



AN OFFER YOU SHOULD REFUSE
Matthew 4:1-11

Mark Anthony was considered one of the great orators of Roman culture. He was an intelligent person, a brave soldier, a powerful leader. Outwardly, his credentials would have put him in the Fortune 500, the Speaking Circuit, and Who's Who in America – but inwardly, he was a moral midget. One of his associates said to him, **“Thou art able to conquer the world – but unable to resist a single temptation.”** We know from our biblical heritage that this is our story as well. We are all tested by the tempter. Ever since that war in heaven between God and Lucifer – and Lucifer's removal from paradise – and his residence on earth – temptation is simply present in our lives. Don't waste time and effort debating it – but defeating it – and rendering invalid its ability to entice us.

Our scripture lesson from Matthew has often been called the temptation of Jesus. Dr. William Barclay believes it would be accurately called **“the testing of Jesus.”**

You know the story well. Jesus came from Nazareth at the age of 30 to be baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. As he came out of the water, the Spirit of God descended upon him and a voice from heaven declared, **“This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.”** However, still soaking wet from the waters of baptism, the Spirit of God thrust him out to the desert to do battle with Satan or - more accurately - the Tester.

Today, our gospel lesson tells the good news of Jesus Christ who – unlike Mark Anthony – was able to resist every temptation or testing that came into his life. There are offers that come to us in life that we should refuse.

In our Christian walk and witness the most challenging tests are those which we identify as temptations. Jesus knew what it was like to be tested as the Son of God by the power of temptation. What makes our lesson even more interesting is that God actually permitted the testing. **Hebrews 2:18** shares this important insight, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Yes, none of us goes through life without being tested. **Hebrews 4:15** shares that Jesus was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin. Jesus is not tempted to see **if** he is the Son of God – he is tempted because he **is** the Son of God.

The testing or temptation reveals whose energy and faith we really engage life with. Ours or God's? Character is both revealed and developed by testing.

I personally draw strength and inspiration from this passage of scripture. I not only have a great high priest in heaven – I have a friend in the low places of life as well.

It was Dr. William Barclay who helped me to realize that this story contains autobiographical data. We would have never known of this chapter in Jesus' life – unless he had shared it with the disciples – who shared it with others. Who else could have been present except for our Lord?

These testings are of such importance that they are placed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry – like a Table of Contents to all the decisions Jesus would have to make – even accepting the cross. This passage of scripture identifies the insights which Jesus used to be faith-full to the role and mission that was given by God – and accepted at his baptism.

Temptation has 3 components or dimensions that need to be considered in order for us to say “no” to the offers given to us – and pass the test.

FIRST, THERE IS AN INTERNAL COMPONENT TO TEMPTATION.

How we deal with our own time of testing will be determined, first of all, by the strength of our internal resources. If we are strong inwardly – we will pass on the offer – regardless of how good the offer looks on the surface.

Our greatest appetite, desire, and longing is for God. The testing or offer is to put bread first and God second. It is to put the need for bread at the center of our lives – and our need for God at the edge.¹

We know that the only miracle story to appear in all 4 gospels is the feeding of the 5,000 – so what's the big deal about bread?

The temptation is to bypass God in order to do something good.² In **John 4:34** “My bread,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” Jesus knew his role was to lead us to acquire new appetites – a hunger for righteousness.³ The real hunger beneath all other human hungers is the hunger for God. Jesus, responds to this seemingly innocent offer by saying, “Man does not live by bread alone,” as is shared in the Book of Deuteronomy. Jesus knows his identity comes from God and this gives him his internal strength and power. This was the call upon his life that he accepted and said “Yes” to.

THE SECOND OFFER THAT COMES TO JESUS IN VERSES 5 & 6 IS EXTERNAL.

Eugene Peterson writes: “What's wrong with letting God perform a miracle on your behalf?” “How can it be temptation to stage a little excitement for the bystanders –

and show how wonderful things are with Jesus?”⁴ Because miracles – as attractive as they are – are not primary. God is primary. Jesus will not use God as a means of showing off or attracting admirers.⁵

Jesus will be calling and training disciples for the tough work of salvation and love. Discipleship will involve holiness, self-denial, and suffering – not entertainment.

