

Matthew 4:1-11 - June 13, 2021

“Twisting Words”

8:15am & 11:00am Morning Service
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
Pastor Nathaniel H. Gutiérrez

Matt. 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” 4 But he answered, “It is written,
“Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

Matt. 4:5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple 6 and said to him, “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,
lest you strike your foot against a stone.”

Matt. 4:7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written,
“You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve.”

Matt. 4:11 Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray together.

Growing up as a missionary kid gave me a vast exposure to culture, language and street smarts. Often our missionary work took place in less developed and rural areas and one of the first things you learned, before learning the language or the culture was how to protect your belongings.

I remember dad sitting me down and explaining to me the basics. And one thing that stood out and that I experienced first and second hand was the art of distraction. You see, a thief rarely works alone. He almost always has an innocent-looking accomplice whose sole purpose was to draw the victim’s attention and focus away from any valuable items, by causing distractions.

Turns out, we tend to focus on only one thing at a time. And that is true on the streets of a third-world country, but we also see this play out in other areas of our lives.

In the first pages of the Bible, we read of the first case where that happened. God spoke to Adam and Eve and opened to them the whole of the Garden of Eden – God gave them an abundant paradise full of everything they could have ever wanted or needed, except for one tree.

God's words were clear and truthful. He dealt graciously with Adam and Eve. But the devil came and distracted their eyes and twisted the truth. He twisted God's words.

"Eve, is it really true that God said you couldn't eat off of ANY of the trees?" [paraphrase]

In twisting God's word, he sought to twist Eve's memory and perspective. She went from delighting in the glory of God's abundant provision, to focusing on the one thing she couldn't have.

With twisted words, the devil manipulated Eve. He tempted her to lose focus of the abundance of God's gift and his loving provision and to center her focus instead on the one thing God had prohibited.

With his calculating words, he sought to paint God in a bad light. He made it appear that if God had really cared for her, he would have given her everything she wanted. Adam and Eve believed Satan. They trusted his words, and in so doing, they doubted God's intentions. They lost faith in Him.

And this is Satan's MO. This is how he works. He finds ways to undermine and question God's words and rule over our lives so that we lose trust in God.

While we served as missionaries in Peru, we were part of a faithful group of believers that we considered our family. We worshipped together, we ate in one another's homes and worked hard at growing the church.

When we believed it was time for our family to return to the US, our hearts were heavy and there were many tears shed. Then on the day before we got on the plane to leave Peru, I received a phone call from one of our church members, furious at us. Someone had spread a lie that we were leaving Peru with all the church's money.

That one lie turned nearly the whole congregation against us in an instant and some of the sweetest ladies of our congregation turned into some of the most aggressive people I've known. They believed the lie hook, line and sinker.

With just one lie, the twisting of the truth, five years of our lives, sacrifice and relationships were tainted.

This is the devil's work. He finds ways to twist the truth and undermine credibility. And he does this in our lives all the time.

We face unexpected situations. We are sinned against or attacked. We lose money, investments, jobs or friendships. Relationships get strained and we suffer. What does Satan do? Satan seeks to use all these trials to undermine God's work. To twist God's words and twist his actions so that we lose trust in him. To make us think: why is God doing this to me? Rather than trust him implicitly.

We see that here in this section of Matthew as well.

If you remember, just a verse before our section, we read that Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist. As Jesus came up out of the waters, heaven opened and the Spirit of God came down upon Jesus like a dove and a voice came from heaven saying,

"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." [Mt. 3:17]

The Spirit of God visibly came down to Jesus and God the Father said audibly, "***this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.***"

Before we go any further, let's take a second to reflect on this incredible moment. Does it get any more beautiful than this? A Father declaring he is well pleased with his BELOVED Son, for all the world to hear?

God the Father declares to Jesus that he loves him and is so pleased with who he is.

The main point of this passage isn't that parents should tell their kids they love them, but of course we should. Satan twists things and tempts our kids to believe that they are unloved. Even if it embarrasses them, they need to know how much you love them – just as we all have needed to know how much our parents have loved us.

