

Sermon for Sunday, September 20, 1970, by
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"WHEN THERE'S THE DEVIL TO PAY"

Matthew 4:1-11

Text: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." (Matthew 4:1)

Jesus usually taught in parables. Sometimes truth and reality can best be conveyed in this manner. For example, what better way could a man convey the meaning of "neighbor" than the story of the Good Samaritan? One could write a large book and not say so much so well. Jesus undoubtedly told his disciples of the temptations that came to him at the beginning of his ministry. They could not have known about it otherwise. And in order to convey the profound reality of the struggle that must have raged across the battleground of his soul, he told it in parable form. He said he went into the wilderness to fast--to pray and find God's will for his life--and there the devil came to him to tempt him. As Jesus told the story--trying to help his disciples understand the raging conflict that griped him vice-like in its clutches--we see the devil spring to life. We see him standing before Jesus--we hear the honeyed-tones of his persuasive voice, we feel the tug of his sly promises, we are dazzled by the glitter of his offers. We are held spell-bound by an intense drama of the inner conflicts that rage back and forth across the heart of Jesus. So it is that Jesus conveys to us the deep truth, the profound reality of temptation. Temptation usually comes to us in terms of short-cuts to our goals. For example, if Jesus was hungry, bread was a legitimate desire. But the temptation to turn stones into bread was a short-cut to meeting his need. Again, as the Son of God it would be necessary for him to demonstrate to the world who he was. Yet, to do so by a spectacular stunt was a short-cut to that goal which stopped short of the cross. And again, as the Lord of lords and the King of kings he had a right to rule the kingdoms of the world. However, to worship Satan in order to gain his kingship was an illegitimate short-cut to achieve his goal.

In this inner struggle of the soul, Jesus reveals to us a number of things about temptation. The first thing we learn is that temptation is pervasive. You know, of course, what pervasive means. It means to permeate, to pass through all the parts. It means to spread through the entire extent of a thing. So, when a thing is pervasive it is everywhere; it means there is no place where it is not.

Now, temptation is pervasive. It is everywhere. There is no place where it is not. Our scripture for this morning says that Jesus "was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." That sounds as though God and the devil are working hand in glove! But what it

really means is that even when God has you by the right hand, there is still the devil to pay, for he has you by the left. It means that temptation is pervasive. It means that even when you are very close to God, temptation is still a dreadful reality.

This has some rather startling implications for us, does it not? It means that ultimately we can never run away from temptation. We can't run away because temptation is something going on inside of us, within the very framework of our own souls. Just because we belong to the church doesn't mean we won't be tempted. It is just when we aren't looking for it; just when we have been at our prayers, that the devil strikes us. Sometimes we think because we are doing the Lord's work that the devil is dead or at least outside the sanctuary doors--or better still, over visiting the neighbors! But that is exactly what he isn't doing. Temptation is pervasive, it is everywhere we are because it is an inner struggle that goes with us, even into the presence of God.

The second thing we learn about temptation is that it is intensely personal. When Jesus speaks of the devil, I think he is relating in dramatic form the intense personal-ness of that temptation. Now, I have never seen the devil. Several times I thought I had, but it always turned out to be an Elder or Deacon! But that doesn't make him any less real, because I haven't seen a toothache either! Surely all of us know the magnetism of his personality, the entreaty of his eyes, the cajoling of his voice. Isn't this what the Bible means when it says of Jesus that "the tempter came to him?" It means that temptation is intensely personal. We have to wrestle, as Paul put it, "against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of the world." (Eph. 6:12) So temptation is not only pervasive, it is also personal--intensely so.

The third thing we may note about temptation is that it is also particular. Did you notice the temptations of Jesus as we read them this morning? Were they vague and general, or were they terribly specific and awfully particular? You see, the fact is you can't be good or bad in general. It is always in the particular. For example, you can't be a Christian in general. You can't say, "I'm going to be a Christian, but I'm not going to like just this one person, or I'm going to cheat just this once." That's the way it is with temptation. It is always specific, a particular thing. We can't defeat temptation in general, we have to beat it in particular. Our problem is the same as Charlie Brown's who puts it, "I love humanity, its people I can't stand."

The fourth thing we might note about temptation is that it is private-- it is terribly private and awfully lonely. As Jesus went into the wilderness to seek God's will for his life--as he contemplated the hard years of rejection and agony and suffering, culminating in the tragedy of the cross--

surely he was tempted to turn aside. Do you remember what the writer of the book of Hebrews says about Jesus? He writes, "he himself hath suffered being tempted..." (Heb. 2:18) And as Christ wrestled with those ultimate decisions about himself, about who and what he would be, the Bible tells us he was alone in the wilderness. There was no one to share the suffering of decision, no one to share the agony of it.

