

“Pleasing God”

Genesis 3:1-7 & Matthew 4:1-11

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The story is told about two hunting buddies who had been flown into Canada’s far North for some elk hunting. They stayed in a rustic cabin for a week and waited triumphantly on their last day for the pilot to arrive to fly them out—with their bounty. When the pilot had landed his plane he inspected the proud hunters’ six elk. “I don’t believe the plane will carry this many,” he told them. “Four is about the limit.” “What about last year?” one of the hunters protested. “The pilot who carried us out then flew a plane that was exactly like this one—same horsepower, similar weather, and we had six elk then.” Reluctantly the pilot agreed to try. They loaded up and took off, but sure enough there was insufficient power to take off. The plane sputtered as they tried to clear the mountains and with all that weight they crashed. Stumbling bleeding from the wreckage, one hunter asked the other if he knew where they were. “I’m not sure,” he said, “but I think we’re about two miles from where we crashed last year.”

In our scripture this morning the devil is tempting Jesus with the same temptations that work so well on all of us from the beginning of time. The very first sin resulted from the devil’s challenge to Eve. Come Eve eat the fruit you will be like God. Who cares if you displease God for you can become powerful; you can have everything your way. Please yourself. The devil wins; Eve and Adam eat the fruit. The Israelites were just delivered from Egypt by a series of God’s mighty miracles clearly demonstrating that God was in control and loved the Israelites. Now in the wilderness God is providing them with water and manna daily. God simply asks that they share the manna and do not gather more than they can eat, so they remember it is God who loves them and provides their every need. The devil temps again. You do not need to please God. You can be self-sufficient. You can be in control. Simply hoard the manna, take enough so you can make it to the Promise Land on your own; then, you will be in control and have it all your way. The devil wins. The Israelites hoard the manna, fight with one another for the manna; and when the manna spoils, instead of confessing their sin they complain and blame God.

At the beginning of our text, the devil knows he is in trouble. God’s love is so strong for us that Jesus comes to earth to show us the way and prove God’s love. Jesus has lived for 30 years on earth and has not given into a single temptation. Jesus is now baptized and God says in a booming voice from heaven for all to hear, “This is my Son with whom I am fully pleased.” The devil does not give up. Perhaps since Jesus is fully human, he will succumb to the same temptations that have worked so well for thousands of generations.

The devil waited until Jesus was alone, tired, hungry, and exhausted from forty days of fasting in the desert. "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." The devil’s temptation is not to do something evil, for Jesus had the power to change stones into bread. Later in his ministry, Jesus on several occasions fed huge crowds by multiplying bread and turned water into wine to celebrate a wedding. Food and eating are good.

The devil tempts with something that is good and that Jesus is able to do. The temptation lies in the timing and who is being pleased. Jesus voluntarily fasted in order to experience humanity fully, so Jesus could fully identify with us. Jesus was fasting to focus himself on the will of God before he started his ministry. Jesus was fasting to please God not to please his own desires. Jesus knew that God has, is, and will provide his every need in God's perfect timing; so, there was no need to hastily change stones into bread. Jesus responds to the devil with Deuteronomy chapter eight verse three. "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" This verse is taken from Moses' speech to the Israelites, as they are about to enter the Promise Land. Moses reminds them that their long trial in the wilderness was designed to teach them humility and make them aware of their absolute dependence on God and God's teachings. Jesus' response demonstrates that he will not grumble and complain like the Israelites when facing material lack. Jesus is already committed to trusting God for his provision. Jesus is showing us that we ought to trust God for food and all our needs.

Before we move on from this first temptation think about just how tempting it was. Jesus was all alone and very hungry. No one would ever know. The father of a small boy would occasionally sneak over the fence into his neighbor's back yard and help himself to as much of the choicest fruit as he could carry in his shirt. He always made sure, however, that no one was looking. One day he invited his son along. After carefully looking in every direction and making sure his neighbor's car was gone, he crept over the fence and helped his son to follow him. Just as the father was about ready to help himself, his little boy whispered loudly, "Dad! Dad! Somebody's seeing us!" "Where? Where?" the father answered, "I don't see anybody." "You forgot to look up," his son explained. "You forgot to see if God is watching." It has been said that character is what you do when you think nobody is watching. Perhaps the devil's best weapon is tricking us into thinking we are alone, that somehow God is not watching over us, and that God is not constantly caring for us.

