

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

April 30, 2017, Pastor Jeff Harrison

### **Battling Against Temptation**

Matthew 4:1-11

#### **Introduction:**

##### **A. Jeff's marriage story shows our vulnerability to temptation**

Good morning friends. So this morning we're talking about temptation. Temptation is tough, I remember a time when it seemed to come out of nowhere to get me early in my marriage. Back then I worked as an auditor, and when Steph and I got married 10 years ago, it was the beginning of the auditing busy season. So I was working a ton of hours at a job I did not like so we could get on good financial footing before I started seminary to become a pastor.

So one night, as I'm driving home late from work, I'm tempted to think about my "many" contributions to our marriage. And I indulge that temptation, reflecting on how I'm working more hours, making more money, doing a lot of housework, and to top it off, I even talked with Steph a long time that week about her big work frustration, even though I didn't want to. This beginning husband thought he was bringing an incredible level of excellence to the craft of marriage.

And what's the harm in a little personal back patting when you're doing so many good things? So as I continue celebrating the husband I've already become, I walk in our apartment, and see Steph reading on the couch. Now she's been working all day too and contributing to our marriage in a ton of ways, including putting up with my nonsense.

But in that moment all I'm thinking is, "I can't believe she's not working on dinner, when I'm doing all this." And suddenly another temptation came, the temptation to comment on what I thought Steph "should" be doing. And believe it or not, this beginning husband might have made a little comment suggesting his wife should be making dinner, and that little comment might have led to a big blowup.

It all started on that car ride home, as I indulged that first temptation to pat myself on the back. It was a sneaky temptation, and a terrible irony, as I was simultaneously congratulating myself for how unselfish I was being while toasting myself for my many contributions.

##### **B. How do we battle against temptation?**

Now I'm going to go out on a limb and assume I'm not the only one here who has succumbed to temptation. And some temptations aren't funny. Temptations to sexual

immorality, to destructive gossip, to violent anger. We're all vulnerable, a battle going on inside each of us.

And not only that, spiritual forces attack, looking to lure us to places we ultimately don't want to go, to discourage us, to sow seeds of doubt about God's trustworthiness, to cultivate disunity here, to encourage prioritizing other things over God, and on and on it goes.

And sometimes we go through hard times that can make us even more vulnerable. Chronic pain in a hospital bed, a relationship falling apart, a lonely ache after the loss of a loved one. The Bible sometimes uses the theme of the wilderness to describe these times of hardship and disorientation.

And in the wilderness we can be especially vulnerable to making choices that wreak havoc in our lives. We've seen others do it, perhaps we've done it ourselves. For all of us, temptation's coming, and it will leave us better or worse, stronger or weaker, more like Jesus or more like Satan. So how do we battle against temptation? We'll find our answer in the Bible book of Matthew, chapter 4. So if you've got a Bible, I invite you to turn to Matthew chapter 4.

As we're turning, if you're here just checking out Jesus and His church this morning and you're not so sure about this talk of temptation, sin and a literal devil, I want you to know I'm really glad you're here. I love that we have people who are questioning and seeking at Northwest, for your questions enrich the spiritual journey we're all on. As you explore the faith, I encourage you to focus on Jesus, for if He really is God Himself, then we must take everything He says seriously.

## **I. Grasp how God and Satan work in the “wilderness”**

### **A. Context of Matthew 4**

So let's see what Jesus has to say in Matthew chapter 4. Now Matthew is one of the four gospels, the books in the Bible about Jesus' life on earth. And here in Matthew 4 Jesus is about 30 years old, at the start of His public ministry, having just been baptized. When Jesus is baptized at the end of Matthew chapter 3, the Spirit of God descends on Jesus and God the Father says, “This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased.”

### **B. Distinction between tempting and testing with good motives (4:1-2)**

Now as we look to Matthew 4 to see how to battle against temptation, the first thing to understand is how God and Satan work in the wilderness. Please follow along with me as I read, starting in verse 1.

