by means of a social lubricant. Sex outside marriage continues to wreck lives, produce unwanted pregnancies, and destroy families. And there is a disturbing cult of violence that is growing today in literature, film and in the streets of our country.

Jesus countered this temptation, and all three for that matter, by saying, *"It is written..."* He consistently appealed to Scripture, God's written Word, for gaining perspective and guidance as He sought to live His life in accordance with the will of the Father. Jesus obeyed the Spirit of God and overcame the devil by recalling Scripture. He realized that it is not transforming stones into bread that proves the truth about things in relation to God. Rather, it is one's simple trust in the Word of

truth, a trust that may at times have to be lived out in the untransformed things of this world. Jesus replied, "*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*" (4:4). Our Lord refused to misuse God's power to satisfy His physical needs.

What is your point of weakness? Where are you most vulnerable right now? In what area of your life does Satan tempt you most? And how might God want you to draw upon the truth of Scripture to overcome temptation when it comes your way?

## **II. The Second Temptation: A Diversion From God's Purpose**

Ironically the second temptation is full of holy things. Usually we think that temptation involves things in our lives that are debased and wrong, but here we see that the devil uses even that which is holy to tempt Christ. Jesus was taken to the holy city - Jerusalem, placed on top of the holy temple, and there Satan quoted to Jesus the Holy Scriptures. Where the devil tried in the first temptation to reach Jesus through His point of weakness - His hungry stomach, now the evil one tries to reach Jesus through His point of strength - His faith in the Word of God.

We learn something important here of Satan's strategy from the sequence of temptations. The first approach is to aim at our weakest spot, where it is obviously easiest to make a person fall. But, surprisingly, the second approach is not to aim at our next weakest spot. Rather it is to aim at our strength. It is a kind of spiritual jiu-jitsu the devil attempts. If it is easiest to get us where we are weak, it is next easiest to get us where we are strong.

In this temptation Jesus was confronted with Scripture, and the devil himself said, "It is written...." Here we see one of the most surprising sources of radical evil in the world - the perverse use of Scripture. Specifically, Christ was tempted to prove by action His faith in "*every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*" What Satan was saying here is "If God has promised to give special protection to His people, and especially to You His Messianic Son, then step out in faith and prove it. Dare the risk of faith. Live completely by faith. Surely God's promises will hold for You. Aren't You His Son?"

The temple was built on the top of Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The top of the mountain was leveled out into a plateau, and on that plateau the whole area of the temple buildings stood. There was one corner at which Solomon's porch and the Royal porch met, and at that corner there was a sheer drop of 450 feet into the Kidron Valley below. Satan suggested that Jesus stand on that pinnacle, leap down, and land unharmed in the valley beneath. People would be startled into following a person who could do something like that.

But Jesus responded that it is also written in another place in Scripture, "*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*" Here Christ put one passage over another, and He countered the devil's literalistic exegesis with a more careful biblical and theological exegesis. Christ pointed out that testing God is not trusting Him. There are times for daring faith, to be sure, but there are also times for careful faith, and the whole counsel of God in Scripture needs to be considered when important decisions are being made.

Many years ago, I read a book by Arthur Wallis on fasting. In the preface of that book he wrote something which I've never forgotten: "Truth is like a portrait. If you ever overemphasize or underemphasize any aspect of the portrait, it becomes a caricature."<sup>1</sup> Every principle laid out in Scripture needs to be held in tension with all the other principles that are taught in the Bible, and Jesus understood this truth. Christ did not allow Satan to twist Scripture, and He was determined to bring the whole counsel of God to bear upon His life.

How is Satan using even holy things and the things of God in your life to be a source of temptation? How is your piety perhaps a stumbling block to you in your life or the life of another? And are you tempted to rush to judgment when it comes to the teaching of Scripture, or are you careful to hold the truths of Bible in tension with one another, checking one passage over against another, seeking the whole counsel of God?

### **III. The Third Temptation: A Deviation From God's Mission**

*"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'" (4:8,9).* In the third temptation Satan promised Jesus the main thing He wanted on this earth, namely the salvation of the world. It was more than just a temptation to use His power for His own purposes and more than just a temptation to do the daring thing of faith. Rather, it was a temptation to deviate from God's mission done in God's way. The suggestion of Satan was this: "Let's go into partnership, You and me. Nobody needs to know. It will only be a momentary deviation. And look at what You will accomplish; You will have the kingdom on earth that You came to found, and You will achieve all this without having to go the way of suffering and death which Your Father seems to have mapped out for You. Take a shortcut; bypass the cross. What do You say, Jesus?"

The only catch in the offer was that the price Christ would have to pay was the price of *compromise*. Bow the knee to Satan. Worship him for just a moment. Rationalize just this one time that the end justifies the means. Christ was not asked to spend his whole life at Satan's feet. He was given what might appear a real bargain - one momentary bow (the aorist tense suggests one single act), and the entire world would be Christ's. What is one simple gesture when the whole planet hangs in the balance?

