

"How To Overcome Temptation"

Matthew 4:1-11

March 9, 2014

1st Sunday in Lent

Many Christians seem to enjoy and seek out books which give practical application of Christian principles in their every day lives. Many Christian book stores thrive by selling such spiritual “self-help” books. Given the title of this sermon – “How To Overcome Temptation” – you might think this sermon is a “spiritual self help” tool. It would be appropriate, as we begin Lent, to consider how we are to deal with temptation since temptation leads to sin and sin led to Jesus’ crucifixion, the centerpiece of our Lenten meditation.

However, neither the text nor this sermon based on this text is to show God’s people how they may successfully overcome temptation by following Jesus’ successful example. In fact, it’s just the opposite. Our text today shows how the people of God have failed in overcoming temptation. No amount of “self-help” or “how to” principles will change that. This text is about Jesus, not about us. It is about what Jesus has done right where we have done wrong. It is about how Jesus’ actions actually help our situation and not how they serve as examples for our actions.

Our story actually begins before our text at the baptism of Jesus where the voice of God the Father, speaking from heaven, declared of Jesus, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus had not come to this world to be merely a teacher, a preacher, a worker of miracles, or a moral example. He had come as a substitute and a stand-in for the people of God. He was the nation of Israel reduced to a single man. He would do everything Israel should have done and failed. He would do it right.

As Israel had gone through the water of the Red Sea and immediately into the desert, so Jesus went through the water of His baptism and into the wilderness. However, God had led Israel into the desert to test the people for faith and righteousness, but they failed. Jesus, our text says, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

As God led the people of Israel, the first temptation they faced was whether they, as the children of God, would trust God's promise or not. However, when they got hungry, they immediately began to murmur against God. They said it would have been better to die in Egypt than starve in the desert. The people's murmuring was not halted by the fact that God fed them with manna. They wanted meat. Even when they got meat, they still were not satisfied. They either forgot God's promise or failed to believe it. This led Moses to say later, "And [God] humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."(Deut. 8:3)

How often we fail at this test as well. We are the children of God, yet we live as if we weren't. We say that we trust God to care for us. We say we believe in God's promises. Yet, when things go wrong, we often give in to the temptation to murmur against God. Even when God provides for our needs, we are often not satisfied because God has not provided in the way we want Him to provide. Instead of living by the Word of God and its promises, we live lives based solely on satisfying our physical wants and needs.

But Jesus acted differently. The tempter comes to Him and says, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." The temptation is far worse than the one Israel experienced or the temptation we experience. Jesus is *the* Son of God. As such, He could have called the shots, used His divine power, and satisfied His own needs, rather than humbly trusting God to meet His needs in God's time and in God's ways. But Jesus refuses to do so! He will not give into that temptation and, instead, quotes back to the devil the very word of God given to Israel and to us, "Man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."

The second temptation for Israel was whether they would trust God's presence among them. At a place called Massah, the Israelites ran out of water. Being in the desert, there seemed no place

to get water. They tested the Lord's power to protect and provide for them by asking, "Is the LORD among us or not?" (Ex. 17:7) The Lord nevertheless proved His presence by providing water for them from a rock. Later on, Moses would recall that incident when he commanded the Israelites, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah." (Deut. 6:16)

How about you and me? Do you ever put the Lord to the test by believing He has abandoned you and is no longer there to help? Do you test God by doing foolish things just to see if God is present to notice or care?

That's what the devil tried to get Jesus to do. He took Jesus to the top of the temple and told him to jump off and trust God to be present and send His angels to rescue Him. Jesus refuses to obey the temptation of the devil but, instead, chooses to obey the will of His Father, quoting the same words said to the Israelites and to us, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test."

