

Engaging the Enemy

Matthew 4:1-11

This morning I am led to speak on the topic, *Engaging the Enemy*, the enemy being Satan of course. None of us have ever seen him, but every one of us has had to deal with him. Temptation is the universal experience of mankind including saints and scoundrels. None of us are exempt! The magazine *Discipleship Journal* asked its readers to rank the areas of greatest spiritual challenge to them. The results came back in this order:

1. Materialism
2. Pride
3. Self-centeredness
4. Laziness
5. Sexual Lust
6. Envy
7. Gluttony
8. Lying

The respondents also noted that temptations were more potent when they had neglected their time with God (81 %) and when they were physically tired (57%). They also reported that resisting temptation was best accomplished by prayer (84%), and by avoiding compromising situations (76%).

Let me hasten to say that to be tempted is not to sin. In fact, the strongest attacks are often made on the strongest saints. My own experience is that I cannot engage the enemy of my soul without Christ. And I know that I am not alone. Oscar Wilde once said, “I can resist everything except temptation.”

Mark Antony was known as the “silver throated orator of Rome.” He was a brilliant statesman, magnificent in battle, courageous, and strong. And he was handsome. As far as personal qualities are concerned, he could have become a world ruler. But he had the very vulnerable and fatal flaw of moral weakness, so much so that on one occasion his personal tutor shouted into his face, “Oh Marcus, oh colossal child! Able to conquer the world, but unable to conquer yourself, unable to resist a temptation.”

It has been said that both rivers and men become crooked by following the line of least resistance. The best men have always known this, but they have also struggled with it. Thomas Watson observed this fact. He said:

“Who would have thought to have found adultery in David, or drunkenness in Noah, and cursing in Job? If God leaves man to himself, how suddenly and scandalously may sin break forth in the holiest man on earth! I say unto all, ‘Watch!’ A wandering heart needs a watchful eye.”

We may be self-deluded into thinking that we are immune from temptation. But a little self-examination and honesty quickly reveals that all of us are in a battle with the arch-enemy of our souls, and that if we are so foolish as to engage the enemy in our own strength, we lose. Thomas á Kempis warns us all of this fact:

“No one is so good that he is immune from temptation. We will never be entirely free from it ... There is no order so holy, no place so secret where there will be no temptation.”

So how do we deal with it? We face it squarely in the strength of the Lord. We yoke ourselves to Him, and together with Him we defeat Satan. The Scriptures show us that immediately after our Lord’s baptism, his ordination and commissioning if you will, he was led by the Spirit of God directly into the wilderness. The desert is the place of the first showdown between competing kingdoms and their rulers, between the figures who lay claim to the hearts and souls of men and women. Rather than retreat, Jesus marched into the wilderness to commune with the Father and to engage the enemy. This morning, I want to drive home a number of realities; things that are absolutely crucial for us to see if we are to triumph with Christ.

(1) First, understand that Satan is a real adversary. That’s what his name means, “adversary.” His Greek name, *diabolos*, means, “accuser.” The devil is not a symbolic being, not an emblem of our own propensity toward corruption. Anonymity is one of his most powerful and lethal weapons, and whenever he can get modern sophisticated man to disbelieve in his existence, Satan has won half the battle ...

“The devil is an intelligent, powerful spirit-being who is thoroughly evil and directly involved in perpetuating evil in the lives of individuals as well as on a much larger scale. He is not an abstraction, either as a personification of the inner corrupt self or in the sense of a symbolic representation of organized evil.” - Clinton Arnold

We must understand this. We have an arch-enemy who has us in his cross-hairs, who wants to destroy us – to destroy all humanity - because we are made in the image of God, whom Satan hates. So, as we see Jesus moving into the desert wilderness to engage Satan in battle, we begin to understand that “the battle line traced in the sands of the Judean desert is really a battle line in the sands of all time, because the outcome will have eternal implications for all of humanity” (Michael J. Wilkins). That’s the first reality: Satan is real and the battle is real. The cosmic chessboard is set, the pieces are moving, and the outcome is spiritual death to those who are unwary and unprepared.

(2) The second great reality in this passage of Scripture is that our Champion, Jesus, succeeds where the first man, Adam, failed. Think about this: Adam failed under the best of conditions, optimum conditions. He was in the Garden of Eden, which represents the ideal situation, an unfallen world. But he failed; he fell, and in his great fall he dragged all humanity down with him.

But look at Jesus, our champion! Where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded. And our Lord succeeded not in the best of conditions, but in the worst. Jesus was in no Eden, but in the wilderness! Moreover, our Lord had fasted for a lengthy period of time, and even in his weakened physical condition, He triumphed. Oh, I am just enthralled when I read this. Satan is no match for our Lord and Master – even when Jesus is physically at His lowest ebb! As powerful as Satan may be, and as frail as Jesus must have been because of the extended fasting and the intensity of the temptations, Jesus still vanquished him with a word – the Word of God!

