

## “THREE TEMPTATIONS”

Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

January 16, 2005

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In the church, oftentimes, we are very good at talking about how to deal with the consequences of sin and offering forgiveness, and that we are supposed to repent when we sin and that's a good thing because we do sin and fall short of the glory of God. But oftentimes we don't spend enough time, though, talking about sin prevention. I mean, we don't *have* to sin; we don't *have* to yield to temptation when it comes, and I want to share with you this story from our Lord Jesus as He went out into the wilderness. He has been baptized and now He is going for an extended time to fast from people and food, but especially, He knows that the greatest problem in the world is this sin problem that has been going on from the time that Adam and Eve disobeyed in the garden. And so, how is He going to go about it? He's praying and He is led by the spirit to go out into the wilderness and He is tempted. In chapter 4 it says:

*1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."*

*4 Jesus answered, "It is written: `Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

*5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.*

*6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:*

*" `He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"*

*7 Jesus answered him, "It is also written: `Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

*8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

*10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: `Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."*

*11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

In the sermon called "Sin Vaccination", one of my favorite authors and preachers, Max Lucado, talks about one of the great disasters of history, the Black Plague. He writes:

In October of 1347 a Genoese fleet returned from the Black Sea carrying in her cargo the death sentence for Europe. By the time the ships landed in Messina, Italy, most of the sailors were dead. The few who survived wished they hadn't. Fever racked their bodies. Festering boils volcanoed on their skin. Authorities ordered the vessels out of the harbor, but it was too late. Flea-infested rats had

already scampered down the ropes into the village and the Bubonic Dictator had begun her ruthless march across the continent. The disease followed trade routes northward through Italy into France and the northern nations. By Spring it had breached the border of England. Within a short and brutal five years, twenty-five million people, one-third of Europe's population, had died. And that was just the beginning. Three centuries later it still raged. As late as 1665 an epidemic left a hundred thousand Londoners dead, taking some seven thousand lives a week, until a bitter, yet mercifully cold winter, killed the fleas. No cure was known. No hope was offered. The healthy quarantined the infected; the infected counted their days.

And he writes this way:

When you make a list of history's harshest scourges, rank the Black Plague near the top. It earns a high spot, but not the highest. Call the disease catastrophic, disastrous, but humanity's deadliest? No. Scripture reserves that title for a darker blight. An older pandemic that, by comparison, makes the Black Plague seem like a cold sore. No culture avoids, no nation escapes, no person side-steps the infection of Original Sin. Yet, today we have a tendency to not see it in that light. We take sin lightly instead of taking sin seriously.

Some years ago Liz and I did a workbook on Maxie Dunnam on the Seven Deadly Sins and before you get into the Seven Deadly Sins, Maxie Dunnam is a great spiritual writer. They have a whole week on taking sin seriously because Maxie Dunnam realizes that not everybody takes it seriously. I mean, seriously, sin is for, well, "people who stand before the judge or are incarcerated, but it really doesn't apply to everyday people." We take sin lightly. St. Augustine, in his classic, *Confessions of St. Augustine*, who by his own admission, had a mistress, fathered a child out of wedlock — I mean, did some things that most people, even today, would think would be sinful — but he wrote of a time when he and his friends in his youth shook down a pear tree and didn't even want the pears; they just fed them to the pigs.

And he described it this way: He said that they "took a great quantity of fruit from the shake-down, not to eat them themselves, but simply to throw them to the pigs." And then this is what he says: "It was only my love of mischief that made me do it. The evil in me was foul, but I loved it. My soul was vicious and broke away from the safe keeping to see it's own destruction."

What was he saying? He saw the true nature of his rebellion. He realized that he had a sin nature that only God was the cure for. Today I would like to share with you from the Master, the only one who is totally unbeaten when it comes to not yielding to temptation, Our Lord Jesus. There are three very common temptations that will come our way when we seek to serve the Lord.

In Matthew's Gospel I have tried to share messages of discipleship. The Wise Men put worship first and gave God their very best, their gifts. John the Baptist was very clear about his calling. But Jesus shares this lesson with us; He shares it with His Disciples because there is opposition and we need to be prepared for the sin prevention not to yield to temptation. The first temptation that came to Jesus and also comes to us I call the *temptation of distraction*. Have you been dis-

tracted lately? God has a clear calling for our lives, but there are times that we get off course; we get distracted from what God wants us to do. We may be doing *good* things, we may be very *busy*, but we are distracted from what God really wants us to be doing. The tempter came to Jesus. Jesus was out in the wilderness; He is very hungry, of course and the temptation comes: *If you are the son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*

If I hadn't eaten in forty days I would have already been eating the stones, but for Jesus, the temptation comes to him: Turn these stones into bread. You are going to be a miracle worker. You can do that.

Jesus responds though, and Jesus has a compassion for people that are hungry. He has a compassion for those that are suffering from disasters. But He knows that's not the most important reason that He came. He says:

*"It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' — that what is most important is that people respond to God's word, that people respond to the love of God and come and follow Him.*

The tempter has been thwarted. What's the truth about temptation? Well, first of all, you never get to the point where you will not be tempted. Sorry. You may think, well, if I get to a certain level of consecration I won't be tempted; that just won't happen. And also, the truth about temptation is: Just because you are tempted, doesn't mean it's a sin. I mean, Jesus was tempted.

Another truth about temptation is: We don't have to give into it. One of the great promises is in the Bible in I Corinthians, chapter 10, verse 13:

*No temptation is overtaken you that is uncommon to man. God is faithful and just. He will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape so we may be able to endure.*

Temptations come, don't they? When we were having our visitation this past week, my brother had the bright idea of putting up a bunch of pictures of Mom, which was fine, but also Mom saved a lot of little letters that we wrote to her. He said he screened them but one that I had up there was written back in 1966 and it told Mom that I loved her. I think I can remember it because I wasn't in the habit of writing letters to my mother, especially when I was living at home, but I remember the caption though, "I'm going to try to be a better boy." So I realize there must have been some reason that I ended it by saying I was going to be a better boy.

Oh, all of us are trying to be better boys and better girls and we would like to resist the temptation, but sometimes it is very hard. But the temptation for Jesus here was just to be a miracle worker. He did feed four-thousand, plus women and children; He fed *five*-thousand, plus women and children; He cared about that. He knew how important it was as a means of faith with the manna in the wilderness for the Israelites, but His primary calling was to give His life upon the cross and to call people to follow God's Word.

One of the ways that Christians, many Christians are distracted today is that we forget that, re-

ardless of our age, our gifts, the opportunities, God wants all of us to be involved in The Great Commission. Before Jesus ascended He said;

*Go into all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.*

“Go and make disciples of all nations.”

Who does God want to use you to influence for the Kingdom, to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? And not just a convert, but a disciple — one that has come to know Christ and to love Him and to serve Him faithfully. How do we resist the temptation of distraction and be clear about God’s will? I think it’s the practice of prayer. When we spend time praying God gives us these clear priorities of what is really most important in our lives and what God wants us to be doing and we resist the *good* for the *best*. We go for what God really wants us to be about. This first temptation is distraction — get you out of line. In my life I find that, you know, God has called me to preach and it is important to visit, and it is important to go to meetings and all, but I find that throughout the last twenty-five years, I have tried to spend two or three hours, four or five days a week, studying and preparing. And generally, if I am getting distracted, I can tell what is happening to me is that I am slowly, surely getting away from this primary calling to be ready to preach.

How does it happen in you life? Be prepared for this temptation.

The second temptation I call the *temptation of deception*:

*Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:*

*" `He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'*

He is quoting Psalm 91. Beautiful psalm of comfort and care. It’s the temptation of deception. Jesus said:

*"It is also written: `Do not put the Lord your God to a foolish test.'*

The Devil is a great liar. Have you been lied to lately? I remember going to First Family. You remember going to first weddings, first funerals and things like that, but I remember the first family that came to the parsonage wanting help. They were so sincere, so down on their luck, so I called a few people, got a lot of food for them, did several things for them. Got a call later that afternoon; found out that they were one of the best cons in the community and they were just taking advantage of the new preacher coming in. I gave them some money. I didn’t know that I wasn’t supposed to do that and I felt embarrassed by that. But generally,

people that lie real well, what they will do is take about 80% truth and mix in just a little bit of lie because it is bait. It's bait. In *Fuel for the Journey*, Andy Lambert compares temptation to sin like fishing; that is, there's got to be a bait out there. It's just like, you know, the fish, it's one thing to be going around there, but when the angler is fishing, you know, the bait is put out there, are you going to take it? Has there been some bait that has been laid out there for you lately and it is deceiving you? Jesus was not going to be deceived by this. He knew the truth was, you don't worship the enemy and you don't put God to a foolish test. One of the best ways to come against this temptation is, as Jesus says, to know the truth.

