

January 19, 2020
The First Temptation of Christ: The 'Good' (?) Life
Matthew 4:1-4

Wouldn't it be great to live in a palace, have servants waiting on you hand and foot, not have to shop for food, make meals, or clean up, not have to do laundry, have a limitless clothing and vacation budget ... Wouldn't it be nice to be Prince Harry and Meghan ...?

Are they happy? Apparently not ...

If only we had more money. If only we had a nicer house. If only we could take nicer vacations. If only we had just an itty-bitty teensy-weensy bit more, we'd be so happy, we never want another thing. Right ...? Or may be not ...?

Temptations are a fact of life. We can't avoid them. We're surrounded by them. How do we deal with that reality? How do we wrestle with the struggle between who we are and what we have and who we are pressured to be and what we are told we should have (a new iPhone 11 that can take slow motion selfies)? Over the next three weeks we'll look at three temptations Jesus faces. Temptations that are common to our experience as well ...

The Temptation for More and More and More

Remember the old *Star Wars* movies? You know Darth Vader was the bad guy because he is dressed in black, has no face, and invites you to the "dark side." All of us who have any moral sense at all recognize evil when it's that obvious, but it seldom comes so obviously.

C.S. Lewis was much more accurate in *the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* – evil comes through a beautiful White Witch offering the sweet temptation of Turkish Delight.

Jesus is tempted by the prospect of Turkish Delight – well, bread, anyway. After He had been fasting in the wilderness for forty days, bread was temptation enough.

In our lives, we can certainly be tempted by physical needs and wants, for everything from food, clothing, housing, games, cars, TVs, vacations, mutual funds, ski trips, etc., to that beautiful girl or that handsome guy. It is so easy to spend 99.9% of our time and energy worrying about, working for, and thinking about these kinds of things, and NOT being thankful for what we already have. God has been very good to each of us already.

Jesus challenges us to remember some things are more important even than these basic physical needs or wants. The verse with which Jesus rebukes the devil is from Deuteronomy 8:1-3: *"Be careful to obey all the commands I am giving you today ... Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD."*

Food is necessary. But what's more important than a satisfied stomach is a satisfied soul. That only comes from knowing God, deeply and personally.

Jesus says, *"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money. That is why I tell you not to worry about everyday life – whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?"*

"And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?"

"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:24-34).

Where is my heart? Where is my treasure? One of the big themes of Jesus' preaching is that true satisfaction and contentment are found in the Kingdom of God, in doing our best to live the values of His kingdom, and sharing God's love through our lives. As we struggle through difficult political and financial times it's good to keep things in perspective.

Money, in itself, is not bad. The temptation for more and more is the problem. Paul writes to his young friend, Timothy, *"People who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows" (1 Timothy 6:9-10).*

Paul is saying that *putting your trust and hope* in money – the love of money – is a serious problem. If money is where your heart is, if you are never satisfied with what you have, if you think you will be happy if you just had 10% more ... life is going to be full of stress and disappointment (I recently reads a study that showed that people of ALL income levels link happiness to having 10% more income – yet even if their income goes up 10%, they are not happy – another 10% would make them happy – and so on and so on ... In fact, people at higher income levels were less content than those who had lower incomes.).

The sober warning of Jesus' first temptation is that money and things cannot satisfy our souls. *"True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth,"* Paul advises Timothy, *"After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content" (1*

Timothy 6:6-8). Wealth can't provide contentment. Only *"seeking first the Kingdom of God"* can do that. Paul goes on to say to Timothy, *"Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith"* (1 Timothy 6:11-12). In other words, get your priorities straight ... How does that challenge you?

- *If you are relatively "well off"*: be content; be careful money doesn't become an obsession that leads you away from God; don't put your hope in wealth; put your hope in God; do good; be rich in good deeds; and be generous and willing to share.
- *If you are less well off*: be content; be careful your desire for money doesn't lead you away from God; don't think getting more money will solve all your problems; put your hope in God; do good; be rich in good deeds; and be generous and willing to share what you have.