4 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

So Jesus just had this spiritual mountaintop experience at His baptism as the Spirit descends on Him and the Father says Jesus is His beloved Son. We might think, “Okay, it’s go time, let’s get a huge ministry going right away and destroy the forces of evil.”

But interestingly, God’s Spirit instead leads Jesus to 40 days alone in the wilderness for prayer and fasting, where He’ll be tempted by the devil. The book of Matthew was originally written in Greek. And the word “tempted” here in verse 1 in the Greek can mean to tempt or test in a bad sense, encouraging evil, as Satan does here. Now as the Bible book of James says, God never tempts people to evil. However the term “tempted” here in verse 1 is also sometimes used to test someone in a good sense, to reveal their goodness or to strengthen them through the testing.<sup>1</sup> And as we read the Scriptures, we see that God allows His people to be tested in that good sense, with the hopes of strengthening their character and intimacy with Him.

And both good and bad testing are happening here in Matthew 4. As Jesus is alone, vulnerable, and hungry, the devil sees an opportunity to lure Jesus to evil. And the devil loves to do the same with us, especially in our wilderness. But what the devil intends for evil, God plans to use in His purposes for good, which is why verse 1 says that it is the Spirit that led Jesus to pray and fast in the wilderness in the first place.

Now forty days alone in the wilderness for prayer and fasting is not our first instinct after a spiritual mountaintop experience like Jesus had at His baptism. For we don’t like the feelings of vulnerability and aloneness that come in a wilderness with no food. I don’t know about you, but I tend to prefer a spiritual life that is safe, manageable, with plenty of food.

But God often does powerful things in our lives when we’re in the wilderness. And so, as He does here with Jesus, sometimes He leads us there. And other times He allows a wilderness in our life and then redeems it as He works through our pain and disorientation, to develop our character, intimacy with Him, and fruitfulness.

Recently I saw an interview with Joni Eareckson Tada, who is a living testimony of this. Joni is a Christian who became a quadriplegic at age 17 after a diving accident. She shared honestly about the hardships of life in a wheelchair and a bout with cancer and chronic pain. These are terrible, terrible things that shouldn’t be minimized at all. Yet Joni also shared about

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<sup>1</sup> BDAG entry for **πειράζω**

incredible ways God has shown Himself faithful in helping her to know Him intimately, in growing her character, and in using her ministry in the lives of countless others. Joni described God's work in the wilderness by saying that sometimes, "God permits what He hates to accomplish that which he loves." That perspective is not easy for us, but it's so important to have as we battle temptation in the wilderness. And we must also understand what our enemy is trying to accomplish.

## **II. Satan tempts us to question God**

### **A. "God's not providing as He should, so indulge your appetites" (4:3-4)**

So please follow along as I read, starting in verse 3, as we examine Satan's schemes.

<sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

To help us imagine this wilderness temptation, here's a picture of how Jesus might have looked after 40 days of fasting in the desert.<sup>2</sup>

Look back with me at verse 3. Notice that the devil starts his temptation by saying, "If you are the Son of God." The devil starts with the word "if" but I don't think he's trying to convince Jesus that He's not God's Son, after all Jesus just clearly heard His Father say, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." And I also don't think the devil is trying the immature tactic of saying, "You're not God's Son, the only way you can prove it to me is turning these stones to bread."

Rather, I think the devil is trying to tempt Jesus to doubt God's plan. So I think the devil is basically saying, "If you're God's Son [and we both know you are] what are you doing starving and alone in the wilderness? God's not providing as He should, so take care of yourself here. Why don't you start by making yourself some fresh baked bread, you need it."

And Satan tempts us in similar ways, to doubt God's provision in our wilderness and to take matters into our own hands by trying to find relief in things like overeating, pornography, the Pottery Barn catalogue.