Does that suggest to you that with Jesus we, too, can be victorious? Can we stand up to Satan and overcome him? The answer is a resounding “Yes!” if we are yoked with Jesus, if we have His Spirit living in us, if we have put on the helmet of salvation and the breastplate of righteousness, if we have taken the shield of faith and if we are wielding the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. We have tremendous encouragement, not only from our Lord’s unprecedented triumph over Satan, but

from what the Word of God tells us. James, brother of Jesus, and the apostles Peter and Paul have something to say to us:

“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

Listen to me! What Jesus did we can do! His only weapons were the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. We have the same weapons. But let us understand that unless we have Christ we have neither of these weapons. That great man of God, F.B. Meyer, said:

“I do not believe in sanctification, I believe in the Sanctifier; I do not believe in holiness, I believe in the Holy One. Not an it, but a Person; not an attribute, but Christ in my heart.”

If we want to be successful in resisting temptation, then we must be with Jesus, we must go where He goes and avoid places that are outside the will of God. A man went in to a doctor complaining that he had broken his arm in two places. The doctor’s reply: “Well then, stay out of those places!”

According to legend, there was once an island dominated by an Iron Mountain that emitted such powerful magnetic force that it attracted every piece of metal brought within the range of its influence. Ships at sea, passing near the shore, felt its force on their anchors and chains. If a ship drew closer, the attraction became stronger until finally the very nails flew from the vessel’s beams and planks, and fastened themselves to the side of the mountain. The ship would then fall to pieces with great loss of life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Call on God, but row away from the rocks!” John Jess said that, “To pray against temptations, and yet rush into occasions, is to thrust your fingers into the fire, and then pray they may not be burnt.”

It reminds me of the man who had an eating problem and decided that he would go off sweets until he had lost weight. But one morning he showed up at the office with a gigantic coffee cake.

“This is a very special coffee cake,” he explained. “I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a host of warm goodies. I felt this was no accident so I prayed, ‘Lord, if You want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let me have a parking place directly in front of the bakery.’ And sure enough,” he continued, “the eighth time around the block, there it was!”

Listen, my friends, the great lesson we can take from this portion of Scripture is this:

Resist the devil in the power of the Spirit of God, and through the guidance of the Word of God, to accomplish the will of God the Father.

That's exactly what Jesus did. He resisted the devil. He did so in the energy and power of the Holy Spirit; He used the Word of God to accomplish the will of God. So in our struggles we must always ask the question, "Is this in the will of God?" The Holy Spirit and the Word of God will give us our answer. And then our response to Satan must be, "No!"

Make no mistake about it. Satanic temptation is not always intrinsically evil. Often it's just out of the will of God. Turn these stones into bread? There is nothing intrinsically evil about turning stones into bread. But in that context there was, for it was out of the will of God. Jesus knew this – and He said, "No!"

Now let me finish with one final reminder that the power to resist Satan is not in us but in Christ. One final example:

There are atomic submarines built strong enough to batter through the ice at the North Pole. But they have a maximum "crush-depth" beyond which they may not go with safety. Some years ago, however, the submarine *Thresher* exceeded that depth. As the pressure increased, the seawater crushed the sub's heavy steel bulkheads as if they were made of cheap plastic. Searchers found only little pieces of that huge submarine.

Yet it is a curious fact that there are fish that live at the same depth in which the *Thresher* was crushed. How can they do it? How can they survive the crushing pressure? The answer is that by an ingenious design of the Creator they have equal pressure within themselves. Seems impossible, doesn't it? But this fact has been scientifically proven.

- Well, what God can do for a fish, He can do for us. We'll survive the crushing pressure of temptation if we have the supernatural power of Christ inside. And this power is available for you and me right now. Christ is here in this place. We are standing on holy ground. All that is required for us to successfully engage the enemy is our reliance on Christ.
- I said earlier that the battle line traced in the sands of the Judean desert, where Jesus engaged Satan in battle, is really a battle line drawn in the sands of all time, because the outcome will have eternal implications for all of humanity. That means it has implications for you and me right now.
- We must come down on the right side of that line, the side of Christ. He is our Champion! He is our victory!
- Jesus said, "Come to Me and take My yoke upon you ... for My yoke is easy and My burden is light!"
- Today the Lord would encourage us. He would say, "I will supply everything you need for life and for godly living! I AM strong and I have defeated your arch-enemy!"

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Points to Ponder

Top Eight Temptations:

1. Materialism
2. Pride
3. Self-centeredness
4. Laziness
5. Sexual Lust
6. Envy
7. Gluttony
8. Lying

Battle Keys:

Our Lord resisted the devil in the:

- Power of the *Spirit of God* ...
- Through the truth of the *Word of God* ...
- Thereby accomplishing the *Will of God*.