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TEMPTATION IS NOT A SIN!

Today's Text: Matt. 4: 1-11

Extracts:

Then, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" ... Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him [Matt. 4: 1-4, 11]

On 4 November 2008, Americans went to the polls to elect Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States of America. That he is the first black American President to be so elected is a major historic landmark. However, he won largely because America elected the best candidate that ran a near flawless campaign, the best in the nation's political history. The Republican Party (the party in power in the last eight years) knew that it could not win on the economy which was in bad shape under its watch. So, the party and its presidential candidate, John McCain, decided to make Obama's character the issue. They threw every smear at him. For example, he was called a Muslim; he palled with domestic terrorists; he was a socialist, even a Marxist! During the debates, his opponent addressed him as "that one!" Yet, Obama remained calm, cool and unruffled. Instead, he stuck to his message of change and economic relief for the middle class. He discouraged booing or disparaging remarks against his opponent whom he always addressed with respect. By election time, Obama's dignified campaign resonated with American voters and his opponent's negative approach backfired. Obama won in a landslide (364 electoral votes to 163)!

What is the lesson for believers from that story? The negative attacks on Obama are analogous to Satan's relentless pursuit of the children of God that he falsely accuses [Rev. 12:10]. Just as Obama had no control over what his opponents did, so we cannot stop Satan's attacks. Just as Obama had control over his reaction, so we can resist the devil's temptation and he will flee from us [Jam.4: 7]. Therefore, we need to know what we are facing in an increasingly more wicked world.

What is temptation? Is temptation a sin? How can we win over temptation? Those and more are the issues that we shall examine in this week's study, based on the temptation of Jesus.

1. Temptation: a scene or a sin?

Temptation has been defined as “a testing designed to *correct* or to *corrupt*.”¹In the Lord’s prayer, Jesus taught His disciples to pray to God, saying, “Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” [Matt. 6: 13]. The evil one is the devil, also called Satan, Lucifer, the deceiver, the serpent or the accuser of our brethren [Rev. 12: 9-10]. He was the serpent in the Garden of Eden who tempted Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit [Gen. 3: 1-14]. It was Satan that stood up against Israel and moved David to take a census of the people without God’s approval [1 Chron. 21: 1]. It was Satan that asked Jesus for permission to sift Peter as wheat [Lk22: 31] by denying the Lord thrice during His trial. It was Satan that entered into Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus [Lk 23: 3]. So, *Satan and temptation are closely linked*.

The word of God also says, “Be angry and do not sin” [Eph. 4: 6]. Our Lord, Jesus, “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” [Heb. 4: 15]. That suggests that temptation *per se* is not sin but an *invitation to rise above or to fall into sin*. So, when Satan comes knocking at the door, your response will determine whether you have sinned or not.

As defined above, temptation can be a test of our lust or of our faith. Let us amplify that point further:

a) *Temptation as a test of our lust*

Satan cannot be in every place at the same time because only God is omnipresent. Rather, the devil is always “going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it” [Job 1: 7]. Therefore, some people invite temptation on themselves and claim that Satan made them do it! For example, prostitutes and other sex workers *deliberately* go out looking for prey. Some married people actually leave their matrimonial homes to solicit for pleasure outside with single or married partners [Prov. 7: 6-23]. Some people deliberately cut corners when they do business with others or misappropriate the resources of their employers. Some people choose to work in revenue-collecting or compliance-enforcing offices where they believe there are opportunities for self-enrichment. Scriptures underline such lust as follows, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But *each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed*” [Jam. 1: 13-14].

Take the case of King David. Here was a man with multiple wives. He had spent over ten years in the wilderness, running away from his predecessor, king Saul’s persecution. Having ascended to the throne and with peace all around him, he began to wake up late instead of going to war like other

¹ *The New Open Bible Study Edition* [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990; p. 322]

kings. One evening, he got out of his bed. As he strolled on the roof of the king's house, "he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful to behold." David sent his messengers to bring Bathsheba, another man's wife, and he slept with her, [2 Sam. 11: 1-4]. You know the rest of the story. David could have turned away as soon as he saw a naked woman not his wife. In those days, there were no enclosed bathrooms as we do today and the woman might not have known that some man not her husband was watching her from the 'skies'! Therefore, for David, it was a self-inflicted temptation. He invited Satan to tempt his lust.