Now Jesus knew the Spirit was leading Him to a season of fasting and praying, so He trusted God's provision in God's timing. Even though He must have been starving. Forget 40

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<sup>2</sup>[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ\\_in\\_the\\_Desert?sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiFxqWHgZ\\_TAhUiqlQKHSPTDKQ\\_Q\\_B0IPzAA#/media/File%3AChrist\\_in\\_the\\_Wilderness\\_-\\_Ivan\\_Kramskoy\\_-\\_Google\\_Cultural\\_Institute.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_in_the_Desert?sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiFxqWHgZ_TAhUiqlQKHSPTDKQ_Q_B0IPzAA#/media/File%3AChrist_in_the_Wilderness_-_Ivan_Kramskoy_-_Google_Cultural_Institute.jpg)

days of fasting, I get excited if I haven't eaten for a few hours and go to a place like Carrabbas and they bring the fresh baked bread with the herbs to dip it in. And think of how much more delicious Jesus made bread would be. Yet Jesus refuses to indulge his bodily appetite, even a legitimate one, if it was not God's will for His life at that time.

So Jesus quotes God's Word to Satan. "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." It's interesting that Jesus' quotation, along with two other quotes coming up, all come from a section of the Bible book of Deuteronomy with similarities to Jesus' situation in the wilderness.

In the time of the book of Deuteronomy, God recently freed His people, the Israelites from slavery to the Egyptians. The nation of Israel, which Scripture sometimes calls God's Son, spends 40 years in the wilderness, where they are tested by God to prepare them for their ministry as God's chosen people in the Promised Land. And one of their tests relates to trusting that God would keep providing them food in the wilderness, manna. Sadly, the Israelites failed that test, and others in their 40 years in the wilderness.

And now Jesus, God's true Son, is also in the wilderness for 40 days, and tempted by Satan to not trust God with His physical hunger. But where Israel failed in the wilderness, Jesus succeeds. And He does it by submitting to the Spirit's leadership and quoting a relevant Scripture that encourages the Israelites to learn from their wilderness failures. Unlike the Israelites, Jesus did not allow His appetites, even at their strongest, to keep Him from God's mission. Jesus was saturated in God's Word, ever mindful that He was on special assignment from God Himself. And God calls us to the same, to really know His Word, which directs us away from temptation and towards our special assignment from the King.

#### **B. "Are you sure God cares, test Him to make sure" (4:5-7)**

Let's look now at a second way the devil tries to tempt Jesus, and us, away from God's mission, starting in verse 5. <sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup> "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.'" <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

In this temptation, the devil takes Jesus to the highest point of the temple. Again, he starts with, "If you are the Son of God." For when Jesus, or we, are in the wilderness, Satan

tempts us to think that if God really loved us, He wouldn't let us be there. And if we start to doubt God's love, it makes us vulnerable to temptation.

So having tried to cast doubt on God's care for Jesus, Satan tempts Jesus to throw Himself down from the temple. He's inviting Jesus to test God, to prove God really cares. And it's possible Satan might also be tempting Jesus to seek approval in an inappropriate way. That if Jesus jumped, He would see God's approval as He is saved from falling and get the people's approval as they see His miraculous deliverance. And this time, Satan even quotes God's Word to try to support his temptation.

But Jesus knows Satan is misapplying God's Word and again He recites a relevant passage to counter the temptation. This time Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6. There God's Word tells us not to put God to the test, noting a time when the Israelites made inappropriate demands of God in the wilderness by testing Him.

With this quotation of Scripture Jesus makes it clear that He won't test God - it's inappropriate and unnecessary because Jesus trusts His Father. But despite Jesus' resolve, Satan is not finished.

### **C. "God's plan is too hard, take a shortcut" (4:8-11)**

Let's see the devil ups the ante, starting in verse 8. <sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup> "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" <sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him."

Look back at verse 8 with me, notice that the devil not only offers Jesus all the kingdoms, the devil tempts further by showing Jesus their splendor. And Satan likes to do the same with us, enticing our eyes to look and see splendor in things we shouldn't have, or in good things that we shouldn't try to get in illegitimate ways. And to get all the kingdoms, all Jesus must do is worship Satan. Now Jesus is the rightful ruler of all the kingdoms of the world, and they will be His. But to get there, He must die on the cross and rise from the dead to defeat sin, death, and the devil. So I think the devil is basically saying here, "God's making you die on a cross to get these kingdoms? He's holding out on you, all you've got to do is worship me and I'll give it all to you, right here, right now." To sum the temptation up, "God's plan is too hard, take a shortcut."

