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I Dare You – Matthew 4:1-11

One of the great discussions of Christian history has always been the question of how Jesus could be both fully human and fully God. And we have always believed that in order for Jesus' death and resurrection to be of affect that it must have been fully God that did it. But also that for us to believe that death was truly defeated on our behalf, through our means, that Jesus must have been fully human.

This morning we read a wonderful passage that fits right on the line of Jesus full humanity and full divinity. In this passage we see a man that we can fully relate to in temptation and a man that we strive to be like in his perfect overcoming of it.

In Hebrews 4:15, Paul says, **“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.”**

It is important to point out from the start, though, that this passage we are going to look at is not just about Jesus overcoming temptation. As it appears in the Gospels **it is very much about Jesus' identity as God come to earth.** It is an epic battle in the wilderness between God and the devil. And in it Jesus is fully revealed as God. It affirms what seemed evident in Jesus' baptism.

But this passage is about temptation too and overcoming temptation and not sinning is one of the great struggles of life. I found this cartoon this week that demonstrates the magnetic pull of temptation. **(PIC)**

I also heard a story about a guy who was having a really hard time resisting the temptation to steal so he went to the doctor. He asked the Doctor what he should do. The doctor said, “try to resist the temptation by thinking about other things, but if that doesn't work steal me a new television.

An author I read this week said, **“The challenge of being a Christian is not to understand Christ or devise some philosophic system based on Christ, but to obey Christ, to follow him, to put one's trust into practice.”**

Temptation is a struggle. You can know your Bible like the back of your hand. You can pray with the best of them. You can go to church every day of your life and wear the coolest Christian t-shirts money can buy . . . but **the challenge of the Christian life is what you do when someone accidentally drops \$5 on the floor in front of you . . . what do you do when your coworker is attractive and seems to think you are too . . . what do you do when your neighbor gets a newer and nicer car than you . . .**

The challenge of the Christian life is not knowing more facts about God . . . it is truly knowing God in such a way that we trust and follow him through the nasty world of temptation and the battle that rages in our hearts and minds.

Read Matthew 4:1-11.

Jesus was lead into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil. God let this happen. And once Jesus arrived in the wilderness, he fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. And the text says that he was hungry. Anyone would be.

The devil is then referred to as the tempter and he comes to Jesus and questions his identity. The devil begins, **“if you are the Son of God . . .”** In the section immediately before this one in Matthew 3, Jesus is baptized, gets out of the water, and the heavens open with a voice from heaven saying, “this is my son . . .”

So the devil capitalizes on this idea of Jesus as the son of God. He says, **“if you are the son of God,”** prove it.

What I find fascinating is that in all of these temptations **the devil is not offering Jesus anything that he cannot have or anything that he cannot already do.** If Jesus could turn a handful of loaves and fish into enough to feed thousands of people, he could whip up a good meal in the desert after fasting.

What makes what the devil is doing so powerful is not that the act of turning a rock into a piece of bread is so bad . . . it is the purpose for doing it. The devil is not questioning who Jesus is . . . he knows all too well that Jesus is the “son of God.” **What the devil is questioning is who Jesus will become.** The

devil is tempting Jesus to use his power for himself in what seems like a very simple and harmless way . . . but in a way inconsistent with God's plan.

From the very beginning . . . before Jesus even preaches a word to the crowds, the devil is trying to get Jesus to think about his hunger, his needs, his wants . . . and then to use his power to satisfy them. He wants the self-less Jesus to look out for himself.

Jesus is alone in the desert with the devil. He has not eaten for 40 days and 40 nights. The devil reminds him who he is and what he is capable of . . . and invites him to use his power to fill his aching stomach.

But Jesus knows that is not why he put on flesh and came to hang out with us on earth. Jesus simply responds to the devil by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

The quote comes from 100's of years earlier when the Israelites are being reminded why God led them into the desert to wander for 40 years. (you should see a connection here – Israelites wandering in desert for 40 years, Jesus entering into the desert to fast for 40 days) The Israelites got hungry in the desert too . . . but while they were hungry God provided manna for them to eat . . . and this was to teach them to rely not upon themselves, but upon God.

Jesus will not allow the devil to draw him into self-reliance . . . Jesus models perfectly for us what complete dependence upon the Father looks like.

The devil has two more shots at Jesus though.

