

CROSS PURPOSES

When Temptation Whispers

Text: Matthew 4:1-11

Leaving the Cross

Cross Roads: Walking the Way of Jesus

Theme: *We have an enemy, Satan, whose intent it is to get us to doubt that our ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment comes remaining under the pleasure of the Father.*

Last Sunday, Pastor Meyer introduced us to our Lenten theme, *Cross Roads: Walking the Way of Jesus*. He told us that at the heart of being Christ followers is realignment. Jesus talked about alignment in terms of our dying to self so that His life could take us over. We are to progressively allow our own independent, entrenched self-will to be supplanted by the heart of Christ. Today, the Cross Roads leads us to look at Cross Purposes. What are the temptations that whisper at us to draw us away from the fullness that Jesus offers? Max Lucado puts it this way, *"The father of lies croons and woos like a traveling peddler, promising the moon and delivering disaster."* Jesus began his public by facing His archenemy in the wilderness. Let's turn to that text.

Read Matthew 4:1-11

Followers of Jesus, you have a target on your back. Being on the crossroads puts us in the crosshairs. As we go throughout our day we may be unaware that there is rifle scope focused on us at this moment. We may not see the "red dot" emanating from a high powered weapon, but we are the object of destruction.

Who is holding this weapon that is aimed at us? The Scripture gives him many names—"Satan", "the father of lies", he masquerades as an "angel of light", "the accuser of the brethren", "Beelzebub", etc. Our Biblical text identifies Jesus' arch enemy and ours as the *devil* or literally a *"slanderer"*. The Scripture makes no apology about the reality of the devil. Just as God is supernatural being, who is personal and good, just so there is a supernatural being, who is personal and evil. We are the battlefield on which a war is being fought. Not that we are so important to the devil. The devil's ultimate intent is to destroy Jesus, who is His greatest threat, but he will do so by going after Jesus' people. After all, if he can discredit us then by implication He discredits Christ's cause and the One we claim to follow.

Frankly, we don't spend nearly as much time as we should developing an awareness of the devil and his tactics to undermine our lives. The apostle Peter warned his readers, **"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to destroy"** (1 Peter 5:8). In his ingenious little book on the devious strategies of the devil, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis introduces it by saying, **"There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them."** By far our greatest error, practically speaking, **"to disbelieve in their existence."** In a sophisticated scientific age, many see the devil as a relic left over from the Dark Ages on the order of believing that the world is flat and that the earth is the center of the universe. Even if we do say we believe in a personified evil, how conscious are we of his tactics and strategies to undermine our faith?

I would say that the devil is quite happy to lurk in the shadows of disbelief and carry on his work outside of our conscious awareness. But the New Testament worldview unashamedly affirms the reality of the evil one and that Jesus came with the intent purpose of defeating him on the cross. Since Jesus came for this purpose, He is brought face to face with his archenemy at the very beginning of His public ministry. The first act of the Holy Spirit following Jesus' baptism by John is to lead Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days and nights to encounter the One who will stalk him all the way to the cross.

The point in studying Matthew 4:1-11 together is to see the temptations Satan dangles before Jesus, examine how these temptations connect to us, and then to grasp how Jesus countered them so as not to fall. But before we rush into Matthew 4, we must see the context. Since Matthew 4 starts a new chapter it is easy to sever it from what comes before. If we do so, we will fail to see that the temptations of Satan are aimed at the very message Jesus received at his baptism. We need to see this vital connection.

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all agree, the temptation accounts are preceded by Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. The baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his public ministry. He is empowered for service by the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. But what is truly important is the message that the Father has for the Son that serves as the basis for his identity and ours as well. The Father affirms who Jesus is to him. In Mark and Luke's account, there is personal word of affirmation spoken directly to Jesus, **"You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"** (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Matthew's account shifts the focus from direct address to a message for crowds gathered at Jesus' baptism. **"This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"** (Matthew 3:17).

Why these words? Of all the things that the Father could have said to the Son, why was it important to remind Jesus of His place in the Father's heart more than anything else?

Let me personalize this and then come back to this question. Any of us who are parents, recall or anticipate the tender moments when we send our children off into this big bad world. All of our protective instincts rush to the forefront of our emotions. Whether it is leaving our child screaming the first day of pre-school or kindergarten or some other launching pad, we are concerned for our children's safety. I can remember as if it was yesterday the teary departure from the freshman college dorm room. From the San Francisco Bay Area we traveled 16 hours in the car loaded with "who-knows-what" to drop off our daughter at a school in Southeastern Washington. We hauled the stuff to her dorm room, all along sizing up her roommate and a few of the families and students settling in across the hall. Not knowing a soul, we worried about her making friends, finding a Christian group for fellowship, the challenge of the academics, and all the social pressures of drinking, parties, etc. Then it came time for the final embrace and parting. As we choked back our tears, our daughter was hoping no one saw her parents blubbering. As we exited the campus, I wanted to turn back and shout, "I am leaving you my precious child, the greatest treasure of my life, treat her well!"