But let's return to Jesus' baptism. Jesus has just received the Spirit of God and the Father declares his love and joy in Jesus. The heavens have opened up and everyone has just heard how much the Father loves Jesus.

And then, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness. Wait, what?

And not just into the wilderness, but into the deserted regions in order TO BE TEMPTED BY THE DEVIL.

What is going on? Why was Jesus going to the desert to be tempted by the devil? The Father had just said he was pleased with Jesus. He just expressed that Jesus was his beloved Son. Then he leads him off into the desert? I don't care how much theology you know; this seems confusing.

Of course, if we look back to the OT Scriptures, the same thing happened with Israel. God freed the people from Egyptian slavery with his strong and mighty hand. And in that act, he demonstrated his love for them. But even as he demonstrated his love, we immediately read that instead of taking them to a nearby land, or taking them directly into the land of promise, he led them the long way through the wilderness. [Ex. 13:17-18]

God led them the long way....and they spent 40 years in the wilderness where the Israelites faced many temptations.

They longed for bread, they longed for water and rather than waiting on God and the promise land he had promised them, they bowed down and worshipped idols they had created. They complained and grumbled and tested the Lord. Israel failed to remain faithful to God in her time of testing.

And then here we come to Jesus, being led by God, into the wilderness to be tested. Jesus not only humbles himself to the point of becoming man, but he also submits himself to true suffering.

We read that Jesus fasted for 40 days and 40 nights, and he was hungry.

Being the God-man, he could have solved that problem immediately. But he who with two fish and five loaves fed the 5,000 with twelve baskets full of leftover food, would not use his power to benefit himself.

The God-man could have bypassed all the suffering that he was to undergo on the cross. He could have brought down angels to destroy his enemies and could have destroyed the devil forever with one single word. Jesus used "his powers to provide food for multitudes, but these were special and exceptional occasions. There was no use of his powers for his own gratification...." [Morris, 75; Carson, 112]

Instead, he suffered, and he was hungry. He experienced testing and unlike Israel, he persevered. And I think one of the reasons this passage is recorded for us in the gospel is because we really need to know that Jesus truly suffered. That he chose to undergo suffering in this world in a real way, without using divine power to make it easier for himself. In this life he truly hungered, experienced real pain, and suffered intensely.

RC Sproul argues that we are often tempted to downplay Jesus' suffering. We know that it is impossible for God to sin and to be tempted, so we rationalize that it was never really possible for Jesus to sin. He explains:

"Theologians argue that it was impossible for God to sin. However, God incarnate has two natures (divine and human) and though we cannot divide them, we must distinguish them. During his lifetime, Jesus got hungry, he sweated and he died. Those are manifestations of his human nature not his divine nature. God does not sweat." [Sproul, 36]

Sproul goes on to explain that if we think that “Jesus’ divine nature so overshadowed His human nature so has to make it impossible for him to sin, we have slipped into monophysitism, an old lethal heresy in which divine attributes are imputed to the human nature.” “Moreover”, he adds, “if Jesus had been incapable of sinning, the temptations in the wilderness would’ve been nothing but a sham.” [Sproul, 36]

Sproul is arguing this because Jesus was both 100% God and 100% man. And in his humanity nature, which is not divided from, but distinguished from his divine nature, we must realize that the same Jesus who felt hunger, who sweat, who wept and slept, also suffered intensely in the wilderness. His divine power did not lessen his suffering.

This is critically important because Jesus’ suffering takes on new meaning when we realize he truly was hungry when Satan came to test him after 40 days of fasting and loneliness.

The hunger must have been terribly intense. And Satan knowing the struggle he was facing, went to him and tempted him to give up the fasting and to seek immediate relief. He took the Father’s words in the previous section and twisted them again with these three temptations:

1. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” [v.3]
(Twist: The Son of God should not need to suffer hunger)
2. “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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” (Twist: The Son of God does not suffer injury)
3. And finally, the devil “showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. 9 And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”
(Twist: The Son of God should have everything he wants right now)

In these three testings, the devil is doing the same thing. He is twisting God’s promises in Scripture. The devil seeks to undermine God’s sovereign care for Jesus. He tries to connect suffering with abandonment.

