

First Sunday of Lent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
22 February 2026

Matthew 4:1-11

I was watching a rerun episode of the TV show *Hee Haw*. Remember that show? Well, on this particular episode a patient came to Dr. Campbell to complain that he had broken his arm in two places. The doctor replied, "Well then, stay out of them places!" Although meant in jest, the advice of the doctor is relevant for us today, when we see the temptations of Christ in the desert. I found it curious that the temptations come after his baptism. St. John Chrysostom once said, "It is after baptism that the Christian endures his greatest temptations." (The Homilies of John Chrysostom, the Gospel of Matthew, Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1852, Pg.173).

The Collect today also expresses this reality. It asks God to "come quickly and help us all in all of our temptations." The key word is "us." Temptations often affect entire congregations, cities and nations. We share this fragile human condition and are subject to the same temptations. In a survey of *Discipleship Journal*, readers ranked areas of greatest spiritual challenge: 1. Materialism, 2. Pride, 3. Self-centeredness, 4. Laziness, 5. (Tie) Anger/Bitterness, 5. (Tie) Sexual lust, 7. Envy, 8. Gluttony, 9. Lying. These affect all of us. We all become overly proud; we all lust after things or people; we all have a tendency to self-directed behaviors; and we all allow anger to take hold of our hearts at times.

The collect also acknowledges that there are temptations that are individual and particular to each of us. The collect says, "as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save." Many of us are tempted to drink, to gossip, to engage in inappropriate sexual encounters, to gamble, or to lash out physically or emotionally. These are personal demons we struggle with and they are most likely very different for your families or friends.

Now, let us look at Jesus' own temptations and analyze them. First, we see that while the Lord was fasting he was exposed to no temptations, but it was after his fasting, when he was the most hungry, that he began to be tempted. This exposes one of the greatest truths about temptation: **It is often when we are at the weakest point in our lives that we get tempted the hardest.** When we are hungry, tired, away from home, when we have allowed hopelessness to take over our lives, or when we are experiencing a decline in health.

The Scripture tells us that Jesus was taken to the desert, away from family and friends, isolated from any support systems. This is the second reality about

temptation: **Temptation usually attacks us the most aggressively when we are alone.** Let me paraphrase St. John Chrysostom about this, “The devil assails most effectively when he sees men and women left alone, and by themselves. He approached the woman in the beginning in the same way, having caught her alone, and found her apart from her husband. But, when he sees us with others and banded together, he is not as confident, and makes no attack” (Ibid, 174).

Let me give you some examples: We are driving home and as we pass our favorite bar, our mouth begins to salivate, our heart begins to palpitate a little faster, our lips become suddenly dry, and our mind begins to lie to us. “Only one drink and then I will go home, just one! I am able to control this!” This is not just true for those affected in this way by alcohol. This is the same for those with a gambling addiction. The lie is “I will only play \$20 dollars. That’s it! There is no harm in losing a few pennies.” Temptation is strongest when we are alone.

Now, let us look at Jesus’ temptations. We see that the first temptation has to do with food. Matthew tells us that the tempter said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” This is the third reality about temptation: **Temptation uses our most basic needs as a weapon against us.** In this case the weapon is food. “You know you are hungry, you know you want it, a little bite will not harm you. Did God really say you couldn’t eat of this particular fruit? Go ahead and have a bite, you will not die!” We can see the similarities here between the temptation of Eve and the temptation of Jesus. To Eve the tempter says, “You will be like God, go ahead and eat it.” To Jesus he says, “If you are really God, prove it. Satisfy your own need. Feed yourself!”

These temptations are difficult to resist because these needs are unavoidable. The problem in these cases is not the satisfaction of the need, as much as it is “going too far.” The abuse of anything good (food, drink, sex, or fun) can become self-destructive and enslaving. Jesus responds to the tempter using Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” There is more to life than food and comfort and excess is a risk for our physical and spiritual health. God alone can provide everlasting sustenance.

In the second temptation, the tempter quotes Psalm 91:11-12 and tells Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, 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.’” This particular temptation is very interesting to me. We see the tempter using Scripture. But, what’s interesting is that the Psalm quoted here is taken absolutely out of context. Psalm 91 is not about men and women throwing themselves off cliffs to test God’s provision. It is rather

a celebration of God's blessing of protection for those who believe in him. This is another reality about temptation: **Temptation usually starts with a cognitive distortion.** It starts with a lie that tells us things like, "Pornography is a victimless crime... I am not an alcoholic; I am only a social drinker... Didn't God say it is not good for man to be alone? Well, I am really alone in this hotel, hundreds of miles away from home. Certainly this qualifies. I will do it just this once!"

It is entirely possible to use Holy Scripture to our sinful advantage and to quote it out of context, to justify our own needs and lie ourselves into rationalizing our behaviors. But to this cognitive distortion, Jesus replies, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Deuteronomy 6:16). The lies we tell ourselves put God to the test, because we can never lie to God. God knows the motivations of our hearts. God sees what we try to keep in secret.

Let us quickly review the last temptation. The tempter says, "All this I will give you, if you bow down and worship me." Jesus replied, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only'" (Deuteronomy 6:13). Here we see the tempter say, "Everything that you see is mine and I can give it to you!" This is the ultimate lie of temptation. **Temptation fools us into believing that we have the right to do whatever we want with our wealth or our possessions because they are ours.** We worked hard to get them. We can use them in any way we want. But this too is a lie. Nothing of what we own belongs to us. God gives our life to us in trust. God gives it and can take it away. It belongs to God alone. Our wealth is given to us in trust. Our children only belong to us for a season and then they start their own lives independently of us. Even our spouses are a gift from the Lord. All that we have ultimately belongs to the Lord.

So, let me get back to Hee Haw, because Dr. Campbell was right, "Avoid them places!" How do we deal with temptation? First, we have to watch out for excess and strive not to abuse things like food, drink, sex, etc. Second, we need to strengthen our bodies and souls. We need to exercise, eat rightly, pray, read Scripture, and participate in worship. Third, we need a support system, and accountability group, people who care for our wellbeing. Fourth, we need to check the lies we tell ourselves and expose them for what they are. And lastly, we must realize that temptations only work because they promise us to make us happier. But only God can give us true happiness. All that we have belongs to God and is not ours to abuse.

May God give us the strength to resist evil. Amen!