

3/15/26 The Mountain of Temptation: Winning the Battle Before It Begins
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This June, I hope to attend my 40th college reunion, at Colby College in Waterville, Maine. When I was a student at Colby, I was an undisciplined procrastinator. I often put off studying until I had a test coming at me like a freight train going downhill. Then, with energy and concentration driven by desperation, I applied myself to studying. While I did okay grade-wise, I didn't learn nearly as much as I would have if I had studied daily in a disciplined way. I also had a lot more stress, as a result.

In my last semester, I needed to take – and pass – six courses to have just enough credits to graduate. That may not sound too hard, but I was playing baseball, I had already been accepted to graduate school on a scholarship, I was the Head Resident of a large dormitory, and I was dating Jill. There was a lot to distract me from my studies.

As the semester neared its conclusion, there was a moment when, suddenly, a terrifying thought crossed my mind: if I flunked one of my finals badly enough that it caused me to fail a class, I wouldn't have enough credits to graduate. Everything I had done for almost four years to prepare for the future would be out the window. I'd be ashamed. My family would be embarrassed. Goodbye scholarship to Boston University School of Theology. My whole future would be derailed in an unpleasant way.

Now, because I was, as I said, a procrastinator, this thought didn't occur to me until about three days before finals started – but boy did I study hard from then on! Fortunately, I passed all of my tests, received my degree, got my scholarship, graduated from seminary, married Jill, and the rest is history.

That moment, in finals week, is buried forty years in my past, but if I had failed one of those tests, my future would have been dramatically altered – and not for the good. Have you ever had a moment in your life like that? A moment when it felt like everything depended on what happened next? A moment when you knew: *this test, this decision, will shape the rest of my life*. Many of us have had experiences like that. And Jesus did, too.

According to the gospel of Matthew, just before today's passage, Jesus has the extraordinary experience of being baptized. The heavens open. The Spirit of God descends like a dove. And a voice from heaven says: ***“This is my beloved Son, with***

whom I am well pleased.” You might expect a celebration after that – maybe a family dinner, some congratulations, a moment to enjoy the affirmation with friends. But instead, immediately after this moment, the Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Sometimes, one of life’s greatest moments is followed by one of life’s greatest tests.

Listen to *Matthew 4:1–11*.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, ***‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’*** But he answered, ***‘It is written, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’***”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying 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, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”’*** Jesus said to him, ***‘Again it is written, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”’***”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, ***‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’*** Jesus said to him, ***‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.”’*** Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.”

As we continue our **Mountains of God** series, today, we find Jesus on the **Mountain of Temptation**, and our theme is: **Winning the Battle Before It Begins**. Someone who wants to run a marathon can’t just wake up on the morning of the race and decide to run 26 miles. You could try – but it would be brutal. Olympic athletes understand this even better. None of them show up at the Olympics, expecting to compete with the best in the world, without years of disciplined preparation. They train. They sacrifice, in terms of what they eat and don’t eat. They give up time with loved ones. They push themselves, physically and mentally, beyond what most people are willing to endure. Why? Because they understand something important: **the battle is often won before the contest begins.**

Preparation in the present shapes victory in the future. That principle is true in athletics. And it's also true in the spiritual life.

Before we walk through Jesus' experience, we should acknowledge that this passage assumes something important — that there's a spiritual dimension to life. Jesus is led by the Spirit, and tempted by the devil. The Greek word used here, *diabolos*, refers to a spiritual adversary opposed to God's good purpose for creation and humanity. If you're not sure what you believe about a spiritual dimension of life, that's okay. I simply invite you to listen to the story, as Matthew tells it, and consider the dynamics at work. Let's start with this – **the devil, like God, comes to us through our thoughts and perceptions.** The voice of temptation is opposed **in spirit and content** to God's Word of inspiration. The battle at hand is between the voice of temptation and the Word of God in Jesus' life.