*"If you are truly my disciple you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."*

Sometimes the bait that is put out for me, and it is a real common bait, is the bait to let worry and fear come on into my life. You would think, after a while, not to nibble on that. You'd learn not to even take a bite of it just to see how it tastes, but sometimes I'll still nibble. So I will come back into God's Word and "stand upon the promises", as the hymn says. And in 1 John, chapter 4:18, it says:

*There is no fear in love. But perfect love casts out fear. . .*

So when I come back to God's love I realize that I don't have to be afraid of whatever it is that is bothering me. In 2 Timothy chapter 1:7, Paul wrote to Timothy, who was a young pastor:

*For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, Timothy; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.*

Of oftentimes I will pray Philippians, chapter 4:

*<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance; the Lord is at hand.*

And as Paul is writing from prison, of all places, it says:

*Have no anxiety, no worries about anything, but in everything, by prayer, with supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made known unto God and the peace of God (that's the promise) that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your mind in Christ Jesus.*

Or I will go the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus says, "Do not be anxious about your life, but rather seek first the kingdom of God and His Righteousness. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient thereof."

Or oftentimes, just praying the Twenty-third psalm: *The Lord is the Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures . . . ."*

But you see, the truth helps us not to be deceived. We realize that, now, that's not right.

The second temptation comes to us in the form of deception and the great sin prevention is we take time to be in the Holy Scriptures, to hear it preached; to go to Sunday School; to read it for ourselves, but we saturate our minds with the Word of God that He has inspired.

The third temptation came to Jesus, and it is certainly one that I have encountered through times; I'm know you have too, and that is the temptation of *discouragement*. It says in Matthew 4:8:

*8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

*10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'*

Hannah Smith has written "The Christian's Secret to a Happy Life". She says:

There is an allegory that illustrates this to me wonderfully. Satan called together a council of his servants to consult how they might make a good man sin. One evil spirit started up and said, "I will make him sin." "How will you do it?" asked Satan." "I will set before him the pleasures of sin," was the reply; "I will tell him of its delights, and the rich rewards it brings." "Ah," said Satan, "that will not do; he has tried it, and knows better than that." Then another imp started up and said, "I will tell him of the pains and sorrows of virtue. I will show him that virtue has no delights, and brings no rewards." "Ah, no!" exclaimed Satan, "that will not do at all; for he has tried it and knows that 'Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace; ' " "Well," said another imp, starting up, "I will undertake to make him sin." "And what will you do?" asked Satan, again. "I will discourage his soul," was the short reply. "Ah, that will do!" cried Satan; "that will do! We shall conquer him now." An old writer say, "All discouragement is from the devil."

The best way to prevent discouragement is to have a strong commitment to worship and fellowship. In Acts 2:42 we find that the Disciples were committed.

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

Andy Lambert and Lowell McNaney, in *Fuel for the Journey*, suggest two ways to avoid temptation. One, Stay away from the pier. Fish are more likely to encounter lures in some areas than others. A fish that wants to stay alive would be well advised to avoid those high-risk areas. We too need to avoid certain places and people in order to avoid temptation.

Their second suggestion: Don't nibble the bait. If Mr. Fishy quickly swam to the other side of the pond and retreated when a lure plopped into the water, he will never be a filet that evening. But if the fish begins to nibble, he could soon be in trouble. We too need to be guarded against nibbling on "baits" to sin.

*Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7)*

Max Lucado concludes his sermon with the following story:

It took three hundred years, but the Black Plague finally reached the quaint village of Eyam, England. George Viccars, a tailor, unpacked a parcel shipped from London. The cloth he'd ordered had arrived. But as he opened and shook it, he released plague-infested fleas. Within four days he was dead, and the village was doomed. The town unselfishly quarantined itself, seeking to protect the region. Other villages deposited food in an open field and left the people of Eyam to die alone. But to everyone's amazement, many survived. A year later, when outsiders again visited the town, they found half the residents had resisted the disease. How so/

They had touched it. Breathe it. One surviving mother had buried six children and her husband in one week. The gravedigger had handled hundreds of diseased corpses yet hadn't died. Why not/ How did they survive?

Lineage. Through DNA studies of descendants, scientists found proof of a disease-blocking gene. The gene garrisoned the white blood cells, preventing the bacteria from gaining entrance. The plague, in other words, could touch people with this gene but not kill them. Hence a subpopulation swam in a sea of infection but emerged untouched. All because they had the right parents. What's the secret for surviving the Black Plague? Pick the right ancestry.

Let us pray.

*Our Lord, You have given us the power of Your Holy Spirit and Your Word to empower us to resist temptation when it comes our way. We ask for Your help when the temptations of distraction, deception and discouragement come to us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen*