

Main Idea: As we look at the account of Jesus’ temptation in Matthew 4:1-11, we’ll learn how the tempter works, how our Savior responded to him, and how our Savior can help us overcome temptation in 2016.

I. The setting of Jesus’ temptation (1-2)

- A. There was divine control.
 - 1. Jesus was tempted in order to show His humility.
 - 2. Jesus was tempted in order to show His humanity.
 - 3. Jesus was tempted in order to show His holiness.
 - 4. Jesus was tempted in order to show His love for sinners.
- B. There was the devil’s attack.
 - 1. The devil can do only what God allows him to do.
 - 2. The devil will do all that he can do to persuade humans to dishonor God.

II. The specifics of Jesus’ temptation (3-10)

- A. The devil tempted Jesus to perform a miracle for Himself (3-4).
 - 1. His strategy: He appealed to a legitimate need.
 - 2. His aim: He wanted Jesus to act independently of God.
 - a. That’s what he did with Adam and Eve.
 - b. That’s what he did with Israel.
 - c. That’s what he does with us.
 - 3. Jesus’ response: He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3.
 - a. He made it clear that there is something more important than bread.
 - b. He made it clear that He wasn’t going to use His power for personal gain.
 - c. He made it clear that He wasn’t going to act independently of God.
 - d. He made it clear that He was going to live by God’s Word.
- B. The devil tempted Jesus to prove Himself (5-7).
- C. The devil tempted Jesus to promote Himself (8-10).

Make It Personal: Since Jesus endured temptation, we can be sure of this (Heb. 2:18)...

- 1. He understands what we face.
- 2. He can help us when we are tempted.

I want to make a prediction for the new year. We’re all going to face something in 2016. Every one of us. And I’m concerned that many of us aren’t ready. That’s why I want to begin the year talking about it, and pondering a text in which Jesus faced it and endured it to the glory of God.

It’s called *temptation*. Let’s read our text, and then immerse ourselves in it.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:1-11

According to *Second Glance Ministries*, 50% of Christian men and 20% of Christian women are addicted to pornography. The largest consumers of internet pornography are 12-17 year olds, according to *Internet-Filter Review.com*.

A magazine does not cause sin. The internet does not cause sin. But both the magazine and the internet are instruments of something that, if not thwarted, can lead to sin.

It’s called *temptation*.

In the Lord’s prayer Jesus taught His followers to pray, “Lead us not into temptation.”

That’s an important prayer request for us as we enter this new year. But what is temptation, and how can we overcome it?

I know of no passage that answers this question more powerfully than the one open before us, Matthew 4. We’ve looked at this text before, and we ought to look at it often,

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Temptation series at WBC in 2009..

for if we don't know how the temptation process works, we are in grave danger when the tempter comes meandering into our lives.

It's good to know how to get rid of sin from your life, and that can happen through trusting in Jesus Christ and His crosswork. But it's better to stop the sin before it occurs, at the temptation level, and that too can happen by the power of Christ.

The Puritan, John Owen, made an following important observation 350 years ago in his book *Of Temptation*, "This is a folly that possesses many who have yet a quick and living sense of sin. They are sensible of their *sins*, not of their *temptations*,—are displeased with the bitter fruit, but cherish the poisonous root. Hence, in the midst of their humiliations for sin, they will continue in those ways, those societies, in the pursuit of those ends, which have occasioned that sin; of which more afterward."²

Is Owen describing you? Are you sensible of your temptations? By that I mean do you know the particular temptations to which you are most vulnerable, and have you given attention to understanding how the tempter works through those specific temptations which have proven costly in the past?

That's our aim in this two or three week series. As we look at the account of Jesus' temptation in Matthew 4:1-11, we'll learn how the tempter works, how our Savior responded to him, and how our Savior can help us overcome temptation in 2016.

I. Scene #1: Consider the setting of Jesus' temptation (1-2).

Matthew records the setting in verses 1-2, "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."