The setting for this story is the wilderness. And that setting matters. In the Old Testament, the wilderness was the place where Israel was tested. After God delivered them from Egypt, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years. During that time, they repeatedly failed to trust God. They complained about food. They doubted God's presence. They questioned whether God would provide. Now, Jesus enters the wilderness for forty days, just as Moses spent forty days on the mountain with God. Matthew is showing us something profound: Jesus is reliving Israel's story — but where Israel failed, Jesus remains faithful. The same Spirit who descended on Jesus at his baptism now leads him into this time of testing. God allows the test. The devil attempts to turn it into a temptation, and seeks to tempt Jesus in three areas – **appetite, applause, and allegiance.**

The first two temptations begin the same way: ***“If you are the Son of God...”*** **The devil attacks Jesus at the level of his identity.** Temptation often begins the same way, in our lives — by planting doubt about who we are and whose we are. Doubt, insecurity, or fear can make us vulnerable to temptation.

The first temptation concerns something very basic, an area of legitimate need, a basic human appetite: hunger. After fasting for forty days, Jesus is famished. Notice that it's after forty days, when Jesus is physically weakened and hungry, that the adversary shows up. When we're weak, we may be more vulnerable. The devil says, ***“If you are the Son of God, command these stones to***

become loaves of bread.” On the surface, that doesn’t seem unreasonable. Jesus has the power. Why not use it? But the deeper temptation is this: **use your power to serve yourself instead of trusting God.** Jesus responds by quoting from the Book of Deuteronomy: *“One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Deuteronomy 8:3).* When Israel was in the wilderness, they complained constantly about food. They doubted that God would provide. Jesus does the opposite. He trusts the God. The first temptation is about **appetite**, about satisfying legitimate needs in the wrong way or at the wrong time. But the devil isn’t finished.

The second temptation moves from appetite to **applause**. The devil takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, ***“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.”*** This time, the devil quotes Scripture, since Jesus did — *Psalm 91:11-12* to be precise — about angels protecting God’s people. This teaches us something important. Just because someone can quote Scripture doesn’t mean they’re holy or trustworthy. The devil can quote Scripture. There are people who can hold a Bible, quote the Bible, and use the Bible to justify what they want — but that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re following Jesus. **The real test of faith is not how well someone quotes Scripture, but how faithfully they live it.**

In this temptation, the devil is trying to get Jesus to force God’s hand — to stage a dramatic display that would prove his identity and impress the crowd. Some people can’t resist the temptation of praise and the desire for popularity; they hunger for applause and for people to tell them how great and amazing they are, even more than they hunger for food. But Jesus doesn’t need any of that. Again, he turns to Scripture, and says: *“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”* Real faith doesn’t manipulate God. Real faith trusts God.

The first temptation was about appetite. The second temptation is about applause and approval. The third temptation goes even deeper. It’s about **allegiance and ambition.**

The devil takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. *“All these I will give you, if you fall down and worship me.”* **This is the temptation of power.** Jesus came to establish God’s kingdom. One day, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. But the path to that kingdom will go through suffering and the cross. The devil offers a shortcut: power without

obedience, glory without sacrifice. Jesus refuses. He says, “*Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’*” With that, the devil leaves him.

Something deeply important is happening in this story. In the beginning of the Bible, Adam faced temptation in a garden filled with abundance — and he failed. Israel faced temptation in the wilderness — and they failed, again, and again. But Jesus faces temptation in the wilderness and remains faithful. Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeds. Where Israel failed, Jesus succeeds. **Jesus shows us what faithful obedience looks like.** But this story is not only about Jesus — it also speaks to us.

Temptation is still part of the human experience. It may involve money, status, power, or the desires of the flesh. Some people, tragically, give in to all of them. Sometimes we blame the object of temptation, rather than accepting responsibility for our own choices. But temptation doesn’t come from the object. **The Bible is clear that temptation grows out of the desire within us.** What is a temptation to one person is nothing at all to someone else. The object could be the same; the difference is within each person.