Now there's nothing wrong with Jesus, as God's Son, wanting to rule the world. But if He, or we, care so much about a legitimate desire that we'll disobey God to get it, we value that good thing more than God, which is sin.

And so Jesus again speaks Scripture, saying, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only." Unlike ancient Israel, Jesus passes all His tests in the wilderness, showing Himself qualified to reconcile God and man. And the devil finally leaves Jesus for a time, and having refused Satan's temptations, angels now come and attend to Jesus.

A commentary I read this week on the book of Matthew notes that the word "attend" is used multiple times in Matthew in conjunction with food, so it's possible that one way the angels are ministering to Jesus is by providing food. That commentary describes the way God provides for Jesus after He said no to the temptations by saying, "Jesus had refused to relieve his hunger by miraculously turning stones to bread; now he is fed supernaturally... He had refused to throw himself off the temple heights in the hope of angelic help; now angels feed him. He had refused to take a shortcut to inherit the kingdom of the world; now he fulfills Scripture by beginning his ministry and announcing the kingdom in Galilee of the Gentiles (vv.12-17)".<sup>3</sup>

This wilderness has shown Jesus that opposition is ahead, but that God will be with Him and provide. And the same is true for all of us. Temptation's coming, and one vital way God equips us for battle is with His Word, the Bible.

### **III. Battle temptation by following God's Spirit and speaking God's Word**

#### **A. Read God's Word and pray**

As we've seen Jesus successfully battle temptation, it's become clear He did it by following God's Spirit and speaking God's Word. From the very beginning of Matthew 4, we see Jesus being led by the Holy Spirit. And for those of us who follow God, the Spirit is working in our lives, and we can look to Him in dependence and respond in obedience to His leading.

And the second thing Jesus did to battle temptation was speak God's Word. For when we face temptation, over and over, day after day, it just doesn't work that well to only say "no." When you're disoriented in the wilderness and tempted to anxiety, or lonely and tempted to sexual sin, or furious and tempted to violence, you need more than "no." We need to speak

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<sup>3</sup> Carson, Don, *Matthew* (Expositor's Bible Commentary), 114-15.

God's Word, for it has spiritual authority that our words do not, and God uses it to accomplish powerful things when we quote it to the demonic and to corrupt desires within us.

It's why God's Word is described in the New Testament book of Ephesians as the sword of the Spirit, gifted to us by God to help us battle against evil. I like the way Martin Luther, the church reformer from the 16<sup>th</sup> century describes it. It is said that Luther would say, "When the devil knocks with temptation, I send Jesus to answer the door."<sup>4</sup>

Again, why use your own words when you can use the words of God. But of course you can't say, "It is written" to temptation unless you've actually read it. As I once heard another pastor say it to some people struggling to read their Bibles, "You're Christians, at some point you're going to need to read this book." So I'm asking all of us every day this week to read God's Word and respond in prayer. And if you've never read the Bible and prayed on your own before, there's a handout in your program with ideas to help you get started. And if you'd appreciate other people helping you grow in reading the Bible and praying, check out an Adult Bible Fellowship on Sunday morning or talk with me about our small group Bible studies.

Now I know we're very busy, but let's find at least 10 minutes every day this week to read God's Word and pray. Whether we find that time through avoiding social media, or turning off the TV, or skipping a meal, or waking up a little earlier, or neglecting a chore just this week, whatever we need to do to find that time. For temptation's coming, and when we aren't engaged with God's Spirit and Word, we might as well hang a sign around our neck that tells Satan, "I'm an easy target, come and get me."