Compare that with the reaction of the sons of Noah when he lay naked from excessive drinking. For Ham, it was a laughing matter. He invited his other two brothers, Shem and Japheth, to come and see their father's nakedness. Rather than do so, they took a garment and covered their father up while looking away [Gen. 9:18-23]. The three sons faced the same temptation but reacted differently. While Ham sinned by mocking his father's nakedness, his other two brothers shut the devil out of their hearts.

b) *Temptation as a test of our faith*

Recall that when Satan appeared before the Lord with the sons of God, He asked the devil where he had been. He said that he had been roaming the earth. God asked him how he saw His servant, Job, "a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil." Satan replied God, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? ... But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face." God gave the devil permission to test Job's faith by taking away his possessions but not to touch his person [Job 1: 6-12].

This is an example of an unsolicited temptation. It is only possible because God has allowed it. Therefore, it is for a purpose, such as, to train or strengthen your spiritual muscles or to wake you up from complacency. For example, you are trying to deal with an anger problem. All of a sudden, you find yourself being provoked to anger at home, school, work or church. That temptation is a training opportunity for you to overcome anger. You are fighting off a life of sexual immorality. Suddenly, beautiful people are smiling at you and making irresistible overtures. Know for sure that you are facing a training opportunity. When you pass the test, God will promote you. But when you fail, it can be disastrous. The word of God says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that *the testing of your faith produces patience*" [Jam. 1: 2].

Joseph the dreamer gives us a good example. He had been sold into slavery by his brothers. In Egypt, he was bought by Potiphar, Pharaoh's general. We are told, "the Lord was with Joseph." Consequently, he found

favour with his master who put everything in his household, except his wife, under Joseph's control. But God had a bigger purpose for Joseph and He was not going to let him remain a houseboy. So, God allowed Satan to tempt Joseph "who was handsome in form and appearance." Soon enough, his master's wife "cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me.'" Joseph refused, saying, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" [Gen. 39: 1-9]. Joseph's faith was tempted but he did not sin. He passed the test. His spiritual muscles became stronger. That was his route to becoming the governor of Egypt subject only to the Pharaoh [Gen. 41: 41-44].

In Peter's case that we had cited earlier, Satan specifically asked Jesus for permission to shake him up. God allowed it because Jesus was preparing Peter for the leadership of His church [Lk 22: 32]. Satan used fear to tempt Peter and he denied Jesus three times but later repented [vv. 54-62]. That taught him that he could not rely on his bravado but on the power of God to lead the church [Acts 4: 8-13]. *Peter passed the test of faith by rising from failure and learning the right lessons out of that experience.*

From the foregoing, we can conclude that there will always be temptation because we either invite it through lust or it comes by God's design to build our faith. There is nothing wrong with temptation because it is a test to correct or to corrupt us. When we are favourably disposed to temptation like king David in the matter of Bathsheba, instead of fighting it off, we wind up being corrupted by it. However, if we can fight it off like Joseph, or repent when we fall, like David and Peter, we become winners. Joseph won because he had the fear of the Lord *at the time of the temptation*. Peter and David won because they believed in the mercy of God on the repentant [1 Jn 1: 9]. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one, so we pray each new day. Let us learn from Jesus Himself how we can be tempted and not sin

2. Satan tempts Jesus

The word of God says [1 Jn 2: 15-16]:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, for all that is in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life-is not of the Father but is of the world.

