



Lent 5
March 28, 2004

Matthew 4:8-11
The Temptation of Power
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Sometimes it is asserted that truly spiritual people are not tempted because they have become so filled by the Holy Spirit that the hungers of the flesh and doubts others have about God are just no longer a problem. We have a highly theological term for this belief - we call it baloney.

Jesus, the embodiment of true spirituality, was really tempted by the devil. The Bible makes that clear. When the devil asked Jesus to turn a stone into bread, in the first temptation, he knew Jesus was really hungry. When the devil asked Jesus to jump from the top of the temple to see if God would catch him, in the second temptation, he knew Jesus really wanted to be certain the Father loved him. Now when we get to the third temptation the devil has appealed to Jesus greatest desire - the longing to save the world.

Matthew tells us that the devil took Jesus up to the top of a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. Then he said, "All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." Jesus responds, as he does to all of the temptations, by quoting scripture: "Away with you Satan! For it is written, Worship the Lord your God and serve only him." But notice that Jesus doesn't say, "What do I care about the kingdoms of the world?" That's because Jesus would love to have the world. Saving it was central to his mission. So this is not a temptation about ends. It is a temptation about means. The devil is not tempting Jesus to forget about the Messiah business and just play golf for the rest of his life. That would not have been tempting to him. What was tempting was that the devil was offering to help Jesus achieve his own goals.

I am impressed by the high and grand goals of people who come to church. There are other things you could do on Sunday morning, but you choose to come to worship because you want to make holy sense of life. You want to raise your children well or to find a sacred purpose to your long days at the office. You want to make a difference, somehow, with your life. So do you really think the devil is going to show up one day and ask you to run numbers for the mob?

No, the devil doesn't ask us to give up our lofty dreams or high purposes for life. What he asks is that you simply be pragmatic about what it is going to take. He tells us, "You just have to make a few compromises." He insists that the end will justify the unholy means. He claims that the world belongs to him, that evil is so much a part of the system, and that your success will require a little complicity with how it is. "If you really want the power to make your high dreams come true," he tempts, "I can provide it." All you have to do is make a deal with the devil.

It seems to me that these days the devil is running several special deals. All of them are appealing because they offer to help us with our great goals for life. But once you take these deals, you'll soon discover that the cost was to your very soul.

For example, I caution about the demonic deal that claims you're on your own to make your dreams come true. "No one is going to hand it to you," the devil tells us. "You're going to have to make it happen." That's just the way his world works, he explains. But in spite of what the devil tells you, the world doesn't belong to him. It belongs to God. And God is still intimately involved with it and with your life.

Think about the things that you cherish the most: family, friends, health, freedom, life itself. Which of

these things did you earn? Not a one. They are all blessings, and blessings only come from the hand of God who gives them freely by grace. No, you cannot earn a blessing. But you can certainly screw one up, and the best way to do that is to insist on earning it.

If you turn a blessing into a goal and become determined to make it happen - whether it is the goal to succeed at work or in raising children - eventually you are going to meet resistance. When you run into that resistance you are going to double your efforts, which will result in a redoubling of the resistance. Eventually you will find that you are doing whatever it takes to succeed. It is then that you become mean, trying to do good.

Your children and your colleagues aren't helped by you turning into a Mean Messiah. Neither is the kingdom of God. And it does not help to say, "Sorry that's just the way I am." No, it is not. You are who God made you to be, and God did not make you mean. By contrast, one of the Bible's compelling images for people who wait upon God for their dreams is that they are those who mount up with wings as eagles. If you have ever been blessed to see an eagle soar, you know they don't do a lot of flapping. Mostly, they just ride the currents of wind that have come from heaven.

This is a bit far fetched, but imagine if a baby eaglet was adopted by a family of snakes. As it grew up, all it knew was what the snakes taught him. When it tried to spread his wings, the snakes would hiss and say, "Oh, don't ever spread those ugly wings. What you should do is crawl around on your belly and bite people!" Can you imagine anything more pathetic than an eagle acting like a snake? Can you imagine how pathetic we must look to heaven when we succumb to meanness? But that is inevitably what happens when you believe the devil's lie that you are on your own to get what you want. You may live among snakes, you may work among snakes, you may even work for a snake. But you are not a snake. Don't take the devil's deal to become one.

Another deal the devil is peddling these days tells us, "You have got to be realistic." The world has far too many realists and not nearly enough visionaries. Of course you have know reality, and you had better learn how to deal with it. But our society is dying for leaders who know how to envision another reality.

All that the devil could offer was the world that he saw. Jesus could resist that temptation because he was committed to the world that he envisioned. So the last thing Jesus was going to be accused of was being realistic. When Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, the Pharisees said, "Who are you?" When Paul wanted to take the gospel to the Gentiles, they told him it would never happen. When Pope Leo announced he was going to the gates of Rome to ask the Huns to go home, they laughed at him. But Leo succeeded. Martin Luther, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa, and Nelson Mandela were all told that their great dreams were completely unrealistic. Thank God for that! Thank God we are given men and women who refuse to accept the world they see and who call us to work for the world they have envisioned.

This is why worship is so important. It is here that we find holy dreams for our lives. It is where those who have made a world of difference discovered their visions, and it is where you will also. Because the dreams of God are the ultimate reality. And these dreams are not relegated off to the distant future, but they are breaking into the day you have if only you could see that. The eternal always enters the presence tense.

That leads me to one last caution about another deal the devil will try to make with you. That is the deal that says, "You can miss today because your life begins tomorrow." We are in such a hurry to get to tomorrow, such a hurry that we miss the blessings of the day we have.

A woman from out of town sits by the hospital bed of her dying mother who lies in a coma. As she strokes her mother's hair she remembers that things have not always been good between them. She meant to work on that, but there was a career to develop, her own children to raise, and so many pressing appointments. Now she would give anything if the dying woman could hear her say, "I love you, Mom." But it is too

late.

A man cradles his new born child, and vows this kid will never be in need. So he throws himself into work to be a good provider. But a few fleeting years later he is taking this kid to college thinking about all the piano recitals he missed, all the soccer games for which he was out of town, and all the weekends lost in the office. He wonders where the time went, and how the kid grew up so quickly. Then he wonders how he could have forgotten to provide the most important thing - himself.

A new widow stands beside the closed casket of her cherished husband. As she runs her fingers across the top of it, she remembers the promises they made about retirement. They would work hard through the middle years and enjoy the later years. That was the deal. But now he is gone too early, and she is left alone. Alone with a bad deal.

It doesn't have to end that way but it will unless you realize that blessings do not have a long shelf life. There will be more blessings tomorrow when it gets here, but today is the day to receive the ones you now hold. For each of these blessings flow out of the love of God for you, and to hold off the blessing is to hold off the love. Nothing could be more dangerous to your soul.

Remember, all these temptations came after Jesus' baptism when he heard the voice from heaven saying, "You are my Beloved." It was only because those words were still ringing in his ears that he could resist the devil's temptations. In your baptism God has also claimed that you are his beloved. This is where your true power in life comes from. It comes from the God who is blessing you today. From the God who gives you visionary dreams. And from the God who makes the dreams happen - one day at a time. All because God loves you, and is not done with you.

You have got to see that, because it's the only way to find the courage to say no to the devil's lousy deals for your life. Amen.