### **B. Jesus was blessed through His wilderness battle against temptation**

Rather, like Jesus, let's be ready to speak God's Word when temptation comes. In the wilderness the devil sought to defeat Jesus, but God redeemed those temptations, using them for His good purposes and defeating the devil's work. In the rest of the gospels, we get glimpses of how God used Jesus' wilderness testing. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus left the wilderness and returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, His wilderness time in prayer, dependence, and obedience having strengthened Him for ministry. And Jesus used those wilderness lessons to teach others, to say no to greater temptations, and to experience God's blessing.

Think of that first temptation. After fasting for 40 days and refusing to turn the stones to bread, Jesus could authoritatively teach, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for

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<sup>4</sup> John Barnett, *Living Hope for the End of Days*, p. 101. Quote accessed online on 4/28/17 at books.google.com.



righteousness, for they will be filled.” In the second temptation, the devil starts with, “If you are the Son of God...” and then tempts Jesus to doubt God’s care and put God to the test. About 3 years later, as Jesus is on the cross, He faces perhaps His greatest temptation. As Jesus experiences physical agony, and spiritual agony as He absorbs God’s wrath for all our sins, onlookers derisively tempt with some familiar words. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” And Jesus says no to that greater temptation. One commentator described it this way, “What is intended by the devil [in the wilderness] as a means of defeating Jesus becomes in the purpose of God the occasion of his [the devil’s] defeat.”<sup>5</sup>

And in the third temptation in Matthew 4, Jesus is taken to a mountain and offered all the kingdoms of the world if He worships the devil. But Jesus says no, submitting Himself to God’s way of the cross. And Matthew concludes with Jesus back on a mountain, this time with all authority not only on earth, as Satan had falsely offered, but also in heaven. God the Father abundantly blessing the obedience of His Son.

**Conclusion:**

**A. God will bless as we follow His Spirit and speak His Word**

And every day, we have choices to move towards or away from God’s blessings.

Temptation’s coming, and it will leave us better or worse. And in this battle, too many wrong choices can lead to ruin for ourselves, loved ones, and church family as we dishonor God.

So may we be a church family that follows God’s Spirit and speaks God’s Word to temptation. It starts as we all read God’s Word and pray every day this week. And as we, in God’s power, say no to temptation this week, who knows what blessing God might bring.

I love the ways I see our church family loving God, each other, and our world. When I’m not preaching, I have the privilege of checking in on our nursery and children’s Sunday Schools, and each week I see nearly 30 teens and adults inspiring children’s faith in God. And on Tuesday and Thursday mornings here, as I go grab some coffee from the church coffee shop, I love to walk by our adult classrooms and see some of you showing the love of Jesus to our neighbors from around the world as you teach English as a Second Language classes. And I love to visit our small groups and see the ways you encourage each another to love and serve God and support one another in the mountaintops and wildernesses of life.

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<sup>5</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC), 169.

And I also wonder what other blessings God might be inviting us to as a church, but that we aren't walking in, because of the ways we aren't prepared and then give into temptation. How many unnecessary heartaches for ourselves and others we could avoid by saying no to temptation. How much stronger spiritually we would all become over time. How much freedom we could walk in as we have no hidden sins, no anxiety that we're about to be found out any time someone close to us says, "We need to talk."

And can you imagine how God might multiply our blessings if together all of us were passionately pursuing God? What might God do in our midst if we were all passionate about depending on God, loving and living the Bible, building faith at home, relating with one another honestly, masks off, living and giving generously, and bringing our friends to Jesus. Think of the love and inspiration and joy that could flow between us as we experience together more of God's love, and spread that love to our fellow students, friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, who desperately need the love of Jesus.

**B. Jesus blessed us through His battle against temptation**

It starts with all of us reading the Bible and praying every single day this week. No matter what bad things we've done or good things we've left undone, no matter how long it's been since the last time we opened our Bible and prayed, today is a new day. For we worship a God of grace. Our heavenly Father always has a fatherly heart towards His children, even when we struggle. He gives us good gifts, like His Spirit, His Word, and His people to help us in the battle against temptation.

And we can always look to Jesus for help. For He not only modeled how to battle temptation, He said no to every temptation for us, so that He could save us, and make us His friends. And what a friend we have in Jesus!

Let's pray...

Dismissal - Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.