Those who work according to the world are controlled by the prince of the power of the air which is the spirit that works in the children of disobedience [Eph. 2: 2]. Satan is a liar and the father of lies [Jn 8: 44]. So, when he tempts us, he spares nothing to try to get his way! If he cannot get you through lust of the flesh (the physical level), he attacks your pride of life (the psychological level). If that

fails, he takes the spiritual route through the lust of the eyes. Let us see how Jesus handled him at each of those levels:

a) *At the physical level*

Soon after His baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where He fasted for forty days and forty nights. After that, He became hungry. That was when Satan came to tempt Him [**Matt. 4: 1-2**]. The tempter said to Jesus, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become *bread*” [v. 3]. A hungry man will want to grab bread! But who is the devil to command the Son of God how He should feed Himself? In like manner, Satan can tempt us by first planting a doubt in our minds (concerning God’s promises to us) before reminding us of our material lack. He told Eve, “Has God in deed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” [**Gen. 3: 1**]. So, watch that lust of the flesh. Something inside you will put a strong urge in you to do it, to simply fulfill instant gratification without any concern or thought for future implications. That is how people are pushed into stealing or sexual immorality, murder or lying. As soon as it is over, you wonder to yourself, “What have I just done?”

Jesus knew that He was under spiritual attack. So, He summoned the sword of the Spirit, the word of God [**Eph. 6: 17**] to confront Satan. The Lord said to him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” [**Matt. 4: 3**]. Jesus was quoting from the book of Deuteronomy [**Deut. 8: 3**]. Many people who claim to be Christians do not even own a Bible, not to talk of reading one! So, how can you war against Satan when you do not have the sword of the Spirit? Our first lesson then is: *hide the word of God in your heart so that you don’t sin against Him* [**Ps. 119: 12**].

b) *At the psychological level*

Having failed to tempt Jesus to sin by turning stones into bread, the devil took Him up to Jerusalem and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down, for it is written, ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone’” [**Matt. 4: 6**]. Satan raised the stakes to appeal to the pride of life, that is, to the psychological level. Much more, he quoted the book of Psalms [**Ps. 91:11-12**]. Satan will pump up your head by reminding you to use your power or authority, and quote the Scripture to back up your actions! Be careful. Jesus responded, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God’” [v. 7], quoting Deuteronomy 6: 16. The sword of the Spirit again!

The lesson for us is as follows: *let not the word of God ever depart from your mouth* [Josh. 1: 8].

c) *At the Spiritual level!*

Having failed to make Jesus fall through the flesh and human pride, Satan raised the stakes. He took Jesus into an exceedingly high mountain and showed Him *in an instant* [Lk 4: 5] all the kingdoms of this world and promised Jesus, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me” [Matt. 4: 8-9]. Jesus rebuked him and said, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’” Thereafter, Satan left Him *for a season* [Lk 4: 13] and the angels came and ministered to Him [Matt. 4: 10-11].

If the devil can show our Lord visions, why do you think he cannot deceive you with false dreams or visions or speak lies through prophets? That is why we are warned to test all spirits so as to know who is speaking to us [1 Jn 4: 1-4]. Jesus replied Satan by quoting Deuteronomy 6: 13. The lesson: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom* [Ps. 111: 10].

3. Conclusion: You will be tempted but don't sin!

From the forgoing, we learn that we cannot avoid temptation. What is important is that we do not sin when we are tempted. That we have won one victory is no guarantee that Satan will not return. In fact, he does so with bigger weapons [Matt. 12: 43-45]! So, to be a winner *at all times*, try out the following:

- Satan will tempt you with what you love the most or where you are most weak. Is it food or money or power or sex or fear of man? That is where the devil will wait for you. *Don't go there!*
- You cannot win by will power or human sense of decency or integrity. You can only fight Satan with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Therefore, do not let the word of God depart from your mouth. Let it be near to you in your heart and on your lips [Rom. 10: 8]. *Overcome Satan by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of your testimony* [Rev. 12: 11]
- You may not always win, but *whenever you fall, get up*, repent and return to Christ.

Temptation is not a sin. To fall is the sin.