But Jesus showed us that we must be careful not to seek to be successful at any price or else we will have made success our god. Our ambition and desire to succeed must be ruled by God, and if we ever come to the point where we want success, even spiritual success, more than we want the Lord Himself, then we have already lost the battle, and Satan has won the contest.

Earlier this year there was a film in the theaters about William Wilberforce, the committed Christian and member of the English Parliament in the early years of the 19th century who fought against the slave trade. It is a powerful story about "Amazing Grace" in which his tireless work finally convinced Parliament to pass the historic bill that outlawed slavery in the British Empire.

In 1801, Lord Addington had led his party into power, and as the new prime minister, he began to form a new cabinet. Wilberforce was rumored to be among the candidates for a cabinet post, and it did not take long for him to become preoccupied with the possibility of the appointment. For days it grabbed at his conscious mind, forcing aside almost everything else. By his own admission he had ambition, and it was crippling his soul.

The next Sunday, however, Wilberforce went to church to worship God as was his custom, and there he found perspective. In his own journal we read these words, "Blessed be God for the day of rest and religious occupation wherein earthly things assume their true size. Ambition is stunted."<sup>2</sup> It was only as Wilberforce worshipped God that he was able to see clearly the things of this world and hold in check the ambition that welled up in his spirit.

Christ understood this truth as well. Jesus said to the devil, "*Away from me, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only'*" (4:11). He refused to compromise, even for a moment, His allegiance to the Father, and the Son maintained His focus. All the kingdoms of the world were no match in His mind to the kingdom of God, and in His resistance to this third temptation our Lord chose to go the way of the cross in bringing about His kingdom to the earth. The Lord's work would be done in the Lord's way. The end never justifies the means.

## **Conclusion**

All of us struggle with temptation. We may be tempted to eat that extra piece of cake, or look at pornography on the internet, or buy that new dress when we're already way over the budget. We may be tempted to flirt with a co-worker, or cheat on our income taxes, or lash out in anger at someone when they hurt us. Temptation comes in a variety of forms and situations. The encouraging thing in all this is that we're not alone in our struggle with temptation. Jesus Himself was tempted, and we read about it here in Matthew 4. There is much we can learn that will help us face our own temptations by studying Jesus' close encounter with the devil and the way He overcame temptation when it came His way.

Did you know that the word that is translated "tempted" in this passage is the Greek word *peirazo*, and it can also mean "tested"? A test is as much a chance to rise as it is a chance to fall. It is as much a chance to make an A as it is a chance to make an F. It all depends on the preparation and the knowledge of the one who is tested.

As we close this morning, I want to point out several principles we can learn from the temptation of Christ in the desert. First, we learn that we should not be surprised when temptation comes our way, for the disciple is not above his/her master. If Christ was tempted, then we will be, too.

Second, we learn that temptation is not the same thing as sin. To be tempted to do something is not the same thing as doing it, and while we can't prevent birds from flying around our heads, we can prevent them from building their nests in our hair!

Third, we learn from this close encounter with Jesus that Scripture is the greatest weapon in resisting temptation. Our Lord did not engage in debate or argument with the devil; He simply called to mind the truths of Scripture, and He let God do the talking.

And finally, we learn that in dealing with the evil one, it is important to be decisive. Jesus' contact with the devil was reduced to the minimum, and there was an aggressiveness to Christ's response to each temptation and a final command to be gone.

There is one other thing I want to mention about temptation. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, the apostle Paul provides an encouraging promise to everyone who struggles with temptation. He writes, *"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."*

If I examine every occasion in my life when I have fallen into sin, God always gave me a choice and a way out. In each instance God gave me a choice, and it was up to me to resist the temptation. Two options stood before me, and I could either choose to give in or I could choose to go another way. God always provided a way out.

As you think about your own struggle with temptation, remember this closing story. In World War II, an Army general needed a new driver, so he interviewed three soldiers for the position. He asked each of the men, "If you were on a winding mountain road during a battle, how close can you drive to the edge of a drop-off?" The first driver said that he could easily drive within a foot of one. The second driver said that he could get as close as six inches and still stay on the road. But the third driver said that he would try to get as far from the cliff as possible. He would hug the opposite side of the road. The general hired the third soldier, for that man realized what the others did not. There is no need to take unnecessary chances, especially when one is already in a dangerous area.<sup>3</sup> Sin is dangerous, and we must not flirt with it. Instead, we should steer clear of it and stay as far away as possible. And when temptation comes, let us follow the example of Christ. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast*, preface.

<sup>2</sup>Adapted from Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*, pp. 173,174.

<sup>3</sup>Cited by Gene Sikkink in a sermon preached at the Glendorado Good Shepherd Lutheran Parish in Princeton, MN. Date unknown.