Then, says Matthew. The temptation of Jesus happened right after His baptism which is recorded at the end of chapter three. Jesus was baptized, the Spirit descended like a dove on Him, the Father spoke from heaven, "This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased," and *then* came the temptation.

Notice what brought about Jesus' temptation. Matthew says that Jesus was led by *the Spirit* to be tempted by *the devil*. Both elements are critical to see. Jesus' temptation was the result of divine control *and* the devil's attack.

According to James 1:13 God is not the author of temptation. But here we're informed that He is sovereign over it. Nothing happens in God's universe apart from God either initiating or permitting it.

Matthew is very careful to make this important distinction in the text. He emphasizes both divine control *and* the devil's attack in this temptation.

Frederick Bruner comments on the relationship between these two elements, "It is not the Spirit who introduces the doubts, ambitions, and enthusiasms of the temptations. God does not do the tempting in these stories, and so it is thoughtful not to say that God or the Spirit led Jesus *into* temptation. But God's Spirit does lead Jesus to a place where Jesus can *be* tempted."³

Let's ponder carefully these two elements at work in Jesus' temptation. First...

A. There was divine control. This is vital to see. The same Spirit that came on Jesus like a dove at His baptism now leads Jesus into the desert to be tempted. The text is quite precise, as Bruner points out, "The Spirit of God does lead Jesus not specifically

² John Owen, *Of Temptation*, chapter four.

³ Bruner, p. 100.

‘into temptation,’ but ‘into the wilderness,’ and there specifically ‘*to be* tempted by the devil.’ The Spirit is free; free to lead us not only into good things, but into confrontation with bad things.”⁴

Which raises the question, *why*? Why would the Spirit of God do this? Why would He lead Jesus into this place of temptation? Or to frame the question another way, why was Jesus tempted? The answer is that Jesus was tempted in order to demonstrate four things about Jesus.

1. *Jesus was tempted in order to show His humility.* He “was led.” That’s amazing. Remember, He is the Son of God and the Creator of heaven and earth. All things exist because He made them. But now He who is the Leader of the universe is *being led*. While on the earth, the Son of God didn’t do His own thing. He came to do the Father’s will and He humbly did so as the Spirit made that will known to Him.

2. *Jesus was tempted in order to show His humanity.* In obedience to the Spirit Jesus went to the desert and then went without food there for forty days and nights. Consequently, He was *hungry*. See His humanity, beloved. Jesus was hungry.

As D. A. Carson points out, Jesus’ hunger is one of many ironies in Matthew’s account. He is hungry (ch 4), but feeds others (chs 14 & 15); he grows weary (8:24) but offers others rest (11:28); he is the King Messiah but pays tribute (17:24-27); he is called the devil but casts out demons (12:22-32); he dies the death of a sinner but comes to save his people from their sins (1:21); he is sold for thirty pieces of silver but gives his life as a ransom for many (20:28); he will not turn stones to bread for himself (4:3-4) but gives his own body as bread for people (26:26).⁵

3. *Jesus was tempted in order to show His holiness.* As the perfect Son of God, Jesus was impeccable. Unlike you and me, He did not have a human father and therefore did not inherit a sinful human nature. He who is intrinsically holy could not sin. But in order to demonstrate His holiness, Jesus was tempted so that His response to temptation might reveal clearly to the onlooking world the undeniable reality of His holiness.

4. *Jesus was tempted in order to show His love for sinners.* The fact is, if Jesus hadn’t been tempted, He couldn’t identify with us.

Parents, don’t you love it when someone who’s never had children tries to give you advice? Jesus isn’t like that. He’s been there. He’s experienced what you and I experience, for He’s “been tempted in every way just as we are, yet was without sin (Heb. 4:15).”

Why would the Holy Son of God, in obedience to His Father’s purposes and the Spirit’s leading, go out into that desert and subject Himself to the devil’s temptation? It’s because of His love for sinners like you and me, my friend. He went there for the same reason He came to earth in the first place. He’s on a love mission. He’s come to seek and save lost people.