The Father must have had similar feelings toward His Son. The Father knew all the pain that was ahead for His Son, and that His earthly life was inevitably marching toward a cross. The Father was also aware that the deepest need of his Son's life would be to know where He stood in His Father's heart. His identity is that he is the beloved of the Father. So what's the connection here to the temptations of Jesus? 1. The temptations of Satan were meant to be an assault, to cast doubt on Jesus' belief that he was the beloved of the Father. Note that two of the three temptations begin with the phrase, "If you are the Son of God..." 2. The ground upon which Jesus is to fight the battle is from the secure foundation that his satisfaction and fulfillment came by remaining under the pleasure and delight of His Father. He resisted the temptation on the basis of His being the beloved of the Father.

So what is the connection to us? What is true of Jesus is true of us. The highest privilege and our fundamental identity is that we have been adopted into the family of God as beloved children of the Father. Jesus, as the only, natural eternal Son of the Father, gave his life so that we, who were born orphans, separated from and at odds with the Father, could become the beloved children of the Father. So our fundamental identity is similar to Jesus. The apostle Paul puts it like this, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' [Abba, Daddy is the same way Jesus addresses His Father.] The Spirit

himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:15-16). The British theologian J. I. Packer puts it like this, "What is a Christian? The question can be answered in many ways, but the richest answer I know is that a Christian is one who has God for his Father."

So we enter the wilderness temptations of Jesus, knowing that Satan's efforts are focused on getting Jesus to doubt that he is the beloved of the Father, and that Satan's aim is to do the same to us. In other words, our greatest defense against Satan's attack is to remain under the pleasure of God and to believe our ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment is to remain in his love.

Let's look now at the three temptations that Jesus faced.

1. The first temptation is to equate life with the material comforts.

Satan starts with the obvious. "After fasting forty days and nights, He [Jesus] was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread'" (Matthew 4:2-3). If you are beloved of the Father, certainly your Father would not want you to famished? What loving Father would allow his child to starve? Exercise your privilege as the Son to meet your immediate physical need.

Jesus' answer to the devil tells us how he understood the temptation. "It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus quotes Moses from Deuteronomy 8 who is addressing the children of Israel who have wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Moses told them that the reason it took 40 years to go only a few miles was so that they would learn to rely on the Lord to provide for them and to realize that life was far more than having their physical needs met. Deuteronomy 8 is the chapter where Moses warns them not to forget God when they come into the Promised Land who will provide them with food and shelter in abundance. Once you have all that you need, will you say, we did it ourselves?

Isn't this the temptation of Western society? Reducing life to the material is the spirit of our times. Materialism and self-reliance is the air that we breathe, therefore it is easy to get sucked into it. Our cultural message is, "I am what I have." This leads to a very individualistic, get-what-I-can-for-myself lifestyle. There is little sense of community or larger purpose that comes with this approach. I confess that I believe that our political leaders have failed us when it comes to fighting this war on terror or as it has been called "the clash of the civilizations" between radical Islam and the West. Following 9/11, what were we told was our responsibility as an average citizen? Go out and shop. The message was...don't let the enemy defeat us with fear; keep the economy going, as if this were the end all and be all of life. We were not told to sacrifice as you would expect if we are in a time of war. There was no larger national purpose put

before us that would require an adjustment in our lifestyles. What do my neighbor and I have in common, if we are not asked to sacrifice something together for a larger purpose? A study was done of those who lived in London through "The Blitz" during WWII. Sixty percent of the people surveyed said that this was the happiest time of their life. Why? Because they experienced what it meant to a community of shared sacrifice while living for a larger purpose than their own self-fulfillment.

By saying to the devil that "man does not live by bread alone", Jesus is saying that though daily bread is a necessity it is not sufficient. Life is more than bread or the material alone. Life consists of reliance on "every single word that comes pouring forth out of God's mouth." Where do we go to hear this word? Historically, we have said that we place ourselves under the authority of the Scripture as the reliable source for the voice of God. Satisfaction comes in keeping up the daily conversation and dialogue that comes from God's word as the perspective of what this life consists. When we are born we should all be presented with an instruction manual. If you want this life to work right live by this. The Scriptures are the instruction manual for why we were created and how we are to live. What is memorable acronym for B.I.B.L.E? *Basic Instruction Before Leave Earth*. Feed on the word and do it with others. This is why we are so highly encouraging of these Lenten small groups and life together in community. We listen to the Scripture together for what it means to follow Jesus. This is the way we fight the ever oppressive message of materialism that dominates our culture.

The first temptation of Jesus moves from obsession with physical comfort to the seeking of personal fame.

2. Seek Fame. What was Andy Warhol's famous line? Everyone will get their 15 minutes of fame. I am still waiting for mine. Satan is clever. Jesus answered his temptation to meet his physical needs with Scripture, so Satan decides to use Scripture as a way into the second temptation. The Scripture focuses on Jesus doing something spectacular. "Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the son of God,' he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written, (quotes Psalm 91)

'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" (Matt. 4:5-6).

Even the devil knows the Word, but he twists it for his own benefit. Psalm 91 has to do with God as our refuge and shelter in times of danger. Satan lifts this out of context and turns it into a challenge for Jesus to do something spectacular.