Finally, the third temptation for Israel was whether they would remain loyal to the Lord and worship Him only or be disloyal and worship the false gods of the neighboring nations. The incident with the golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai showed how they abandoned the Lord so soon after He had delivered them. The subsequent history of Israel in the Promised Land showed the same thing. Israel would not so much "abandon" the Lord. They often would still talk about Him and include Him in their worship. But they also wanted be free, at the same time, to worship the gods of their neighbors and the surrounding culture. Moses would warn them, "It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve." (Deut. 6:13)

This is a huge problem for us, as God's people, today. We are tempted by the idols of this age and culture. Yet we want to be thought of as Christians. So while we may not abandon some sort of thought about the true God, we also find ourselves bowing down to various idols: money, possessions, sports, jobs, school, family, friends and so on. It's not that these things are necessarily sinful. But they can become our masters and we become their slaves. We will give up anything, even the worship and service of the true God, in order to have and serve these people and things.

Jesus was tempted to do this, yet only in a far more difficult way. The devil took him to a high mountain and, in some way, showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. The devil offered all the power, glory, and might of this world for Jesus to have if only He would abandon the worship and service of the true God. But again Jesus refused this temptation to worship and serve anything or anyone other than the true God. And again He quoted the Word of God which was for Israel and us, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.”

So, you see, our text is not helpful “self help”. These are not good examples for us. We so often fail when the devil tempts us. We so often fail to trust God to care for us, fail to believe He is among us to help us, and fail to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. The circumstances and nature of Jesus’ temptations are far more difficult. Yet He refuses to give in to temptation every time. He defeats the devil every time. He comes out the winner every time. How can that help do anything for us but make us feel inferior and all the more aware of our sin?

The key here is *why* Jesus is doing this. He is not doing this to show off or as some spiritual “one upmanship” over us. He is doing this for us. Where Israel failed as the people of God in the wilderness, Jesus succeeded. Where we have failed as the people of God today, Jesus succeeded. Where we disobeyed, Jesus obeyed. And that’s how this helps us.

We often limit our thinking on Jesus’ work in saving us to dying on the cross to take away our sins. In other words, Jesus only took care of sin – removing the negative. He allowed Himself to be crucified in order to offer His perfect life as the complete sacrifice and payment for our sins. He did that and that’s important so that our sins are forgiven.

But He did more than that. We act as if forgiveness cancels out the Law of God and that we are no longer responsible for it. Or, if we *are* responsible for it, that means we have to struggle along on our own to not to give in to temptation, to try hard to overcome the devil, and do the best we can to be obedient to God’s Law.

But Jesus has done that for us. He did more than passively allow Himself to be sacrificed for us that our sin might be forgiven, but He also actively obeyed the Law of God for us that we might be holy and perfect in God's eyes. Our epistle lesson makes that clear where it says, "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." (Rom. 5:18-29)

Jesus' act of righteousness in going to the cross in your place has justified you – made you right with Him through the forgiveness of all your sins. The negative has been taken away from you. Jesus' obedience in your place by refusing all temptation, overcoming the devil always, and completely obeying the Law of God has given you Jesus' righteousness, His holiness. The positive has been added to you.

Jesus is more than our Savior from sin. Jesus is our champion against the devil. One of the strangest things about the 1st Sunday in Lent (at least, we tend to think it is strange) is the Hymn of the Day: A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. We might feel weird singing this anytime outside of October. Although it is traditionally a hymn for Reformation Day, it fits this day, too. Listen again to stanza 1 & 2 which tells of Jesus' battle against Satan:

*The old satanic foe Has sworn to work us woe.
With craft and dreadful might He arms himself to fight.
On earth he has no equal.
No strength of ours can match his might. We would be lost, rejected.
But now a champion comes to fight, Whom God Himself elected.
You ask who this may be? The Lord of Hosts is He,
Christ Jesus, mighty Lord, God's only Son, adored.
He holds the field victorious.*

So if you want to know how to overcome temptation, don't look within yourselves for the answer or trust your own pious efforts to find success in "self-help" books. Instead, look to the One who has already overcome temptation and trust in the efforts of Him who has been perfectly obedient. In Him, you overcome; you are obedient; you are righteous. Amen.

