

The Way of Life: Who Are You?
Matthew 4:1-11
Sunday, February 22, 2026

Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan river. The Holy Spirit has descended upon him like a dove and God the Father has just declared, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Up to this point in the story of Jesus’ life, we know very little about him, other than the remarkable circumstances surrounding his birth. But with his baptism, and God’s affirmation, Jesus is just about ready to enter into his earthly ministry.

And, as he prepares to enter into his ministry, it would be fair for us to ask, “So, who is this guy? Sure, the Father has called him his Son, but what does that mean?”

Well, that’s the question today’s scripture is aimed at answering. The Holy Spirit leads him into the wilderness to be tested; to begin to reveal who Jesus is.

He’s out there in the wilderness 40 days and 40 nights, fasting. At the end of the time, he is hungry.

So, it’s then—when he’s most susceptible—that the devil shows up to tempt Jesus; to reveal who Jesus really is. And the devil’s first words reveal the whole purpose of this test. He starts out, “If you are the Son of God” Now, this isn’t really a question. The devil knows that Jesus is the Son of God. He knows Jesus is the coming Messiah. The question is, what kind of son—what kind of Messiah—is he going to be?

So, the devil’s first question, relates to food. If you’re the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. In a broader sense, the devil is inviting Jesus to take responsibility for his own comfort and security; to take care of himself without having to rely on God.

Which, in fact, would have been a pretty kingly thing to do. If the Roman Emperor got hungry, he would order someone to bring him food. The Roman Emperor had his own detachment of soldiers whose only job was to look out for his safety. The Roman Emperor left nothing to chance when it came to taking care of himself.

And most everyone of that day and age, including the Jews, would have probably agreed with him. Certainly, the Jews would have figured their Messiah would do the same thing. When he came into his power, he would live in comfort and security, behind thick, high walls, just like any other king. Most of the people of Jesus' day wouldn't even have seen the devil's invitation as a temptation; they would have called it common sense.

And I think most of the people of our day—including many of us Christians—might see it much the same way. For the last three weeks, we talked about how everything we are and everything we have is a gift from God. God has blessed us to be a blessing. We are created for generosity. Yet we face, and often succumb to, the incessant temptation to take what God has given us and just treat it as if it's our own, looking after our own comfort and security; trying to create our own joy.

Or, taking it one step further, many Christians don't even consider it a temptation. The desire to ensure our own comfort and safety isn't a glitch in our software, it's a feature. If we just do what Jesus wants—which usually includes giving lots of money to the church—Jesus will give us all the money and comfort and security we want. It's called the prosperity gospel. It's a pretty comfortable understanding of our faith. The only problem is, it's precisely the opposite of the kind of faith Jesus himself chose. When faced with entrusting his comfort and his safety to himself or to God, he chose God. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

So, having failed on the first try, the devil tries again. And again, he frames the test in terms of who Jesus is; of what kind of Son he will be. He invites Jesus to take a shortcut in his ministry by

performing a spectacular miracle—levitation—in the middle of the religious heart of Israel: Jerusalem. It made sense. Everyone would see it. Everyone would know about it. He'd be insanely famous. The religious leadership would have no choice but to come over to his side. Instead of slogging from village to village in Galilee for three years, his credentials as the Messiah would be immediately established.

Now, this must have been a real temptation to Jesus. At this point, he probably knows what's waiting for him at the end of his ministry. He probably knows that an extended ministry in out-of-the-way Galilee will foster increasing opposition from the religious elite in Jerusalem. In fact, he probably knows that this opposition would grow to the point where those same leaders would have him murdered. But with this levitation miracle, Jesus could sidestep all that suffering.

It's the sort of thing a Roman Emperor would do. Seize the moment. Get his name out there. Ride the wave of public adulation to the top. It's the sort of thing the Jews of Jesus' day expected their coming Messiah would do. It just made sense.

And how often does Satan offer us the same sort of temptation? In our own lives, how often are we tempted to take a shortcut, to take the easy way. We've got the best of intentions. Our ultimate goals are good. So what if we've got to do a few questionable things to get there. The ends justify the means, right?

Or we chase after fame and recognition, thinking that's going to give us fulfillment. If we can just get recognized for our abilities and brilliance, then we'll be in a position to really get stuff done. Rather than even being a means to an end, fame and popularity become an end in themselves.

It's a test we sometimes fail. But Jesus didn't. He will not take any shortcuts. He will not be tempted by fame and popularity. He will remain faithful to the Father.

So, having failed again, the devil tries one last time. He tempts Jesus with power: if you'll just worship me, you can rule the earth. There is, of course, a lot of irony here. John's Gospel tells us that through the Word (Jesus), the world came into being. Jesus is already the ruler of the earth. It's just that he's a different kind of ruler than the world might expect.

The devil is tempting Jesus with earthly power; with the kind of political and military might that the world thinks of as power. It was certainly the kind of power that the Roman Emperor wielded.

And it was the kind of power the Jews of Jesus' day figured their Messiah—as the representative of the *almighty* God—would wield as well. In fact, it was the kind of power that their greatest kings, David and Solomon had wielded, and after all, the Messiah *would* be the “son of David,” right?

And, as Christians, Satan presents us with the same sort of temptation. It's another manifestation of the idea that the ends justify the means. We are tempted to use political power to impose our understanding of right living on the rest of the world. It's a fusing of Christianity and politics which, here in America, is called Christian Nationalism. We want a Jesus who takes the bull by the horns, asserts his supremacy and his authority, and imposes obedience at gunpoint.

The only problem is, that's not who Jesus is. In this scripture, he expressly rejected that way. The sort of earthly power the devil tempted him with is based on fear, violence, and death. It is ultimately based in evil. That's why the devil said Jesus would need to worship him before he could wield such power.

But that isn't who Jesus is. He's the Son of a God who is the opposite of all those things; a God who is love.

Ironically, in trying to tempt Jesus away from his true identity, Satan reveals who he really is. We see the kind of Son—the kind of king—Jesus is. He came to earth as an alternative to the fear, violence,

and death. He came to be a different kind of Messiah, a different kind of king. He refused to take any power for himself that the Father had not given him, and it was never part of the Father's plan that Jesus would enjoy or employ the power of evil. In fact, as we will see at the *end* of Jesus' ministry in about 6 weeks, it was just the opposite. He allowed himself to be executed by the ultimate earthly power, the Romans, in order to exercise his true power: the power of love; the power that can defeat sin and death.

And, as we've been discussing for the last few months, when we look at Jesus, we not only see God, but we also see who we were created to be. Jesus' temptations are our temptations. And in Jesus' response, we see what God wants and hopes for each of us: that we, like Jesus, would choose love.