Satan – not to be out-manuevered by Jesus – quotes scripture himself. While Satan quotes from the word of God – Jesus submits himself to the authority of the word. Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy, “Don’t you dare test the Lord your God.”⁶

Yes, Satan used external objects to test Jesus. He showed him stones and urged him to turn them to bread. He showed him the temple and suggested he make a daring leap from the top of it.

He showed him the kingdoms of the world and offered to give them to him. Satan was offering Jesus external success – popularity and power – if only he would follow the ways of the world and not the way of God. He should have known Jesus had the power within to resist. Every day you and I are confronted with tests. In a sense, like Jesus, we are tested not to see if we are God’s children but because we are God’s children. There are tests we confront that worldly people aren’t even aware of. There are tests of our honesty and integrity. Tests of our ability to love others. Tests of our willingness to sacrifice for others. Tests of our commitment to our spouses and our families.

In a campaign for the Democratic nomination for President many years ago, John Kennedy’s brother, Robert, suggested that they make a deal with Lyndon Johnson, the other leading contender, to eliminate him as an opponent. John Kennedy disagreed. He told Robert, “Let’s defeat him – then deal with him.”

That’s the attitude we need to take with the tempter. There is an internal component to temptation – and there is an external component.

THIRDLY, THERE IS ONE MORE COMPONENT TO OUR TESTING AND RESISTING THE OFFER – THE ETERNAL.

We resist temptation best when we are committed to something so important, so lasting, of such great value that we will not allow ourselves to be dragged down by that which we know in our hearts is of dubious value. Satan offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world, but Jesus was already committed to the Kingdom of God. He was committed to such a high calling, he could not be brought down to Satan’s level. It is significant that Jesus confronted this test at the beginning of his ministry. This test prepared him for all the decisions he would make later – even accepting the cross.

Passing this test made him better able to pass the other tests. Here is what we need to remember: when temptation comes, it is a test not only of our internal resources but also of our commitment to an eternal God.

In the Lord's Prayer we use every week here at the 10:30 a.m. service and occasionally at the 8:30 a.m. service, we share the petition, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

When I was a member of Marlin Houck's Disciples Class he once said, "Pastor, someday please explain what that line means." Well, here goes. I believe Jesus is teaching us – and the disciples who first heard it – that temptation is no small matter. If I were to say today that the economy is no small political issue in the upcoming election – what I am really saying is that it is a very large issue. Jesus was teaching us that every day we are engaged in a battle that very often threatens to overwhelm us and we need God's help. We are admitting to the Lord we can be easily deceived and fooled. The Evil One can take advantage of us – unless you, O Lord, are the one guarding the entrance to our hearts and minds.

As Eugene Peterson reminds us, "We Christians are not moral giants flexing our muscles and displaying our trophies before the world as evidence of superior spirituality. We are in a battle that very often threatens to overwhelm us – and we need help."⁷

So we are careful never to strut or showboat – or be a 'hot dog' when it comes to this reality in our lives. We rely on the Lord. When God declares, "Don't go there" – don't go there.

In the third offer that comes to Jesus – he is offered all the empires and civilizations of the world. They are spread out before him.

They were glorious to be sure – but also god-less. The devil declares: "Worship me and I will give you all these kingdoms. Rule them as you see fit."⁸ Jesus said, "No." Jesus would not get rid of God in order to do God's will. He was committed to the voice of the Eternal – not the external. Jesus was faithful to his identity and calling as God's son. Jesus' mission was to undo what went wrong in the Garden. He refuses any offer that is not God's offer – even if it includes a cross. So we defeat temptation and pass the test not by using our strength and resources – but God's. We declare 'Satan – begone!' – and he is.

To give us strength for the journey – the bread and cup are in front of us today. Here we see the more excellent way. I close with these words of Isaac Watts:

**"When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride."**

Let us go to the Holy Table.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
March 2, 2008
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ENDNOTES

¹ **CONVERSATIONS: THE MESSAGE WITH ITS TRANSLATOR**, Eugene H. Peterson, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1489.

² Ibid, Peterson, 1490.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper, San Francisco, 1993, January 27th.

⁴ Ibid, Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1489.

⁵ Ibid, Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, January 28th.

⁶ Ibid, Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1489.

⁷ Ibid, Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, March 7th.

⁸ Ibid, Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS**, page 1490.