Matthew says that out in that desert Jesus fasted for forty days and nights. Is that significant? Indeed. In the Bible the number “forty” almost always signifies *testing*. Where do we see the number “forty” used in the Bible? We see it several places, but especially in the Pentateuch. That’s significant for our purposes for that’s the Book from which Jesus quoted in His response to all three temptations we’re about to consider.

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Christbook: Mathew 1-12*, p. 100.

⁵ This paragraph is a rough equivalency of a statement by D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, p. 112.

Think back to one use of forty in the Pentateuch. We see Moses fasting forty days and nights just before he received and delivered the Law to Israel. So too, at the beginning of Matthew 4 Jesus now fasts forty days and nights before proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom to Israel at the end of Matthew 4.

Think of another use of forty. Think of the Israelites who, after going through a baptism in the Red Sea (that's what Paul calls it in 1 Cor. 10:1-2), spent forty years in a time of testing in the desert, after which they headed into the promised land. So likewise Jesus, after His baptism, was taken into the desert for a time of testing.

What's going on here? There's a connection and we must see it. Israel was God's son, but when tested, that son failed the test. What did God do? He chose to send another son into the world, His own true Son, Jesus. And this Son didn't fail the test. But in order to pass the test, He had to experience everything the first son experienced, including temptation. In His own words Jesus said in Matthew 5:17 that He came to *fulfill the Law*, a Law that the first son violated again and again.

But it's not just Israel that failed, which is why there's another connection I must mention. In Genesis 3, the first Adam was tested, but he failed the test. So what did God do? He sent another Adam into the world—that's how Paul refers to Christ in Romans 5. And when tempted the Last Adam proved faithful, and the merit of His accomplishment is given to those who believe in Him. As Romans 5:19 explains, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous."

I hope you don't miss the unmatched love of Jesus as we see Him in the desert. That's why He's there. He was tempted because of His love for us.

Now let's take a look at the second element at work in Jesus' temptation. First, there was divine control. Secondly...

B. There was the devil's attack. Jesus was led "by the Spirit into the desert *to be tempted by the devil*." Mark's account mentions that Jesus was in the desert "with the wild animals" (Mark 1:13). Matthew's account mentions only one wild creature, a being called "the devil" (he's referred to here as "the devil" for the first time in the NIV Bible). The devil is the slanderer (that's what the term means). He was an angel that God created that bucked his creature status, for he wanted to be like God (Isa. 14:12-14). The Lord cast that rebel creature and his followers out of heaven (Rev. 12:9) and one day will send him to eternal torment in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:12). But here he is attacking the Lord in the desert.

We'll see him at work in the three temptations that follow, but for now let me point out two things about our adversary.

1. *The devil can do only what God allows him to do.* He's on a leash, and he can do nothing without permission from God (remember Job?). The Bible does not teach dualism. There are not two Gods, one good and one bad. There is only one true God. Yes, there is a want-to-be god, but he isn't God, and he can do only what God permits.

2. *The devil will do all that he can do to persuade humans to dishonor God.* Since the devil failed in his attempt to usurp God's throne, he now does everything he can to tarnish the splendor of the One who sits on that throne. That's where we humans come in. We've been created to live for God's purposes, but the devil's goal is to persuade us to act in ways that dishonor God. That's what temptation is all about.

Pastor Owen said it well when he wrote, “Hath Satan any more friendly aim and intention towards thee, who is a sharer in every temptation? To beguile thee as a serpent, to devour thee as a lion, is the friendship that he owes thee. I shall only add, that the sin he tempts thee to against the law, it is not the thing he aims at; his design lies against thy interest in the gospel. He would make sin but a bridge to get over to a better ground, to assault thee as to thy interest in Christ.”⁶

That's what the temper is after, my friend. The devil entices you to sin not because he cares about your satisfaction one iota. He tempts you to break God's law because he wants to obscure *your interest in God's gospel*, and in so doing to assault *your interest in Christ*.

So there's the setting. Now let's move to scene #2...

