

Battling Temptation

Matthew 4:1–11

Introduction

Have you ever tried to explain to your children the possible dangers they are facing, but cringe with the thought of these innocent children knowing the dangers? For instance,

- What if you are holding your child's hand in the parking lot and he takes off running? You want to tell him, "Listen, son, you are unaware of the danger. You could be hit by a car and killed. That is why you need to hold my hand." Yet he still runs around with no thought to the danger surrounding him.
- What if you are going to a public place with lots of people like a state fair, mall, or theme park, and your child innocently speaks to anyone and would even hug them if allowed? Why does he do this? Because he is oblivious to the danger around him.

Parents, sometimes you wonder, "Do my children not see the danger they are facing?" The answer is no! They are unaware that in a moment their life could be wrecked! Russell Moore wrote a book that I would like to recommend to you. It is entitled, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ*. In it, he makes a compelling statement that should awaken all of us to the danger we are facing. He says, "You are on the verge of wrecking your life (especially if you *do not* know it)."¹

He means by this statement that you are in a spiritual battle, and it is raging. Moment-by-moment, you are faced with tiny decisions that could lead you to destroy your life. Every person faces them. Every person is one step away from destruction, one step away from throwing it all away, one step away from trading lifelong joys of the future for fleeting momentary pleasures of the present.

Russell Moore is right: you are on the verge of wrecking your life, and so am I. In a moment, we could say something or do something that will have lifelong consequences. You see, everyone is in danger of falling into temptation, but especially those who *do not* realize that they are. It is these people who naively hop, skip, and jump right into temptation because they are

¹ Russell Moore, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 25.

oblivious to the spiritual battle raging against them.

In this text, Matthew takes us aside like a parent would a child. He informs us that danger is all around us, but we are acting like it is not present.

There are two worlds in this room. A physical world with *people that you see* and an invisible world with *spirits that you cannot see*. There are spiritual forces of evil at work in this room that are very real—just as real as you.

If God were to pull back the curtain and allow us to see the spiritual battle going on, it would stun us! It would rock our world.

If God would allow us to see with our physical eyes the spiritual world, it would stagger us! There are spiritual forces at war with our minds.

Russell Moore's piercing conclusion rings true, "You are on the verge of wrecking your life (especially if you do not know it)." You must expect confrontation with the devil.

Transition: Today, I want to give you a battle plan for your war with temptation. Here is where I am going: First, I want to identify the temptations in your life; then secondly, I want to identify how to defeat the temptations in your life.

1. You must identify the temptations (verses 1–7)

Matthew 4:1–11 says,

Then Jesus was led up 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 took Him up into the holy city, 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.'" Jesus said to him, "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God.'" Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.'" Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him.

In this text, Jesus Christ is facing temptation. Last week I covered verses 1–2, so I will not re-hash that content this week. When we approach verse 3, we need to be aware that Jesus is about to face three different temptations. He will face them and defeat them!

Each temptation He faces is unique and different from the others. They actually represent categories of temptation. Every temptation that man has ever faced could fit into one of these three categories. That is why Hebrews 4:15 tells us, “For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin.”

You may be thinking, “But, Kyle, Jesus did not have a TV; how could He be tempted to watch something He should not watch? Lamborghinis were not produced in Jesus’ day, so how could He be tempted to covet one?”

It is true that we have *new ways* of entering into temptation today which Jesus did not have, such as an iPhone, the Internet, and many other things. However, there are no new temptations! There are only *new* ways of yielding to *old* temptations. Jesus has faced every temptation (at its core) that you will ever face. Jesus proved that he could handle every category of temptation.

Let’s look at the first temptation that Jesus faced. It was the temptation of instant gratification.

A. The Temptation of Instant Gratification (verses 3–4)

Matthew 4:3–4 says,

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.’ “

Jesus was hungry. He was on a forty-day fast. Think about how hungry you are if you miss one lunch. Jesus missed forty of them. Satan approached Jesus on the fortieth day and said, “If you are the Son of God . . .” Let’s stop here for a moment. Satan was attacking Jesus’ Sonship. He does it again in verse 6: “And said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God . . .’”

It could have sounded like this: “If you are really the Son of God, then prove it by doing this.” It is interesting that we find this same attack on the Sonship of Jesus when He is on the cross; the people claimed that they would believe He was really the Son of God if He could come down from the cross (Matthew 27:42). His public ministry began with an attack on His deity and ended with an attack on His deity.

Could Jesus turn a stone into bread? Yes, absolutely! He turned water into wine. He turned a few fish into a fish market. He turned some loaves of bread into a Merita Bread Factory.

But this temptation wasn't just about bread. It was about the goodness of God. Behind the temptation was this accusation: "You are the Son of God, the Chosen One, the One who left heaven; You have lived thirty years in obscurity; and now look at You. You are starving." In other words, "God is being unkind to You, Jesus. He is just letting You sit out here hungry."