The devil having failed to appeal to Jesus' basic physical needs decides to tempt Jesus into showing off his divine powers. He transports Jesus up to the highest tower of the temple which was the highest point in Jerusalem and tries again saying, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" The devil tempts Jesus with scripture. Dr. Allen McSweeney writes, "The Devil can quote Scripture with the best of us. That may be the Devil's favorite weapon—to use the word of God to separate people from the purposes of God." The devil knows the Bible but fails to follow the Bible. Sometimes friends or others will tempt us with attractive and convincing reasons why we should try something that is wrong. They may even find Bible verses that seem to support their viewpoint. Resist by studying the Bible carefully, especially the broader context so that you understand God's plan for your life. It is difficult to recognize errors of interpretation when others take verses out of context and twist them to say what they want to say unless you understand the whole Bible.

The desert mystic Abba Poeman said, “The nature of water is yielding and that of a stone is hard. Yet if you hang a bottle filled with water above the stone so that the water drips drop by drop, it will wear a hole in the stone. In the same way the word of God is tender, and our heart is hard. So when people hear the word of God frequently, their hearts are opened to the will of God.”

When I saw the enormity of the Grand Canyon I was in awe of the power of water over time. God will bless our prayerful study of scripture. For over time, God will mold all of us into the beautiful person God has created us to be.

Jesus once again resists temptation with scripture saying, “Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'” Once again Jesus response is taken from Deuteronomy referencing the complaints of the Israelites in the wilderness for water prompting God to provide a miraculous water source. Much like the parent who finally gives into a whining child’s request. Jesus will not make demands on how and when God should act. God is not a cosmic vending machine. Jesus will not put God to the test as the Israelites did in the wilderness.

Having been foiled twice the devil puts everything into one last temptation taking Jesus up to a mountain. Together they are able to survey all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. The devil says, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” The devil does not have the power to give this to Jesus, but the devil is a master of deception. The devil is able to make things look attractive and trick us into thinking that we own things, create things, and are in control. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The Devil fights with his own weapons. “He invites Jesus into an alliance of power. He says in effect, Jesus, can’t you see how hungry people are for someone to take charge, to destroy their enemies, and get the economy going again? People are hungrier for a Power Messiah than for bread or miracles. Give them what they want! Religion and power wed! Piety and politics marching arm in arm.” Jesus again resists by quoting scripture, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

The devil tempted Jesus with physical needs and desires, possessions, and power and pride. Since you are the Son of God, which Jesus was, then do this? If you are so great at sports then just do it. If you are a great businessperson then excel, get rich, and win all the awards. Jesus and all of us are challenged to prove ourselves to the tempter. Often the temptations are not temptations to do evil things. The temptation is to do the right thing for the wrong reason. In other words it is a matter of focus and motive. Immediately preceding our text for today, God affirmed Jesus at his baptism as God’s own son and in that passage we are already told that God was “Well pleased” with Jesus. In the temptation story, Jesus is tempted to please someone other than God. He is tempted to please his followers, leaders of nations around the world and even himself, but his focus is singular and he has no need to please anyone except God. Since God is already pleased, the devil is defeated and sent away.

We should be careful when we hear the account of Jesus temptation to not focus all our attention on temptations that break the law. For if we resist them then we are endanger of self-righteousness and pride. Our scripture this morning does not let us off the hook that easily; if we

focus on how good we are, we miss the point entirely. The point is that God is the one who is good and our job is to do only those things that are pleasing to God. To do something good just to show off or satisfy our friends, our families, our superiors, or ourselves is insufficient and fails in the mandate to worship God and God alone.

C.S. Lewis writes, “What Satan put into the heads of our remote ancestors was the idea that they could “be like gods”—could set up on their own as if they had created themselves—be their own masters—invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God, apart from God. And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery—the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God to make us happy. The reason why it can never succeed is this: God made us, invented us as a person invents an engine. A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the human machine to run on God. God is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other. That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion. God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from God because it is not there. There is not such thing.”

Jesus was focused on carrying out God’s will and following God’s plan in God’s timing. Jesus’ desire and motivation was to please God. Have you noticed that the Devil’s temptations were enhanced and later freely given to Jesus by God? Jesus did much more than turn stones into bread he became the bread of life for everyone. Jesus did much more than safely jump off the highest building. He walked on water, healed people, rose from the dead, and offers an eternal life of safety and love. Jesus is much more than an earthly king he is the King of king and Lord of lords that will reign for eternity.

We will be tempted and challenged to prove ourselves worthy and please ourselves. Scripture is a vital tool in resisting temptation and pleasing God. Focused on God we will be molded back into the beautiful image of God we were created to be. We are never alone for Jesus journeys with us through life and angels will meet us along the way! Amen