The second time around the text says that the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand at the highest point of the temple. The holy city is Jerusalem, which is the center politically and religiously. The temple was the tallest building in Jerusalem and from its highest point not only could someone see all of Jerusalem, but you could see for miles around.

The devil begins as he does before with, **"if you are the son of God"** and then tells Jesus to throw himself down." But this time the devil uses Jesus' tactic and quotes scriptural support. The devil goes with Psalm

91, **“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.”**

The devil wants Jesus to jump from the top of the temple to show that God would catch him. **The devil wants Jesus to show him how this verse of protection is true.**

What is startling about this temptation in particular is that **the devil uses scripture**. The problem is that the devil uses the words, but did not use the verse in its proper context.

Jesus clears things up though. He again cites a passage from Deuteronomy, **“do not put the Lord your God to the test.”** God indeed promises to protect people but that does not give us a license to throw ourselves off of buildings.

The verse that Jesus quotes again arises when the Israelites are in the desert. This time they are without water and they are complaining and carrying on. They begin to rebel against Moses and threaten to return to Egypt if they don't get water. They eventually tested the Lord by asking whether he was really amongst them or not. God gave them water, but scolded them and told them that He was not to be tested.

To test someone is to see what good or evil, strengths or weaknesses, exist in a person. We are not to test God because we are to trust and believe that he only exists as good. So our testing of God is really just evidence of doubt and disbelief. Someone who knows the Father as Jesus did does not need to test Him.

The devil has one more shot at Jesus in our text. This time the devil takes him on top of a very high mountain, presumably even higher than the temple in Jerusalem. And the devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. **“All this I will give you . . . if you bow down and worship me.”**

In the Gospel of John the devil is described as the ruler or prince of the world at this time (John 12:31). The devil offers to give the world over to Jesus. Why should Jesus wait for God's plan to develop when Satan would just hand over everything to him now? The agreement had a contingency, though, which required Jesus to bow down and worship the devil.

Jesus responds confidently and firmly, **“away from me, Satan! For it is written: worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.”** Again Jesus uses Deuteronomy. Jesus can’t have two masters. We can’t either. We either serve God or we serve someone or something else.

Then the devil took off and the text says that angels came and attended to Jesus.

Temptation is all over the Bible. Adam and Eve were tempted in the garden. David was tempted by Bathsheba. Jonah was tempted by comfort. Temptation is as prevalent in the Bible as it seems to be in our own lives.

One verse I think is really helpful in helping us to understand temptation more clearly is 1 Corinthians 10:13. It says, **“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.”**

There are several things in this verse that I think help us understand temptation more thoroughly. When we began I said that one of the most significant aspects of the passage we read this morning was that it illustrates both Jesus' humanity and his divinity. **Jesus experienced and overcame faithfully what we experience.**

1 Corinthians 10:13 begins, **“no temptation has seized you except what is common to man.”** We have no opportunity to say that our temptations are different or more difficult than anyone else. No temptation that any of us experience is uncommon to others. The nature of temptation is the same regardless of what it is. **For some the temptation may be lust, for others it may be gossip, for others it might be greed . . . whatever the temptation pulling on you is at any given time, it is like the temptations that others experience.**

This truth prevents us from saying that our temptations are just harder or more severe or more serious than someone else. The Bible does not permit us that excuse.

The next part of 1 Corinthians 10:13 is helpful too. **“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.”**

When I read this part of the verse, **it does not seem true.** What do you mean God does not tempt us beyond what we can bear? Every day I am tempted and don't handle it well.

But Paul's point is not that God will prevent us from succumbing to temptation, but that we won't have any temptation that we can't overcome. We have the ability to overcome every temptation that we face. We may not do it, but it is not because the temptation is too hard or because we are not equipped to overcome it.

God has given us all that we need to overcome temptation in our lives. Jesus modeled that perfectly for us. Each temptation he faced, he experienced it, evaluated it and resisted it, achieving victory over it.

Closely related to this is the end of 1 Corinthians 10:13, **“when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”** **Not only does God not doom us to failure, but He gives us a way to avoid it.** In the face of every temptation, God presents us an opportunity or a way to avoid it. In fact the verse says, that we are given a chance to stand up under it. **We are given a place where we could actually not just resist temptation, but move closer to God through it.**

I have shared with you before that one of the things that I like to do when I study a text in the Bible is to draw it. I am a visual learner and a pictorial representation often helps me to think through a text. This week I worked through what happens in my mind as I face temptation. **(PIC)**

We all face temptations. They will happen no matter what. We can't fully avoid temptation, so our starting point is there. Temptations themselves are not sin. They are emotions calling our attention to possibilities inconsistent with our commitment to faith. They are emotions luring us towards some sin.