Is it not so with us? Our temptations are terribly private, awfully lonely. No one can really make our decisions for us, no one can really share the suffering of the battle, the loneliness of the choice. No, within our own souls each of us must make that choice for ourselves as to who and what we will be. The choice is inevitably our own, a private affair where no one can make for us those ultimate decisions of our personal destiny.

But not only does Jesus give us some valuable insights into the nature of temptation, he also gives us some help in handling temptation. And this, after all, is what we need. Notice first that in response to the temptation to turn stones into bread, Jesus replied, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Here we are introduced to the principle of preoccupation. A man whose life is focused on the things of God is too preoccupied to let other things distract him. See how it works! The Jews had been in captivity in Babylon and under the leadership of Nehemiah had returned to Jerusalem. The people round about sought to stop the work of the Jews and to take the life of Nehemiah. But Nehemiah was busy rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem and to the entreaties of his enemies he answered, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down." This is a principle we hear echoed in the words of Paul who wrote to the Romans, "Never let evil get the better of you; get the better of evil by doing good." (Romans 12:21, Moffatt's) It is said that after he accepted Christianity, William Lloyd Garrison was complimented upon the distinctiveness and beauty of his handwriting, which once had been so poor as to be almost indecipherable. "I set to work to improve it when I became a Christian," explained Garrison, "for I resolved that I would make my Christianity reach into every detail of my life." Here is the picture of a man who will not be easily overcome by temptation for the simple reason that he is preoccupied with higher things.

Notice secondly that when satan tempted Jesus to leap from the temple, Jesus said, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." Here we are introduced to the principle of resistance. Do you remember that glorious passage of Scripture of Paul's in the 6th chapter of Ephesians? Remember how he speaks of taking unto ourselves the whole armour of God? And the passage ends this way, "and having done all, to stand." Sometimes we simply have to stick out our courage and resist temptation. In the book Jane Eyre there is an unforgettable scene. Rochester is

pleading with Jane to go away with him to the south of France. They loved each other, and to Jane, who had all her life dreamed of such love, the appeal was almost irresistible. Only the memory of what she had been taught as a little girl saved her in that hour. She said at last: "Laws and principles are not for the time there are no temptations; they are for such moments as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigor. Stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have a worth--so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane; with my veins running fire, and my heart beating faster than I can count its throbs. Here I plant my foot." Yes, "here I plant my foot." And if there is anything men and women need to do in our sex-saturated society it is to plant their feet. You young people might take warning, for if at your convenience you break the holy laws of God, of what worth are they? No, there comes the time when the Christian will resist temptation, when he says, "here I plant my foot."

Then note thirdly that in response to the temptation of Satan to fall down and worship him to gain the kingdoms of the world, Jesus replied, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." Here we are introduced to the principle of a higher attraction. This principle of overcoming temptation by being filled with the beauty of a higher attraction is well-illustrated for us in an ancient Greek legend. It is the story of the argonauts who had to sail by the southern shore of Italy where the sirens lived. They were beautiful in voice but evil in soul. They used to come out to the shore and sing as ships were passing by and thus lured the sailors to destruction on the rocks. As the argonauts sailed by this dangerous place they had on board the famous poet and singer Orpheus. According to the legend his voice was such that lions and tigers would come crouching to his feet, rocks were softened, and oaks moved from their place. As the argonauts arrived at the place of peril, the sirens came out and sang their sweetest. Strangely enough the argonauts only laughed at their singing and rowed steadily on. Every day they had heard the sound of the music of Orpheus. And for these men whose ears were accustomed to such wonderful sounds there could be no attraction in the inferior music of the sirens.

Is not this the profound secret of the Christian religion? The attraction of evil is overcome by a higher attraction. Temptation is a dreadful thing. It is all-pervasive, it is intensely personal, it is terribly particular, it is awfully private and lonely. But for the person whose eyes are on Jesus the attraction of evil is overcome by a higher attraction.

Back in Lubbock Elizabeth and I belonged to a Tuesday night prayer group. In that wonderful fellowship we shared our triumphs and failures, we shared our needs--we could dare to be honest with one another about

who and what we really are. We prayed for and with one another and we sang together, too. A little chorus we often sang went like this:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of his glory and grace.

Yes, a higher attraction--when your eyes are on Jesus the temptations of life are indeed overcome in the light of his glory and grace. When there is the devil to pay, turn your eyes upon Jesus--and you will have learned how to handle temptation.

And that's what it is all about when your eyes are turned on Jesus. Everything else fades away. When there is the devil to pay, turn your eyes upon Jesus.