

## “Winning Over Temptation”

“He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan” (Mark 1:13). Mark mentions Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness very briefly, with little detail. Matthew and Luke provide more details about this event, but we will look at Mark’s gospel and try to see how Jesus’ temptations relate to the temptations we may face.

First, let’s state the obvious: *Jesus Himself was tempted.* He never sinned. But He *was* tempted. He faced temptations just as we do. Sometimes when we are tempted we feel guilty, unclean, like we’ve failed. But there is no wrong in being tempted. *Our Lord* was tempted.

The temptations He faced in the desert were real and severe for Him. Right before He went into the desert and was tempted He was baptized. Most likely it was then that Jesus understood and accepted His mission to be the Messiah, to save the world. Now, without human company, alone in the wilderness, He wrestles with *what kind of Messiah* He will be. We learn this from Matthew and Luke’s accounts.

Famished after fasting for 40 days, the devil tempts Him to turn stones into bread so He can feed His hunger. Will He use His power as Messiah to satisfy His own wants? Then He is tempted to jump off a high pinnacle outside the temple and trust God to keep Him safe. Will He test God, and box God into a corner? Will He draw attention to Himself? Finally, will Jesus worship the devil in order to rule the world, instead of conquering evil by suffering and going to the cross? *These were gut-wrenching temptations for the Lord Jesus.*

See, there’s no shame nor wrong in being tempted. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, “No temptation has seized you that isn’t common for people.” What are your temptations? Most of us will find if we are only willing to be honest and admit to others the things that tempt us, we will discover that others face the same temptations.

*Some people assume that clergy (pastors) don’t struggle with the same temptations that you do.* We’re insulated from that. (Maybe by ordination)? Don’t I wish! There is a book called *Games Christians Play*. It’s humor, satire. The book contains a section: “What To Do When You Know More Than the Minister.” “Most people are sure they know more than the minister...(not in theology, of course, but in the sordid knowledge of *real* life. Since ministers are never tempted to swear, enjoy sex, or cheat on their income tax return, they do not even realize that such things go on all the time, and therefore you are one up on them). Well, *I hope by now it has sunk in that we clergy face the same temptations as you do!*

To be human means that we will be tempted to do wrong. Sometimes we are tempted over some of the strangest, little, odd things. Torrey Johnson was a well known, respected evangelist. He was a wonderful man of God. I heard him speak once in Lancaster. He admitted that often, before he gets up to preach, for no apparent reason, he is tempted to curse or swear!

One Sunday I preached a sermon on temptation. It was Biblical, but I didn’t especially feel the Holy Spirit moving. It wasn’t one of my better sermons. After the message we sang “What a Friend We Have In Jesus”. As the congregation was singing, a man got out of his seat and came

up to the altar and knelt down. (I don't even think I issued an altar call). He was well known in that small town, a prominent businessman. Well off financially. Kind of suave. This man knelt at the altar and sobbed like a baby. I went down to the altar, talked to him, and prayed with him. He shared how he had given in to some silly temptation, just to keep up with his co-worker. It seemed like such a small thing to me, but it was a big deal for him. He had given in to envy and pride.

We all face temptations. Not just individual, personal temptations. We can face temptations as a couple, a family, a community, a church. What do you think are some of the temptations we face as a congregation? Perhaps to be an ingrown, self-centered church? To give up any hope for the future? The temptation to have little concern for lost people?

Another thing about Mark's account of Jesus' temptation: ***Note again just when this took place: after Jesus' baptism.*** Jesus' baptism was a great God-moment in His life. It's His call to ministry. The Holy Spirit comes down on Him in the form of a dove. There's a voice from heaven, the voice of the Father, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased." Wow! Then *right after that*, Jesus goes out into the desert and is sorely tempted to trash it all!

Sometimes the most difficult times of temptation come after something really good happens, or when we experience some sort of spiritual high. It can happen with someone converted to Christ. Maybe after the initial glow of coming to Christ and experiencing the new birth, doubts may come: Is there really anything to this? Will it last? Perhaps we feel ourselves wanting to do some of the bad things we did before we became a Christian. Or maybe you really feel the presence of God in a worship service. The music or the sermon touches you. But then you go home, and your family isn't really that interested in what you experienced. Or you live alone, and you go home, and there's no one with whom you can share your excitement. Or you're riding a spiritual high, but then you have to go to a job you don't like, or you still face those nagging problems that just don't go away, and you are tempted to be discouraged or want to give up. I have to admit, that last country gospel service, when the church was packed (250-260 people). It was such a Spirit-filled, joyful Saturday evening. Then came Sunday morning – and the empty pews, 30 or so people in worship. It was easy to feel disheartened.