Since you are the Son of God, why are you suffering? You are God’s Son. You should just use your power to make bread. That is a natural need – you aren’t being greedy. You should just create some bread now. There are some decent rocks over there that would work just right. You shouldn’t have to suffer as God’s Son, and you don’t have to endure the cross. I can just give you all the kingdoms of the world right here and right now. [Morris, 73]

Satan offers Jesus immediate relief, and victory over present sufferings. Immediate results, rather than patient endurance and reliance on God and his timing and in his ways. Worldly treasures rather than heavenly ones.

Jesus, deeply hungry, refuses the devil’s temptations. He knows that God’s testing in this world does not mean God has abandoned him. Rather, he trusts that he is being perfected.

And as Scripture teaches us, although Jesus was God's son, "he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation..." [Heb. 5:8-9]

Jesus does not only obey, but he fulfills God's law perfectly. He is faithful and obedient where Israel and Adam had failed. He fulfills all righteousness. And this act is absolutely essential to our salvation.

In many of the Roman Catholic churches throughout South America you see statues of Jesus nailed to the cross and emphasizing his death. We, on the other hand have an empty cross, pointing to Jesus no longer being on the cross, but risen from the dead.

But what we miss perhaps in all of this is that it was not just his death, and/or his resurrection, but his active and faithful obedience to God's word throughout Jesus' life that was necessary for our salvation.

As one theologian writes, "The redemption that Christ accomplished for us was not achieved by death alone. He took our sin and achieved righteousness on our behalf. ***His perfect obedience is as necessary to our salvation as his death on the cross.***" [Sproul, 34]

While Adam was in the garden surrounded by fruit and brought the human race into sin, Jesus was hungry, and in the wilderness, yet he refused to give in to the devil's offers.

Jesus obeys God's law perfectly in a way that we could not.

And while Jesus saves us through his perfect obedience, we are reminded that while we are in this world we will continue to suffer.

Now, if you are like me, and I most of you are in this respect, you are probably somewhat suffering-averse. It is a rare sort of person who when purchasing plane tickets, he searched for the one seat in small distance of the lavatories, which also happens to have no ability to recline.

There is a reason why planes can make hundreds and sometimes thousands more for people to sit in a seat that is just slightly more comfortable with just a little more leg room and all the "free drinks" you could want. It is because we love comfort and hate suffering. But that is the expectation of the Christian's life on this earth.

James writes extensively about the trials that Christians will certainly face. Jesus reminds us that we will be persecuted just as he was. The lives of Christians throughout the Bible are, from a worldly perspective, those most to be pitied. For they suffer great persecution.

After all, it was the Holy Spirit who led the Israelites into the wilderness, and the Holy Spirit who led Jesus, God's very own Son, his beloved Son, 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness to be tested.

We see, throughout the Scriptures a pattern of testing in all of God's children.

We think of King David wrestling with the sins of his son Absalom, and the death of his infant child.

We remember the wars and rivalry between Jacob and Esau.

We think of Joseph being abused and sold by his brothers into slavery, then with Potiphar's wife and later imprisonment.

We think of the trials of Daniel in the lion's den.

Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego in the fiery pit.

Jonah in the belly of a whale.

Steven being stoned to death for teaching the truth.

The persecution of the Christians of the early church.

Paul being stoned to the edge of death.

Righteous Job and the loss of his entire family.

Even though we see the people of God suffering severe difficulties, and though we see even Jesus, God's own beloved Son, in whom he was truly pleased, suffering somehow, when we experience suffering, we believe Satan's lies and think God hates us.

Are we truly his sons? Does he actually love us? When we suffer, the devil twists God's word and makes us feel foolish, inadequate and unworthy of his love. It is not hard to imagine ourselves thinking the way one commentator writes:

We work hard to follow Jesus faithfully, "and then realize that He's led us into the wilderness instead of a garden. We feel that He's led us into a trap, and we are tempted to look elsewhere for our help. We are tempted to seek to live by bread alone and not by the word of God. When we are in the wilderness, we are tempted to test God.

