

# The Deceiver

Matthew 4:1-11

It was a few minutes before the service in a small country church. Everyone was sitting in their pews chatting, waiting for the pastor. Suddenly, Satan appeared at the front of the church. Everyone started screaming and running for the front entrance, trampling each other in a frantic effort to get away from evil incarnate.

All except one elderly gentleman who sat calmly in his pew, quite oblivious to the fact that God's ultimate enemy was in his presence.

So Satan walked up to the old man and said "Don't you know who I am?"

The man replied, "Yep, sure do."

"Aren't you afraid of me?" Satan asked.

"No." said the man.

"Don't you realize I can kill you with one word?" asked Satan.

"Don't doubt it for a minute," the man replied, unmoved.

"Did you know that I could cause you profound, horrifying, agony for all eternity?" persisted Satan.

"Yep," was the calm reply.

"And you're still not afraid?" asked Satan.

"Nope," said the old man.

Now, *Satan* was a bit worried, so he asked, "Well, why aren't you afraid of me?"

Calmly the man replied, "Been married to your sister for 48 years."

Martin Luther once said the best way to drive out the devil, if he won't yield to texts of Scripture, is to make fun of him.

The devil is the first face Jesus meets on his ministry. But what are we to make of him . . . or her?

In his book, *The Screwtape Letters*, CS Lewis wrote there are two errors we fall into when it comes to the devil. The first is to disbelieve in his existence. The second is to believe, but to have an excessive and unhealthy interest in him".

The first error is to discount the devil altogether . . . decide that he doesn't exist . . . that we're too advanced, or modern, or enlightened to believe in Satan. But, God's word tells us the devil is real. God's word *also* tells us that the only power the devil has is the power God allows him to have. So, the second error is to find the devil at work behind every little thing that seems to go wrong, or that we do wrong. Satan doesn't deserve that credit . . . we human beings are quite capably of sinning all by ourselves!

The devil is interested in bigger things anyway; he doesn't really care if we can't keep away from chocolate, or if tell a few lies, he's after bigger fish. His battle is with God. So, if he can get us to turn away from God, to believe in anything else but God, he has won the battle.

And that's his intention when he comes to Jesus in the wilderness. Jesus is the biggest fish of all! God's Son! Satan knows who Jesus is. He knows if he can turn Jesus, victory is his!

The temptations the devil places before Jesus aren't ones we are likely to face. We aren't likely to be tempted to turn stones in to bread, or throw ourselves off a tall building in order to test our faith, or even worship Satan (although people do fall into that temptation), but those three temptations are really just variations on an old theme – the one great temptation, both for Jesus and ourselves. It is the original temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: Eat the fruit. 'God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God' (Gen 3:5). The temptation is to take God's place – to disregard the will of God.

Will Jesus stay committed to the will of God? Will we stay committed to God's will for our lives, or will we go our own way, disregarding what God wants for us? That's the original and greatest temptation we face. God's will, or our own?

"Jesus was hungry"! Now there's an understatement! After 40 days and forty nights without food I'd be hungry too! Hungry! Famished! Starving! Ravenous! What Jesus would have given for something to eat! "Well, you can have something to eat", says the tempter, "just turn these stones into bread and there's your lunch! Problem solved".

Who's most important? You have to look after number one. It's the temptation to selfishness. Don't worry about anyone else, especially God, just worry about yourself. Especially when times are not going so good. It's tempting to think God hasn't really provided as he promised. Perhaps God has even gone against his word.

We succumb to that temptation all the time. Selfishness. Looking after number one. But, Jesus didn't succumb. He points the devil back to God and God's Word. God is the most important. God is the one who can be relied on. God will supply everything needed for life. And God does.

So, the devil takes a different tack. This time he even uses God's word as the basis of temptation. Just as the serpent twisted God's word in the Garden, so now the devil twists God's word here. "Since you're God's son, throw yourself of this tower and God will make sure you don't even stub your toe". Jesus has shown his great faith in God by resisting the first temptation, so now devil's second temptation asks for a demonstration of that great faith. "Let me see how great your faith is! Prove it to me!"

Now, there's a subtle temptation. It's subtle because faith is *supposed* to be visible. "You will know them by their fruits". The fruits of faith are there for others to see, but they were never intended as *proofs* of faith. The temptation, then, is to focus on our faith rather than the object of our faith. Then, our faith can become a matter of pride. It's easy to become religious hypocrites like the Pharisees.

We need to remember, the strength of our faith doesn't rest in the faith itself, but in the object of our faith. That's where the glory should go. Jesus resisted the temptation by giving the glory back to God. Jesus knew where his strength came from. Later he *would* give a powerful demonstration of his trust in God, but it would be because of God's will rather than Satan's will, or his own. Jesus would take that leap of faith when he went to the cross. "Not my will, but your will be done".

The third temptation seems the most blatant and obvious of all, but it is one of the hardest temptations for us to deal with in this day and age. The devil offers Jesus everything! The whole universe, and he seems to

ask for only a small thing in return: just bow down and worship me. Jesus' temptation was to bow to the will of Satan. Our temptation is to bow to the will of the world, or society, or even the 'common good'.

Does the end always justify the means?

If you could have total power to direct the affairs of the world and with that power you could accomplish so many good things in the world, what does it matter where the power comes from?

The temptation is strong to take that sort of thinking into our faith journey. But, God's Word doesn't always sit neatly with the word of the world. What the world says is good may not be what God says is good. What we think is good may not be what God says is good. And, sometimes it's not so easy to work out which is which.

But, Jesus was in no doubt. Pointing to God's word he sends Satan away. But, this doesn't mean the devil gives up on Jesus . . . no, during his whole ministry Satan was in his ear . . . right to the cross . . . as Jesus hung there . . . facing the greatest temptation of all . . . to come down from the cross . . . or, to call down God's armies . . . to distrust God the Father. But Jesus, hung there and died . . . and said to his Father: "Into *your* hands I commend my spirit". He trusted to the end . . . for our sake . . . he won the victory over temptation for our sake.

So, even now, as we battle with temptation . . . especially the temptation to think we don't really need God . . . in Christ . . . through baptism . . . Jesus' victory is ours . . . the tempter will not separate us from God . . . that's God's promise . . . that's God's word.

Amen

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