The devil's challenge is...if you are the son of God, why not show it. Put your power on display. Why are you walking around *in cognito*, as the hymn says, 'veiled in flesh the incarnate deity.' Dazzle people with a display of power. When I think of Jesus' veiled identity as the Son of God, I believe the time of greatest temptation for Jesus, must have come at the moment of His arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. An entourage of soldiers carrying swords and clubs were sent by the religious leaders to seize Jesus. After Judas identified Jesus with his kiss of betrayal, the mob stepped forward. Peter took out a sword cutting off the right ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus says, "Put your sword back in place...Do you not think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53). I know I am reading my own human reaction into this, but don't you think that Jesus yearned with all his might to put an end to this charade and say, "OK, I have put up with enough of your insults. It's over. Send those twelve legions of angels. I am tired playing the servant. It is time that people know who I am." I see Jesus like Clark Kent, ripping open his tunic, and showing the initials on his chest, SOG, Son of God.

Yet, it was because Jesus knew who He was before His Father, as His beloved, that he could continue to have his identity veiled as the suffering servant. It was because he came to die on our behalf, that he displayed power in weakness.

The second and third temptations are all about the nature of power. It is the power of servant love vs. power on public display or human dominance. Here Jesus addresses the temptation to pride: to be known as better than someone else, to be measured by where we are in the pecking order. C. S. Lewis reminds us that pride at its essence is competitive. Lewis writes,

"Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that we are proud of being rich, or clever or good-looking, but we are not. We are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...It is the comparison that makes us proud: the pleasure of being above the rest."¹

What good is it being the Son of God if no one knows about it?

For those of you in the business world, I am sure that Jim Collins book Good To Great is familiar to you. It is a book about what makes for a great company. Great companies Collins asserts are led by Level 5 leaders. Though

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, 1943), 109, 110.

Collins reference point is not the biblical paradigm of servant leadership, his description of Level 5 leaders has an eerie resemblance to the kind of servant leader Jesus is calling his followers to be. Collins says that Level 5 leaders display a duality of modesty and willingness, humility and fearlessness.

He contrasts Level 5 leaders to Level 4 leaders who are concerned with their own reputation of personal greatness. The favorite subject of ego driven leaders is themselves and they love to hog the spot light. In an article by a level 4 leader on leading change, he used the pronoun "I" 44 times, and the pronoun "we" 16 times. Collins concludes, "In over two thirds of the comparison cases (leaders of good but not great companies in the same category), we noted the presence of a gargantuan personal ego that contributed to the demise or continued mediocrity of the company."²

Again Jesus answers the devil with Scripture, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matt. 4:7). In other words, I know who I am before the Father. That is enough. Is it enough for us? If we are not secure in our identity as the beloved of the Father, we will seek to fill this deficit with the praise of people.

3. Go for the glory. The final temptation is an extension of this last one. Go for the glory, forget the cross. "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All of this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me'" (Matthew 4:8-9)

What is the temptation that the devil is putting before Jesus? "Go straight for the glory. Forget the cross. Abandon servant love. Grasp the prize." Jesus' reply to the devil might sound familiar. "Away from me, Satan." You will recall from the setting of last Sunday's text when Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" that it was Peter who had the inspired insight, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus commends Peter saying essentially that He would never have known unless His Father had revealed it to him. Then Jesus goes on to say that He must go to Jerusalem, suffer much at the hands of the religious leaders, be killed and on the third day rise again. In a matter of seconds Peter goes from the head of class to dunce in the corner. He pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him for talking about being a dying messiah. Peter could not imagine this. Jesus then turns the rebuke back on Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!" Peter had become an unwitting dupe and channel of Satan. Jesus recognized the voice of the one who wanted to divert him from offering up his life on the cross. This cross was the mission on which the Father had sent him and for which he had been affirmed.

² Ibid., p. 29

The ultimate issue here is, to whom does our heart belong? Jesus says that He lives before an Audience of One. **"For it is written: Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only" (Matt. 4:10).** What is most precious to us? What is our heart's desire? Has it been captured by the lover of our soul? Is it our desire to give pleasure to the One who takes pleasure in us?

Every temptation is really comes back to a single temptation--to come out from under the pleasure and delight that can be found in our Father. Temptation presents a choice. All temptation comes with the false promise of happiness. Temptation always comes with the prospect that I will be happier if I succumb to the temptation. Here is the choice at each juncture: Will this [whatever Satan croons at us] make me happy or will remaining under the gaze of the Father be where the real satisfaction lies. John Piper pulls it together for us, "When my thirst and joy and meaning and passion are satisfied by the presence and promises of Christ, the power of sin is broken. We do not yield to offer of sandwich meat when we can smell the steak sizzling on the grill."

Conclusion:

The greatest weapon we have against the temptation of the devil who seeks to sever our love connection with the Father, is to remind ourselves regularly who we are: The ground on which we stand to ward off temptation is that we want to do nothing that would take us out from under the Father's delight in us, because there is not greater satisfaction.