The temptation of "It's Mine, all Mine"

This temptation is about food and physical comfort, but also about personal gain. Jesus had not eaten for forty days; He had real human needs. But Jesus chose not to use His power just on Himself. He certainly had the power to create bread: He did so on at least two occasions (Matthew 14:15-21, 15:32-38). When He did create bread from next-to-nothing, Jesus used His gift to bless others, not simply to feed Himself.

In the Gospels, Jesus' compassion was more than a warm, fuzzy feeling; He did something about it. He started with the little that people already had to hand, a few loaves and small fish, and went on to feed thousands (presumably He ate some, too, although we don't know).

God gives us all sorts of blessings – abilities, time, talents, material resources, education, skills, interests, relationships, etc – the temptation we face is to use these gifts all on ourselves. We can push our lives ahead, indifferent to those around us. Or we can choose to use our blessings for others, as Jesus did, when he fed the people in the wilderness. How often do I think about how I can use my time, energy, money, talents, etc. to encourage and bless others? Or, do I focus just on MY (very real) needs, as well as my wants, and desires?

Of course, we need to be responsible and provide for ourselves so we are not a burden on others. It is possible to become a burden on others. That is not what Jesus is saying. He is challenging us to see our blessings as gifts from God, which we can pass on ...

The paradox is we really do experience blessing when we bless others. The most joyful and content people I know are often the most generous people – generous with their time, help, wisdom, money, talents, etc. The least joyful and content people I know can be those who are least generous.

Paul, writing to the leaders of the church in Ephesus, writes, *"I have never coveted anyone's silver or gold or fine clothes. You know that these hands of mine have worked to supply my own needs and even the needs of those who were with me. And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'"*(Acts 20:33-35).

What has God given you as a blessing that you can use to bless others?

The temptation of worry

Jesus' instruction "*do not to worry about tomorrow*" (Matthew 6:34) does not mean be stupid. We should be thrifty, thoughtful, and carefully provide for ourselves and our loved ones. Good stewardship requires us to provide for our own needs so we are not a burden on our families, friends, or the government. Jesus is not urging us to be irresponsible. We are called to work hard – with calm confidence in God to provide for our needs. The birds of the air work hard to care for their young, **but** they are not consumed by worry and stress.

Jesus is talking about the sort of worry about clothes, food, and the future that saps the joy, enthusiasm, and love of God from our lives. Do you know what that is like? We get tied up in knots about things we want ... but do not need? This sort of worry can steal the joy of wealthier people – who fret about their possessions. But it can also rob the joy from poorer people – who complain or obsess about what they don't have.

"Question: What happens if you gather the world's top ten worriers in a room for five days? Answer: Absolutely nothing." Worry saps our energy. Worry paralyzes us; it makes us feel we're doing something when we're actually doing nothing.

- *"Worry is like a rocking chair: it gives you something to do but never gets you anywhere."* Erma Bombeck, author, humorist
- *"Worry never robs tomorrow of its sorrow. It only saps today of its joy."* Leo Buscaglia, author, speaker, special education professor
- *"Every evening I turn my worries over to God. He's going to be up all night anyway."* Mary Crowley, poet, novelist, and musician

What Can I Do?

The antidote to temptation (for more, for myself, for worry) – is to focus our hearts, minds, strength, and souls on God. Turning our worries over to God is an important starting point. One colleague has a "worry tree" by their front door. When they get home, they touch the tree and leave the worries there, in God's hands, till morning. Then they can relax.

We also need to clarify our priorities. What is really important? Money? Stuff? People? God? When **me** – and **my** wants – are not the most important things in my life, I can get pretty miserable. But when serving God in various ways and spending time with people, and caring for people are more important, my own worries disappear as I live for **Jesus**.

What temptations lead me away from God, sometimes? What do I need to do about them?