

“Temptation and Resistance”  
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Matthew 4:1-11

Lent is a solemn season, but we can take pleasure in savoring the story of how Jesus beat Satan like a dirty rug. We face the same opponent he did, day after day, but with much less success resisting temptation. However, if we pay careful attention to the tactics employed by Satan and how Jesus responded, we can resist temptation more often, and that will lead to a better life, not only for us, but for everyone around us.

First, notice how Satan doesn’t arrive until the end of Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness. Never go for anybody when they’re strong. Strike when they’re weak, depleted, starving hungry after forty days of fasting. Temptation will strike most strongly when we are weak and where we are weak.

Wee Willie Keeler, a great baseball player in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, advised hitters “to hit them where they ain’t.” In other words, exploit the holes, the gaps, the weakest points in a defense. Over an 18-year career, his batting average was .385. If you don’t know baseball, that’s as good as it gets.

What makes that little power play even easier for Satan is that our culture despises weakness, so people try to hide their weakness even from themselves. If a person is too proud or too ashamed to acknowledge their weak points, Satan will exploit them every time. When we fail to admit where we are weak, we will not invite God’s strength to be there, and we will succumb to temptation and commit sin *without even being aware of it*. If we refuse to look at the weak spot, we’ll never notice how it’s being exploited. Satan is sneaky. He doesn’t want us to notice,

because if we do, we might feel remorse, and if we feel remorse, then we might resist temptation or repent of our sin. Satan's a pro, and he hits a lot better than .385.

Even worse, though, is how our society defines strength: wealth, political power, reputation, fame, physical prowess. Nothing is intrinsically wrong with any of those things, but if we think **that** is what makes us strong, we're compromised. Satan is a master of attacking perceived strengths and twisting them into tools for our destruction. Those with power are susceptible to corruption. People who rely on popularity for their strength depend on the fickle opinions of others, instead of depending on the constancy of God.

At the moment of his wilderness tempting, Jesus was weak, not strong – at least not strong by the standards of the world. He was poor, a public non-entity powerless in the political realm, and incredibly hungry. Yet he was strong enough to resist the temptation “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” He responded, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Jesus’ strength came from his relationship with God, and that’s where our greatest strength comes from, too. God will shore up our weak spots with His Word, if we admit weakness and know where it is. Satan knows where our weak spots are. Shouldn’t we?

But it was about more than hunger and bread. Satan taunted Jesus. Prove who you are! That’s a reasonable enough request. Once he emerged from the wilderness, everything Jesus did or said was geared toward revealing who he was as the Messiah. That’s the problem with temptation. It seems so reasonable. Your fast is over. Turn these stones to bread and eat, but Jesus saw the trap. Satan wanted Jesus to prove who he was by using his miraculous power for the first very time for his own benefit, but that’s not what Jesus came for.

Jesus came to use his miraculous powers to help and heal and feed and serve others. Jesus came to make miracles happen for God's glory. Had he turned those stones into bread, serving himself instead of others, Jesus would have betrayed who he was, why he came. Would he still have been the Son of God? Sure. Would his power have been corrupted? Absolutely. Temptation can seem so reasonable, so right. We need to carefully examine what's motivating us before we act, and do nothing that might betray who *we are* as **children** of God.

For temptation number two, Satan tried to lure Jesus into performing a circus trick. Jump from the tallest point of the Temple, **if** you are the Son of God. Scripture says angels will catch you, and what could be wrong with Jesus fulfilling biblical prophecies? That's what he came to do, right?

Jesus slapped back with a verse of his own. "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Satan demanded proof, but **he already knew** who Jesus was. That's why Satan came after him in the first place. What better victory for the Prince of Darkness than to cause Lord of Light to falter? Satan demanded proof, because if Jesus took up that challenge, he would have acknowledged Satan's right to demand proof. Demanding proof is judgmental. It presumes superiority. Satan doesn't have that right, that power, nor does anyone else, except God.

Like Jesus, we need to resist the temptation to prove ourselves to others. When we strive to prove ourselves, we succumb to another person's judgment and place ourselves under their power. Yes, there are moments in life when we must submit to another person's evaluation and criticism. We have responsibilities and can be held accountable for our actions. However, only God has the right to judge. What's the difference?

Evaluation and criticism and accountability are about what you do. Judgment is about who you are. Only God has the right to demand that we prove who we are. When we submit to

the demand of any other person or entity to prove who we are, we accept their judgment and their presumption of supremacy, and unwittingly make that person our God, and that's idolatry. When we succumb to the temptation that others must prove themselves us, it works the same, except we make ourselves gods, and that's the worst kind of idolatry there is.

Finally, Satan offers Jesus the world, literally. That must have been tempting. No need to recruit and train disciples. No need to confront the religious elite or deal with the crowds, the sick, and the outcast. No need to suffer torture and crucifixion. Satan saved the best for last, but of course, there was a catch. Jesus had to fall down and worship him. Once more, it's an invitation to practice idolatry.

To accept command over the world from the hand of Satan assumes that he rules it, which is a lie, so it's an empty deal to start with. To worship Satan like a god puts Satan on top, and you get nothing, because he's got nothing to give. The Father of Lies, at his best, makes you think that you're getting the better end of the bargain. Jesus saw right through it, told Satan to leave, and quoted scripture again, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."

What we learn here is *caveat emptor* and *cui bono*, Latin for "buyer beware" and "who benefits," respectively. If something seems too good to be true, it's usually coming from one of three places: an overactive imagination, which is mostly harmless; from God, which is wonderful; or from Satan, which is disastrous. You have to figure out which one, but you don't have to do it alone.

Pray and ask for God's wisdom. Seek counsel from discerning people you trust, and be sensible. If an once-in-a-lifetime, too-good-to-be-true opportunity comes from God, a sense of peace in your heart will reveal that. If the offer on the table is a temptation to sin, a sense of deep unease in your soul will reveal that. If you're really on the fence, humbly consider this:

does accepting the offer worship and serve God? That's the key criteria, the central question, because the whole purpose of our existence is to worship and serve God.

Jesus knew that, not just in his head, but in his heart and his bones and his soul. So when tempted in that weak and vulnerable moment, Jesus resisted, and walked out of the wilderness ready to renew the world. May God grant us grace to imitate his example: "to beat down Satan under our feet," in the words of The Great Litany; to spread the good news of the coming Kingdom of God; and to use whatever power we are given in the service of others for the glory of God. Amen.