We shouldn't be surprised if right after a time of great spiritual blessing we fall into some kind of temptation. It happened to Jesus and it can happen to us.

"He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan" (Mark 1:13). ***Did you notice in this verse it says Jesus is tempted by Satan.*** Belief in the devil is a problem for some people. Many who regard themselves as educated, intelligent folk, look on the idea of the devil as a carryover from outdated folklore.

Yeah, the caricature of Satan as a skinny guy with a pointed goatee, a tail and a pitchfork, running around in red tights – that is silly, and needs to be discarded. But that doesn't mean we dismiss the whole reality of a devil. Peter Marshall was a famous preacher of a previous generation. He preached a sermon on the devil. In that message he said, "In at least forty-three

separate references recorded in the gospels, Jesus spoke of this evil personality, giving him a variety of names: Satan...the Devil...the Enemy...the Adversary...the Tempter. A loving Heavenly Father is never the author of evil, Christ insisted. He attributed to this Dark Power all disease...pain...depravity...sin and death. Hence the devil is one to be taken seriously indeed.”

An irony of our time is that while many *in the church* dismiss the idea of the devil, an increasing number of people *outside the church* are getting involved in *devil* worship and satanic cults.

The Bible says, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). He is not a ridiculous looking figure in red rights. He is much more appealing and seductive. 1 Peter 5:8 warns us, “Be sober. Be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.” Suppose a circus came to town, and a lion got loose. He is sighted in your neighborhood. Would you let your child or a grandchild out on the street? Or if you have a little dog, or a kitten, would you feel safe to let them out? There is a personal, powerful, malignant being who is out to destroy life, to ruin God’s good work. Human nature is weak and vulnerable, and Satan plays on it. We need to be on our guard!

But thank God, this is not the end of the story! ***For Jesus overcame His temptations.*** He resisted the devil’s temptations in the wilderness – *and all through the rest of His life!* And the good news is He is there to help us in *our* times of temptation. Hebrews 2:18 says, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” He understands! *There’s probably no temptation you have ever faced that He did not face, and overcome, Himself!*

With Christ to help us, what are some practical things we can do to win over our temptations? ***First, saturate our life with prayer.*** In the Garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus faced one final temptation to avoid the cross, He prayed. And He told the disciples with Him to watch and pray that they would not enter into temptation.

Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us this, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We are to approach God’s throne of grace (through prayer) with confidence – for God wants to help us win out over temptation.

***Second, we can pray for one another.*** We will never know how many people have gotten through trials and temptations because other Christians have prayed for them! Remember, if we are to pray for one another so we can overcome our temptations, we have to be willing to share with each other our struggles and things that are tempting us!

Jesus to Simon Peter: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31-32). Wouldn’t it be great if

Jesus prayed for us, like did for Peter? Well, He does! Hebrews 7:25 says Jesus ever lives to make intercession for us!

So, prayer is important for winning over temptations, but ***sometimes prayer isn't enough! We have to seek practical help!*** A lot of people today struggle with addictions. Alcohol, drugs, pornography, spending and charging on credit cards, overeating, etc. I've known people, even followers of Jesus, who say they pray and pray, but it doesn't help. Truth is, sometimes we have to take steps, practical steps, in addition to prayer. It could be getting professional counseling, or getting into a 12-step program. God uses these people and methods to help us win out over temptation.

***Then too, we should avoid getting into spots where we know we will be tempted.*** If we have a problem overspending and racking up credit card debt, it's smart not to hang out at the mall or watch Home Shopping Network. If we can't control our drinking of alcohol, it's best not to take that first drink. If we are tempted to be hot-headed and irrational about politics, it's good not to spend hours and hours watching Fox News or MSNBC!

In the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." This implies that we *want to avoid* getting into those situations where we know we will be tempted.

***Then, we do best when we take the little temptations and the little victories seriously.*** Each day turning away from the little compromises, the trivial wrongs, and being faithful in those small matters, will pave the way for us to be faithful in resisting the larger trials and temptations when they come.

We have a Savior who was tempted in every respect as we are, but overcame these temptations. If we've received Christ as our Savior, He and His Spirit are within us to help us win out over the temptations we face in life!

Let me leave you with this promise: "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). If you are a follower of Jesus, remember that the One who is in us (the Spirit of Jesus) is greater than the one in the world who would drag us down and destroy us (Satan).

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