Flying back from the Pastors’ Colloquium on March 6, I watched the movie “Springsteen: Deliver Me from Nowhere” about rock and roll legend Bruce Springsteen. One of his songs is “Pink Cadillac”, which includes the lyrics, “Way back in the Bible, temptation’s always going on, there’s always somebody tempting somebody else into doing something they know is wrong. Well they’ll tempt you man with silver, they’ll tempt you sir with gold, they’ll tempt you with the pleasures that the flesh does surely hold. They tell me Eve tempted Adam with an apple, but I ain’t goin’ for that, I love you for your pink Cadillac.” We can say we’re tempted by money, sex, power, or material things outside ourselves, even by a pink Cadillac, but temptation comes from within.

The Letter of James says, “*When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, **nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death***” (James 1:13-15 NIV).

The good news is that temptation, itself, is not sin. Church reformer Martin Luther wrote, “You can’t stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can prevent

them from building a nest in your hair.” Jesus was tempted; yet he did not sin. And even when we fail, God doesn’t stop loving us. But overcoming temptation requires intentional spiritual preparation. Remember how Jesus responds to each moment of testing. **“It is written.”** The Word of God shapes his thinking, anchors his identity, and guides his response.

Many of us have seen the movie “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade”. Near the end of the film, Indiana Jones must pass three dangerous tests to reach the Holy Grail. One wrong step, and the result is deadly. Life can feel that way sometimes. The tests may not be as dramatic as a movie scene, but the choices we make still matter.

Jill told me something about when she was a child in school. Another student said, “If you do this, I’ll be your best friend.” Jill thought, “You don’t decide whether you’re my best friend. That’s my decision.”

The devil tries something similar with Jesus. *“If you fall down and worship me, I’ll give you everything.”* I’ve heard preachers talk about this as if what the devil says here is true. Jesus says, in **John 8:44 (ESV)**, that the devil, *“does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”* People who lie consistently speak out of their own character, as Jesus says. The devil saying he has the power to give all these things to Jesus is a lie. It’s not true; **Jesus isn’t taken in because Jesus knows who he is, and he knows whom he serves.**

At the heart of this story is a simple but profound question: **Who will we worship?** Who will we trust? Who will shape our lives? Who will we ultimately serve? Will we serve ourselves, our physical desires, our appetites? Will we give in to the temptation of applause, popularity, and the praise of others to feed our ego? Will we sacrifice our character in the pursuit of power? Sadly, there are always people who do, even people who claim to be following Jesus. Jesus makes his answer clear: **“Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.”**

Life will bring unexpected temptations. Sometimes, they appear suddenly, like black ice on a winter road. You can be traveling along a familiar road, feeling confident, when suddenly, the conditions change, and the car begins to slide. That’s why spiritual attentiveness matters. We must remain aware of our lives, our desires, and our relationship with God. Temptation, itself, is not sin — yielding is. The good news is that

we don't face these struggles alone. Jesus has already faced temptation — and overcome it. He succeeded where Adam failed. He succeeded where Israel failed. Through his grace, he empowers us to live faithful and holy lives, as well.

Winning the battle against temptation doesn't begin in the moment of crisis. It begins long before that. It begins in the quiet habits of faith — in solitude and fasting, in prayer, in Scripture, in worship, in loving relationships that provide trust and accountability, and in the daily decision to trust God. When we learn to do those things consistently, **we begin to win the battle before it even begins.**

Prayer: Holy and Merciful God, thank You for showing us, in Jesus, what faithfulness looks like in the face of temptation. Thank you that Jesus understands weakness, hunger, pressure, and testing. Help us to recognize the subtle ways we are tempted — especially in moments of need, insecurity, or ambition. Anchor us in your truth, the way Jesus was anchored in Scripture. Give us discernment to resist shortcuts, courage to trust your timing, and confidence in our identity as your children. And when we stumble, remind us that your grace is greater and your mercy is new every morning. We rely on you, not on our own strength. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Blessing: *James 1:2-4*, “Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but **joy**, because you know that the **testing** of your faith produces **endurance**; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be **mature and complete**, lacking in nothing.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What stands out to you most about Jesus being led into the wilderness?
2. What patterns do you notice in the three temptations?
3. How does Jesus respond to each temptation — and what can we learn from that?
4. What lies is Satan trying to plant — especially about identity and trust?
5. What does this passage teach us about shortcuts versus obedience?
6. How does Jesus' victory here give us hope in our own temptations?