II. Scene #2: Consider the specifics of Jesus' temptation (3-10).

As we'll see, the devil tempted Jesus three times. Luke's account gives a different order (the order is 1, 3, then 2; see Luke 4:1-13).

The three temptations seem to follow the pattern found in 1 John 2:15-16, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the *cravings of sinful man*, the *lust of his eyes* and the *boasting of what he has and does*—comes not from the Father but from the world.”

In the first temptation, the devil goes after the *lust of the flesh*—he tells Jesus to turn stones into bread. In the second, he seems to be going after the *lust of the eyes*—he takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, tells him to jump off, and asserts that God's angels will save you; in other words, do something that people can *see*, so everybody will know how important you are. In the third temptation he goes after the *pride of life*—he shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and says, “I'll give it all to you; you can be great right now, if only you'll bow down and worship me.”

We're going to examine the first temptation this morning, and the Lord willing, probe the second and third the next time or two.

Verse 3 “The tempter came to him and said, ‘If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.’” What's the devil doing? Simply put...

A. The devil tempted Jesus to perform a miracle for Himself (3-4). He begins with the words...

If you are the Son of God. That's what the devil is attacking here. Jesus had just been baptized and heard the announcement, “This is *my Son*, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (3:17).” Is that true, Jesus? Are you really God's Son? If you are, surely this won't be any problem for you, will it? Surely God's Son can come up with some bread out here. Aren't you the one that sent that manna from heaven?

Maybe that's the devil's intent here, to get Jesus to doubt or at least prove the validity of His divine identity.

Or maybe the devil wants Jesus to act self-centeredly in light of His identity. Surely, being the Son of God has some perks, doesn't it, Jesus? I mean, surely if you have the ability to do miracles, and you do since you're the Son of God, you can do this miracle and meet your own needs. Why, if you don't eat, you're going to starve and die, and what good is a dead Messiah to a world in need. That's right, Jesus, if you really cared

⁶ John Owen, *Of Temptation*, chapter seven.

about the world's needs, you'd do something about your *own* needs first. After all, as your own Good Book says, "God helps those who help themselves."

Look at the strategy the devil uses here, for you'll see it again in your own life this week...

1. *His strategy: He appealed to a legitimate need.* "Tell these stones to become bread." Not a pot of gold, that would be greedy. Just bread.

We have a crafty foe, beloved. He knows where we are vulnerable. He knows that Jesus is hungry, so he hits Jesus at His weakest point. Commentator Frederick Bruner calls this first temptation "The Stomach Test."

Where are you vulnerable? For Jesus, after forty days of fasting, it was His stomach. Maybe for you, after a tough year at work, it's, "You're not going to give that offering to the Lord today, are you? Why don't you turn that tithe into bread for your kids? God will understand. You need it more than He does."

Needs are tricky. We all have them, *legitimate* needs. And God cares about our needs—*Seek first my kingdom*, He says, *and I'll supply your needs*. But when it comes to needs, God says first things first. First, seek My kingdom, then I'll supply your needs. I want your needs to turn you to *Me*.

But the devil twists that. He uses our needs to turn our attention *to ourselves*.

"I need my kids to respect me." Do you? Are you willing to sin to fulfill that need? Will you abandon self-control and scream at them to get the respect you say you *need*?

"I need my spouse to love me." Is that so? What are you willing to do if that need isn't met? Will you give him or her the cold shoulder? Would you file papers?

"I need to have a boss that treats me fairly." And if he doesn't, what are you going to do? Will you become bitter towards him? Will you quit the job God gave to you and forfeit the ministry opportunity God is giving you in that difficult situation? Will you do that just to *meet your needs*?

That's the Stomach Test. The devil hits you at your point of need, and quite often the need itself is legitimate. Nothing wrong with wanting respect, or your spouse's love, or a boss's fair treatment. The temptation has to do with what you're willing to do to meet that need.

