

Sermon February 18 from Luke 4:1-13

“Satan’s Game of Temptation”

I am always curious about articles written by the Christian research organization Barna Group, which provides data and insights on the trends affecting faith, culture, and ministry. As I began thinking and praying about today’s scripture, my curiosity brought me to an article from their archives dated April 13, 2009. I was curious about what most American Christians thought about Satan or the Holy Spirit. In 2009, only 47 percent believed the two existed. Then, in 2020, the third and latest report concluded that more Americans believe in Satan than believe in God and that more believe that Jesus was divine and a sinner than believe he is divine and sinless. Yikes! When asked about the existence of Satan, 56 percent said, “Satan is not merely a symbol of evil but is a real spiritual being and influences human lives.” The authors conclude, “Americans are now more confident about the existence of Satan than they are of God! Anyhow.

As we have read through this passage in Luke, what should stick out to us is that the devil recognizes Jesus as “the Son of God.” This title, the son of God, is important to both stories of Jesus’ baptism and temptation. The first son of God, we might think, created in the image of God, was Adam, who, like Jesus, was also tested. Both were tempted by food; in the case of Adam, it was fruit rather than bread, but nonetheless, food. Unlike Jesus, who was hungry at the end of forty days, Adam had plenty of food but failed the test of temptation. And unlike the first Adam, brought to eternal death through sin, Jesus is the last Adam who resisted repeated temptations and brought eternal life through sinless death.

In the previous chapters of Luke, Luke has given us clues to the evil forces at work in the world that will eventually affect Jesus, and the personification of evil is Satan, who now tries to sidetrack Jesus from his mission in Jerusalem but wait, Jesus is “full of the Holy Spirit.” The apostle Paul describes the Holy Spirit as the “sword of spiritual protection in God himself.” The author of Hebrews makes it clear that Jesus bore the devil’s temptations for our sake. In this text, Luke gives us three temptations that correspond to the temptations that Israel experienced in the wilderness: in verses 2-4, to make bread from stone. In verses 5-8, to gain the kingdoms of the world by worshipping the devil, and in verses 9-12, the devil tempted Jesus to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to force God to protect him. Before traveling on, let us pause for a moment of prayer.

Heavenly Father, Satan intends to steal, kill, and destroy us, but you give limitless mercy, abounding grace, and abundant life. Help us turn to you, the one who defeated all the devil's temptations. We need you, and we need you daily, and we need the Gospel truth daily. Please help us with the temptations that we will face. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.

Each of these temptations that Luke lays out for us contains a pitfall and a good reason to avoid all of them. If Jesus had succumbed to any of these temptations, he would be allowing the devil to set the agenda, meaning the devil would drive the car, and Jesus would be the passenger. It's no different than allowing the devil a seat at the table, but we would do well to learn Jesus' treatment of the three temptations that helped him and will help us to survive temptation—two not-so-secret secrets. The first is the Holy Spirit, who helps Jesus survive temptation, and the second is scripture. From his boyhood, Jesus learned the scriptures, and in response to each of the three temptations, the “sword of the Spirit” came to his defense. Without hesitation, Jesus knew the exact verse to counter the danger at hand.

We, too, have the same not-so-secret secrets at our disposal. After receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism, the scriptures are readily available through a wide range of bible translations, and how could we forget the endless knowledge at our fingertips through the internet and Bible software? However, what we lack is biblical literacy. The Bible in our hands is a toolbox in the hands of an unskilled laborer. However, we might not always be afforded extra time when temptation comes to destroy us and then move on. Like any soldier or sports player, we need to always be in training and ready in crunch time.

As we look deeper into the text, we can safely assume that for Luke, the Holy Spirit is the beginning of everything important. Keep in mind Luke was meticulous in his research and writing. The angel Gabriel explained to Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her. John the Baptist promised Jesus would be baptized with the Spirit and fire, then at Jesus' baptism, The Holy Spirit descended in bodily form as a dove on him. Jesus does not go into the wilderness alone, for he is full of the Holy Spirit, and then, at the conclusion of the temptations, Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus later proclaimed in the Nazareth synagogue that “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, and today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Later at Pentecost, we will read about Jesus' disciples, all filled with the Holy

Spirit. Let's take a closer look at the three temptations and the indicators of how not to fail when it comes to resisting temptation.

In both the Garden and the Wilderness, the devil uses God's very own words to offer his temptation. Adam and Eve knew the words God Spoke, commanding them not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but then what happened, the devil in the form of a serpent, turned those words back to them. They did not think about God and all God had already proven about his care toward them. God gave them everything they could ever need! Instead, they thought about having more, and so even in paradise, temptation comes, and we give in.

As we see in the garden, the sad irony is that what is promised to us often becomes the reason why we give into temptation. The first couple had everything, and yet they gave in because it would give them more of what God had already promised. So, the devil calls the same play out of his playbook, actually the one and only play in his playbook with Jesus.

First, the devil tempts Jesus to exploit his identity as the Son of God. Hey Jesus, are you hungry? Then, turn those stones into bread. Then, the devil tempts Jesus to take hold of his power and destiny so that people would give up on what is good and join his "team." Finally, the devil tempts Jesus to test God's promise of protection.

Here's the deal, folks. Contentment with what we have in life already belongs rightly to Christ, the Son of God. It is trusting in what God said. The seeds of discontent are things of the evil one, but it is God's word that guarantees us to be part of Christ's glory. Jesus already has the ultimate authority and power, which has been given to him by God the Father, who in turn can work miracles, but the devil wants him to exploit that power.

Jesus is already the Prince of Peace and the ruler of the Kingdoms of this world, yet the devil wants Jesus to abuse that power for his own safety and protection. Why is Jesus called the Prince of Peace? Because he restores every broken relationship, provides a well-ordered and balanced life, and offers the assurance of eternal life. Christ's sacrifice provides more for us than eternal peace. His sacrifice allows us to have a relationship with the Holy Spirit, the Helper who promises to guide us. The evil one, too, has power; he is the prince of power to manifest evil in the world through influencing people, but his power is limited in the world system in which we

exist because he is always under the sovereign control of God. The only way to escape the power and temptations of the devil is through the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, Jesus is the beloved Son of God, in whom the Father is well pleased; he has the Father's heart, yet the devil wants him to distrust that love and make the Father prove it. Essentially, tempting Jesus to go after what already belongs to him and what will be his, only more quickly than wisdom would lead him to it. In his wisdom, Jesus knows not only the words of Scripture but also the one who inspired them. He knows what they mean, and yet, unlike humans, Jesus is able to lift his mind, trusting in the word and work of the Father. There is a reason Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." He taught us to pray that God would not lead us into the time of testing our trust in God's word and work simply because it is so hard to live by faith and trust.

As we enter into this season of Lent, this time of trial that Jesus endured on our behalf serves as context. The context of the cross and incarnation are necessary for the source of our strength. We, too, can call upon the Holy Spirit to make us more like Christ, able to resist temptation. We, too, can commit ourselves to disciplines that help us to know the Spirit's infilling. We, too, can sacrifice and trust God's words and work are true. We can deny the devil and his shortcuts and pursue the wisdom ways of God. All of this, of course, proves difficult for us to submit to, and thus, Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." