



A PLACE OF TESTING

Today we're going to be thinking about a subject I'm sure everyone here can relate to – if not everyone on the planet – the subject of temptation (don't panic though – I'm not going to ask anyone to share. For once!).

Let's dive straight in, by turning to ...

Matthew 4:1-11

What is your temptation? Your no.1 area of weakness?

Perhaps it's gossip – talking about others in order to elevate yourself or to control the world in which you live. Perhaps it's pornography – the desire to look at certain websites or publications for that cheap and meaningless thrill. Perhaps it's eating or drinking too much – turning to the fridge or drinks cabinet when things are difficult at work or at home. Perhaps it's the inclination to just give up – to gravitate towards a negative rather than positive perspective on life or people. Or perhaps it's too much 'doom-scrolling.' Or that game you just can't put down.

In Jesus' case, He was tempted in 3 ways:

- To turn stones into bread to satisfy His hunger (which we know He could do – think feeding of the 5000).
- To throw Himself off the temple and wow everyone by not hitting the ground (like a 1st century *Dynamo*).

- To worship Satan and thereby achieve instant world domination (with no dying on a cross involved).

Now it would be easy to look at these temptations and think “I can’t relate to that, and Jesus can’t relate to me.” And it’s true that Jesus’ temptations were uniquely *Him*. But we’re also told that “we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). And when you cut through the surface-details, you realise that these temptations are actually very much like ours.

In fact, you can re-categorize them like this (credit goes to Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* for this one):

- **Pleasure** (meeting our needs and desires).
- **Popularity** (impressing and winning over others).
- **Power** (controlling our lives and situations).

Looked at like this, we have more in common with Jesus than we realise. Satan offers Jesus the easy route, a shortcut that avoids surrender and sacrifice. And that’s what every temptation is, essentially. The easy route.

But there is one, very big, difference between Jesus and us: Jesus never, ever, gave in. How then can we battle our own temptations, as Jesus does? How can we know victory?

There are 3 important lessons here:

1) Fight It Early. Jesus saw temptation as an attack to be resisted – and He did. And notice: He didn’t ponder it; didn’t dwell; didn’t flirt with the idea of giving in. He simply said ‘no.’ Because temptation is a process, and to beat it you’ve got to nip it in the bud. But it’s also deceptive. Temptation will disguise itself as something appealing, something we really want – something we really *need* (like food in our stomachs). In reality, temptation is a dangerous thing – for us, and for those around us. So, we need to recognise it for what it is. And fight it.

2) Fill Yourself With His Words. Jesus responds to every temptation in the same way – by quoting Scripture (in fact, He seems to have been reflecting on one book in particular – Deuteronomy – as that’s what He quotes, all the way through). Why does He do this? As a reminder that God’s timing, opinion, and way of doing things are more important than pleasure, popularity, power – even when it’s hard, even when it hurts. In fact, Jesus knows the Bible so well He’s able to spot when Satan is twisting it (as he does with Psalm 91). We need to know it, too.

3) Focus On The Better Thing. In the third temptation, Satan stands Jesus on top of a mountain and gives Him a glimpse of all the empires of the world. “I’ll give You all of this,” Satan says, “if You will simply bow down and worship me.” Now I think this was the greatest temptation of all - because at any moment, Jesus could have showed Satan who is really in charge; could have grabbed that serpent by the tail and smashed his brains out on a rock;

or simply clicked His fingers and brought the whole of history to a cataclysmic end. But He didn't. Why?

Because He loves us.

And love is what makes all the difference.

No-one can fight temptation just by trying. What you need is a 'passion-override' – a greater driver than the habit that plagues you. For Jesus, His passion-override was God, and us. What would yours be? Would it be your spouse? Your children? Your parents? Your friends? Your church? Or perhaps Jesus Himself?

Whatever the mix, the more we focus on our 'alternative passions' the stronger we will be in the face of temptation.

Things Ain't So Bad ...

This event in Jesus' life is often referred to as 'The Temptation', which is kind of wrong, on 2 counts:

- It makes it sound as if this is *the* one and only time Jesus was tempted – which is not true. Temptation is an ongoing battle – as Luke 4 tells us, "Satan left Him until an opportune time." In fact, Jesus was tempted time and again – even while hanging on a cross.
- The Greek word for 'tempt', *peira*, literally means 'test' – a far more positive take on it. From our perspective temptation may be a negative thing, but from God's perspective, it's a positive one. It encourages us to look to Him and raises our endurance levels.

There's a story from the time of the Desert Fathers about a monk called Abbot John, who asked God to remove all temptation from him. He then went to one of the elders and said, "You see before you a man who is completely at rest and has no more temptations." The elder said, "Go and pray to the Lord to allow some struggle to be stirred up within you, for the soul is matured only in battles." John did this, and when the temptations returned, he prayed, "Lord, give me strength to get through the fight ..."

You see, victory does not belong to those who face no challenge at all, but to those who learn to overcome.

The encouraging thing in all this is: Jesus knows. He knows, He forgives, and He can help us win more fights than we lose. "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" (Hebrews 4:16).