Satan tried to get the last Adam (Jesus) to sin with *bread* like he did the first Adam with an *apple*. Now, there is nothing wrong with eating. Any other time, Jesus could have turned a rock into bread, and it would not have been a sin; but, at this moment in time, it would have been a sin.

He was facing human hunger, and it was not the will of His Father for Him to eat *at that moment*. It **was** the will of His Father for Him to eat—even to eat bread—but not *at that moment*. So here is the temptation: "Will Jesus use His divine power in opposition to His Father's will?" No, Jesus and the Father do not act independently of one another (John 5:19).

This temptation for us represents instant gratification. We could desire good things but desire them at the *wrong time*, in the *wrong amount*, or in the *wrong place*.

- You desire sleep, and Satan comes around and tempts you with laziness and sluggishness; he takes something good and perverts it with the *wrong time* and the *wrong amount*.
- You desire food, and Satan tempts you to overeat (gluttony)—the *wrong amount*.
- You desire love, and Satan tempts you to find it in a book or in a movie instead of in your mate—the *wrong place*.
- You desire sex, and Satan tempts you to have it early (before marriage) or wrongly (outside of marriage)—the *wrong time*.

You see, none of these things are wrong. Bread, sleep, food, love, sex are all good things as long as they are kept *under* control and *in* God's design.

Some people get married, and their whole life they have been told that sex is wrong, wrong, wrong. In their minds they have developed a belief that it is *always* wrong—always a sin. When they get married, they wonder why they do not enjoy it. It is because they have been told it is evil, evil, evil; instead of the truth which is that it is evil *outside* of marriage, but a gift from God *inside* of marriage.

Satan uses good things to tempt us to instant gratification. There is nothing wrong with bread. Satan tempts Jesus to turn a stone into bread. In the Greek, the word *bread* literally means

homemade cinnamon raisin bread. Okay, that is not true, but that is my favorite type of bread!²

Church, please remember this: Satan *persuades* you to temptation, but he cannot *push* you to it. He can create the *temptation*; only we can create the *transgression*.³

The only governing motive in life should be the will of God, not our gratification. We cannot be driven by bodily desires.

B. The Temptation of Immediate Acceptance (verses 5–7)

Matthew 4:5–7 says,

Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, 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.’” Jesus said to him, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’”

The second temptation Jesus faced was the temptation of immediate acceptance. Satan took Jesus up to the pinnacle point of the temple. Just looking down would make someone dizzy. This may have been the southeastern portico of the temple. The height of the structure combined with the deep ravine below could have been between 150–450 feet. Some adventurous people bungee jump from that height these days.

Satan asks Jesus to jump because He has a divine bungee chord—a promise. “God will not let you fall; the Bible says so,” Satan alleged. Satan knew that Jesus had quoted the Bible to him in the last temptation; now he is quoting it to Jesus from Psalm 91:11–12. Of course, Satan took this verse out of context and made it fit into his little temptation. The two verses following those verses in Psalm 91 speak about Jesus Christ killing the cobra and a serpent. The ole’ serpent Satan left that part of the quotation out.

The context of the quotation basically speaks about Israel putting God to the test by demanding more water and acting presumptuously. Time will not allow me to develop this fully, but, in short, let’s see the subtlety of Satan’s temptation here. He is saying to Jesus, “Prove to me that you are accepted of the Father.”

² I am attempting to give the congregation a “rest” at this moment with laughter just before I attempt to place an important truth in their hearts.

³ John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Matthew: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 64.

In the first temptation, Satan asked Jesus to do a miracle; in the second, he is asking God to do a miracle. He is being presumptuous. He is testing God. You do not back God into a corner. He is God.

This temptation in our life will manifest itself in our desire to be accepted. You face decisions every day that fall under this category of temptation.

- It is stretching the truth—telling it not quite like it happened to make you come out in a better light.
- It is ignoring a dirty joke—joining in on the profanity to have the approval of those around.
- It is the desire to own that vehicle, that house, or that land because you know the applause of men comes along with it.

We fall into this temptation all the time. Why would we want the approval of others when we already have the approval of Jesus? Do not yield to the folly of shopping for an endorsement from the world.

C. The Temptation of Immense Power (verses 8–9)

Matthew 4:8–9 says,

Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.”

The third and final temptation is where Satan takes Jesus to a higher elevation on a mountain and lets Him see the kingdoms of the world. Maybe the kingdoms Satan showed Him were kingdoms present and future. Maybe Jesus saw the great Persian Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, and/or the British Empire.

Satan grew tired of “beating around the bush.” Finally, he just came out and said it: “I want you to bow down and worship me.” Satan was tired of playing second string to the Trinity. That is why he was kicked out of heaven in the first place. He wanted to be God. He wanted Jesus’ worship.