Listen to C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional book which looks at temptation from the devil's perspective. It includes a series of letters written by a senior demon named Screwtape to his junior demon in training named Wormwood. I want you to hear what Screwtape had to say about *pleasure* when he gave the following counsel about using pleasure to tempt humans:

"Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know that we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours...All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden."⁷

That's so insightful, and that's exactly what the devil does. He knows that God created pleasure, just like He created us with needs. But the devil's goal is to encourage you to pursue those pleasures (like eating food, or enjoying sex, or watching sports) "at times, or in ways, or in degrees" which God has forbidden.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, letter #9.

Nothing wrong with bread. But there's everything wrong with putting bread on your table if it means to get it you must do something that God didn't authorize. That's the devil's aim here...

2. His aim: He wanted Jesus to act independently of God. You see, when the Son of God left heaven to come to earth, He voluntarily laid aside the independent use of His attributes (see Phil. 2:6-8). He who is God truly became a man while never ceasing to be God. But what did cease during the time of His stay on earth was the *independent exercise of His divine capabilities*.

This temptation is the devil's attempt to get Jesus to renege on God's plan, to be self-serving rather than to be a servant, and to take matters into His own hands rather than submit them into His Father's hands.

Jesus, I can hear your stomach growling. How can you be the Son of God if you have so many problems? Sure, God *said* you are His beloved Son, but He has a funny way of showing it, don't you think? Why in the world would He send you out here into this desert if He truly loved you?

And Jesus, nobody's going to want to follow a hungry Messiah. If you want to help people, then you're going to have to learn to think of yourself once in awhile.

Does this sound familiar? It should.

a. That's what he did with Adam and Eve. Ah, go ahead, eat the fruit, Eve. God won't care. And so what did she do? Genesis 3:6 says that when she saw that the fruit was good for food (the lust of the flesh), and pleasing to the eye (the lust of the eyes), and desirable for gaining wisdom (the pride of life), she took some and ate it, and then gave some to her husband, and he ate it too. And so the tempter convinced the first couple to act independently of God.

b. That's what he did with Israel. You read the Old Testament and what do you see? A nation that God loved so much that He made them His children. But what did these children, this "son," do? These children, this "son," rather than obeying their Father, kept acting independently of their Father over and over again. Their Father said to be *holy*, but they wanted to be like the nations, and so they did. Why in the world would people who had a relationship with the true and living God turn from Him and turn to the worship of crude idols their hands had made? They did it because the tempter—remember, he's the prince of the power of the air—the tempter enticed them to act independently of God. And let's not forget...

c. That's what he does with us. Listen again to the demon Screwtape as he once again talks about he uses pleasure to entice the sons of Adam...

"He [that's God] has filled His world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long without His minding in the least—sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying, working. Everything has to be *twisted* before it's any use to us."⁸

And that's exactly what the devil does. He *twists* God's good gifts. Nothing wrong with playing sports, but when sports keep you from worshiping God, he's got you. Same way with work, with sleep, and every other God-designed pleasure. He twists them.

How did Jesus respond? Verse 4 tells us, "Jesus answered, 'It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"'

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, letter #22.

3. *Jesus' response: He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3.* In fact, all three of Jesus' Scripture quotations come from Deuteronomy (8:3, 6:16, & 6:13). Out in the wilderness the perfect Son quotes from the Book that records what happened to first son, Israel, out in the wilderness. But whereas the first son gave in to the tempter, Jesus withstood him by quoting Scripture.

Jesus made four things perfectly clear by His citing of Deuteronomy 8:3.

a. He made it clear that there is something more important than bread.

Please note that Jesus *didn't* say, "Not by bread at all." He said, "Not by bread *alone*." He knows we need bread. In fact, He teaches us to pray for bread in the Sermon on the Mount (6:11). He supplies hungry crowds with bread in Matthew 14 & 15. He challenges us to be people who share our bread with the hungry in Matthew 25:35. So yes, human beings need bread. But not bread *alone*.

Isn't that the fundamental problem in our country right now? We have more bread than any other society in the history of the world, and pastries, and donuts, and cars, and computers, and beautiful houses.

But we're still not content. We innately know that something's missing. The problem is, we come to the wrong conclusions about what that something is. So we fill our lives with sinful things—drugs, drunkenness, illicit sex, dishonest gain—but that never satisfies. And we even fill our lives with good things—friends, family, work, toys, music—but that doesn't satisfy either. That's because it's *not* by bread alone. There's something more important than bread.

b. He made it clear that He wasn't going to use His power for personal gain. Turn stones into bread? No. Out of the question. Why? Not because I can't, but because that's not why I have come to earth.

c. He made it clear that He wasn't going to act independently of God. Or to state that in a positive way...

d. He made it clear that He was going to live by God's Word. Not by bread alone, that's not how man lives, "but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."

If anything stands out from reading the life of Jesus, it's this. Jesus lived by the Book. He was a person devoted to the Book. He quoted the Scriptures. He taught them. He corrected false interpretations of them. He lived them.

Please notice something that Jesus did *not* do when tempted. He didn't pray. Oh, he prayed a lot in His life, but there's no mention of prayer here. The Gospel account does *not* say that He called out to His Father, "Father, what should I do? Is it all right if I turn the stones into bread or not?" The account doesn't say He prayed. The account says He quoted Scripture, and He did the same in all three temptations.

What does Jesus' example teach us about the proper response to temptation? Should we pray? Sure, but for what? For strength? Yes, because we're so weak. But for direct revelation? Should we ask God to show us what to do in that temptation? Again, that's not necessarily wrong to do, but it's not what Jesus did. He went to the Book. He determined what to do based on what the Book said to do. Then He resisted the tempter by citing verses from the Book that He had tucked away in His mind.

Jesus' Book-centered example stands in stark contrast to many in our day who promote an experience-centered approach to Christian living. And I urge you to be like

Jesus. Study the Book. Know the Book. Refute temptation by the Book. Live your life by the Book. Raise your family by the Book.

But some would say that living by the Book is dry and boring. That's not what Jesus said. Right after quoting from the Book He said that we are to live "on every word that comes from the mouth of God." The word "comes" is a present tense participle. It literally says we are to live by every single Word that comes *pouring out* of the mouth of God. This is so exciting, as Bruner points out, "It pictures a God in constant present conversation with his world through his Word."⁹

That's why I urge you to get a Bible reading schedule for 2016 and be in the Word every day, and then under the Word every week in church. We're supposed to live by every Word that comes pouring out from God's mouth when we open up the Book He's given to us.

So you'll get the full picture, I want to mention the next two temptations now, but we'll return and probe them carefully next time, if the Lord permits.

B. The devil tempted Jesus to prove Himself (5-7). If you're the Son of God, jump off the temple pinnacle. Prove yourself, Jesus.

C. The devil tempted Jesus to promote Himself (8-10). The kingdoms of the world can be yours right now, Jesus. Why wait? Why not promote your agenda, and do it right now?

I want to finish by pondering again what this account teaches us about Jesus. And to help us I want you to see what the writer of Hebrews had to say about Jesus' temptation. He writes in Hebrews 2:18, "Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

Make It Personal: Since Jesus endured temptation, we can be sure of this (Heb. 2:18)...

There are two truths you can know for certain about Jesus today.

1. *He understands what we face.* He has been there. He's felt what you feel. He knows what it's like to suffer and even to suffer *when tempted*. That's good news. But this is even better. He not only understands, but...

2. *He can help us when we are tempted.* Is He your Savior? To experience His help, you must first accept the One who went to the cross as your Savior. But that's just the beginning. Keep coming to Him! He understands, and He can help. To borrow from the words of the hymnwriter...

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?

We should never be discouraged, Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Can we find a friend so faithful Who will all our sorrows share?

Jesus knows our every weakness, Take it to the Lord in prayer.¹⁰

⁹ Bruner, p. 107.

¹⁰ Joseph Scriven, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, #435.