We all have thoughts that cross our mind that we do not choose. They simply pop up in our minds. We can definitely put ourselves in situations that are more likely to result in temptation . . . (an alcoholic in a bar, flipping through Playboy magazine), but we will never fully avoid temptation.

The issue then is what do we do when temptation comes. After temptation happens, we have an internal struggle. We have a moment, maybe just a couple seconds, where we weigh what our action will be. Will we surrender to the temptation or will we resist it.

If we give in to temptation we commit sin. We act contrary to God's good intentions for us. We act contrary to what is most good for us.

This is often the point where our peers can have a negative effect on our abilities to resist temptation. **We are very often drawn into all sorts of sins through our friends and other groups.** Gossip happens more natural for us when our friends are gossiping, for instance.

This past week I heard a story about a French documentary where they created a game show where contestants asked other contestants trivia questions. If they got a question wrong, other contestants were encouraged to give a bolt of electricity to the contestant who was sitting in an electric chair. Everyone thought it was real except the guy in the electric chair who was an actor. The disturbing part was that over 80% of the contestants electrocuted the actor, some even giving a lethal dose. The crowd, the authority, the others . . . led them to do something horrible. Peer pressure is very powerful and increases the effects of temptation.

If we choose to sin, then we nearly immediately attempt to rectify our identity with what we just did. We generally like to be comfortable and so it is easier if we can come up with an excuse for our sin or some other way to rationalize it so that we can feel better. **We say, "I have to have fun once in a while."** **"It is really no big deal . . . others do a lot worse."** (Whitacre in the Informant - "provide for my family because there was no assurance that the FBI would")

In our struggle with temptation we often decide that it is easier to give in to temptation and sin . . . and then to repent than to continue in the struggle and not have peace of mind. We want peace of mind. And we often achieve peace of mind by lying to ourselves about the magnitude of our sins.

A very common excuse we like to use is, well we are sinful people . . . no one is perfect . . . yet while this is true, it is no excuse. God has called and equipped us towards victory over sin.

Sin leads to sin and so forth and it multiplies upon it self. They are small steps to go from just noticing an attractive co-worker, to having a harmless conversation, to imagining spending time with them, to spending time with them, to spending time with them alone . . . to having an affair. And these small steps lead us farther and farther from God and his desire for us.

There is indeed a path back . . . but it takes recognizing our sin, naming it and reflecting not just on the actions that were sinful, but the sinful thoughts and decisions you made in your mind before you ever acted. And true repentance, turning from sin, leads to forgiveness, which leads back towards God.

This path has consequences though. Sin always does.

But let's go back to the struggle because we want to avoid this sin path – we want to more regularly achieve victory over the temptations that confront us. 1 Corinthians 10:13 assures us that this victory is possible.

This is the path we are after. In our Matthew passage, Jesus went down this path. I want to end by looking at how he did it. I think we find two antidotes to temptation.

The first antidote to temptation exemplified by Jesus was his profound understanding of scripture. In each of Jesus' responses to the devil he cites scripture. This antidote will work for us as well. **The more we are saturated and filled with God's word as a whole the more equipped we will be to naturally resist temptation.**

Notice that I said that we need a holistic understanding of scripture. **Remember that the devil knew scripture too, but he did not understand it in the complete Story of God.** He used it for his purposes. To have a holistic understanding of scripture means that we don't use particular verses for our purposes, but we develop an understanding of the whole Bible so that it can convince us of God's purposes.

The second antidote to temptation is other believers. Our rationalizations in the face of temptation are often so pervasive that we need other believers to peer into our lives and tell us what they see. We need others to discern our sins and the lies we tell ourselves so that with them we can be brought back to a fuller understanding of the Bible and the faith – that is a deeper, truer relationship to God.

Temptation is real . . . but we are not doomed to fail. We have been redeemed to overcome it. May we resist temptation and achieve the victory God has designed us for.

Resources Consulted:

Jodock, Darrell. "Antidote For Temptation." Christian Century (February 22, 1995), 203.