Jesus did not yield to this temptation either. Jesus knew what was written in the book of Revelation before it was penned. He knew these kingdoms belonged to him already.

This temptation in your life will look like uncontrolled ambition—a thirst and craving for power, a willingness to run over anyone who gets in your way. You crave it; you need it; that is

where you get your worth.

Transition: Not only must you identify what the temptations look like, but also . . .

2. You must identify how to defeat the temptations (verses 3-11)

One of my students in college was from a different country, and I recall on one occasion when he told me about his struggle with sin. He said he was having difficulty with lust. He read the verse in Matthew 5:29 that said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.” He proceeded to tell me that he was very close to gouging out his eyes because he believed this was God’s way of fighting temptation. He did not have a skilled Bible teacher to tell him that Jesus was using hyperbole (an intended exaggeration). Temptation needs to be battled by the ways we find in Scripture.

There are three ways that we can draw from in our text to defeat the temptations in our life, no matter how strong they are.

A. Through the Living Word

Jesus gained the ultimate victory over temptation and sin. Remember that the theme of the book of Matthew is “The King is Coming.” Here we see the King defeating the rival king to take the throne. The enemy king—that usurper—failed to gain a victory over our King Jesus.

We are feeble without Jesus, but with His power we can say no to any sin. Every time we sin, we are saying *no* to something and *yes* to something else. We are saying *no* to Jesus and *yes* to what the temptation is offering, whether it be pleasure, joy, fame, or whatever.

Every sin is rooted in idolatry. In that moment, you are rejecting God as your Father and Jesus as your pleasure. You are saying, “*No*, Jesus. You cannot bring me the pleasure that this sin can bring me.” Battling temptation is a choice—choose Jesus!

B. Through the Written Word

You must fight temptation like Jesus fought temptation. Jesus defeated Satan’s temptation by quoting the Bible three different times. He actually quoted out of the book of Deuteronomy three times. If your spiritual victory over temptation depended on your knowledge of the book of Deuteronomy, how would you come out?

Find a verse in the Bible that speaks to your temptation, and pray over that verse every day. Often in my prayer times, I will do this. Cling to a verse. Cling to the written Word of God.

If you struggle with greed or anger, there are verses that will wash that sin out of your soul. Find them, meditate on them, pray them, live them, and rest in them. Build the Word of God into your mind, and make it a vital part of your decision making.

C. Through Fleeing with no Words

Remember what Joseph did when he was tempted with immorality? He ran! Sometimes you need to flee with no words at all. Just do not even say a word and run away from that man, or that woman, or that TV, or that computer. Just run!

Imagine that a baby bird falls from its nest in the sight of a fox. The bird cannot yet fly (hence the fall), but there is a small protective hole at the base of tree that is within a scurry's reach. The fox pounces and sets out after the bird. What should the little bird do? Of course, it should scamper into the hole to get out of immediate danger. If, however, as time goes on, all the bird ever does is scamper, it will never learn what it has been designed for—to fly. And, eventually, it will surely be eaten by the predators it is designed to escape.

In the short run, we may have to make some difficult decisions just to get out alive. But in the long run, the ultimate way to shape our lives and escape the deadly influence of our besetting sins is by moving the heart with the gospel.⁴

Let me say it this way: until you get a grip on this temptation, it may require quick, decisive action toward that temptation. Stop getting around that temptation until you can handle it.

Conclusion

How long will your temptation last? Forty days? Forty minutes? Forty years? Here is what I do know. There was a time when the adversary exited and the angels arrived to minister. “Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him” (Matthew 4:11). Every temptation you face is common for people to face. God has promised that, if you face a temptation, not only will He provide *a* way out, but He will provide *the* way out. If you want a way out, there is always a way.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 69–70.

1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide *the* way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

I will close with some words of wisdom about temptation from one of my favorite theologians. I will leave you five things to consider in your struggle with temptation.

1. **Guard your marriage.** Evaluate your marriage relationship regularly, watching for the red flags of discontentment, poor communication, and poor marital relationship. Be diligent in daily, meaningful communication with your spouse.
2. **Exercise the caution of wisdom.** If you find yourself drawn to a co-worker or a parishioner, be sure that you meet with her only when necessary, only in the presence of others, and only as long as necessary.
3. **Guard your mind.** Immorality rarely happens all at once; rather, “small mental indulgences and minuscule compromises” add up. Stay strong in your daily disciplines of meditation, worship, prayer, and self-examination.
4. **Rehearse the consequences.** Few things squelch the urge to give in to immorality like listing specific consequences that would result from yielding to temptation.
5. **Beware the enemy.** Be assured that Satan has found our weak spots and knows where to aim his fiery darts. We must learn where our weaknesses lie and be prepared for the battle.⁵

⁵ Adapted from Randy Alcorn, “Strategies to Keep from Falling,” *Leadership Journal*, Summer 1996, accessed September 23, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1996/summer/613047.html>.

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