If God is God, we say, He should be here. He should intervene. We are tempted to question whether God is among us or not. Prove yourself, we demand of God. And we are tempted to abandon Jesus for some other Master. When God leads us into the wilderness, it seems that we have no good reason to serve Him. We're not getting much out of it. Following Jesus just brings us difficulty and pain. Perhaps another Master will do us better." [Leithart, 94]

Satan seeks to tempt us in this way. To think along these lines about the suffering that we are enduring in this life.

But the same God and Father who says of Jesus, "you are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased", also says the same of us as we trust in him. In Jesus, we too "have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God....

17 and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." [Romans 8:15-17] [1 John 3:1]

As much as the devil seeks to confuse us and twist our thinking. The truth of the Christian life is that we will suffer, and this is part of God's plan. He leads us to it.

But the beauty of this passage, is that the same Jesus whose eye is on the sparrow and the lilies of the field, who cares for the orphan and the widow, who has sustained all believer's past, present and future, cares about your present suffering. And he not only cares about it, but he knows what it feels like to be in our very situation. He is our high priest who intercedes for us. Who has gone through the intense suffering we are enduring. [Heb 4:15]

And even so, we might think to ourselves, since he cares about us, why doesn't he do something about our situation? He is doing something. It is just not immediate. Why doesn't he put an end to our suffering? He will.

Back when I was a young lad, we had a terrible soccer team. We were literally the worst. Well, actually, we were second to the worst. Because a team joined after us and had one less game played than us and couldn't catch up.

But eventually my dad hired a coach for our team. And man did he work us hard. I remember him pushing us to run miles and miles. To climb these massive stadium stairs with people on our shoulders (very unsafe by the way). He would push us to do these drills that never ended, and I remember almost blacking out nearly passing out one day.

I was really frustrated at the process. I didn't like how hard he was pushing us, and I remember thinking to myself, "what is the point of all this anyway?! Soccer isn't even fun anymore!"

It wasn't fun anymore. It was work. And coach was pushing us to the limit so we would get rid of all our bad habits, so that we would develop strength and endurance and so that we could persevere.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus didn't come to this world to help us have fun and to sit in more comfortable seats. He came to win the lost. To defeat sin and Satan. To reconcile us with the Father and to make us righteous and holy.

And the way to do that is through trials. Through peeling away our outer self, and being renewed in the inner self day by day. As we go through the fiery trials our earthly desires are being stripped away and destroyed. Our earthly desires are being stripped away.

"...We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. 5:4 For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, **so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life**. 5 He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. [2 Cor. 4:18 -5:5]

I know this is hard, *I know only the tip of the iceberg* of the afflictions that you face every, single, day. Some of you have seriously difficult and debilitating health conditions, others of

you are working through intense broken family challenges, others of you struggle with your work life or with your relationships at church. There is so much more beneath the surface than we all know. Deep spiritual struggles, difficult addictions and even deep loneliness.

Satan wants you to see only those struggles. He wants you to see only your pain and your suffering. He wants to distract you from seeing that God's hand is doing something good. How God is clothing you and preparing you for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison with the momentary afflictions that you face.

So, when your world shakes, or the wilderness intensifies, or the valley grows darker, know that the Spirit has not only so ordained that trial to bring you closer to him, but has led you to it. And the same Spirit that leads us into the trials is the same Spirit that has been given to us as a guarantee to sustain us in them and grow us. To clothe us with his righteousness and life. Our suffering takes us to Him.

We know this is how God loves us, his children because Jesus his beloved Son himself walked through the wilderness to be perfected.

Greater things come after the suffering, not before. These trials are preparing us for our heavenly home.

So, as you face them, I encourage you to rebuke the longing for instant and easy fixes of physical bread, empty earthly satisfaction and temporary health.

Rather, hold fast. Remaining steadfast under trial, trusting in the truth of God's promises, that when you have stood the test you will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. [James 1:12]

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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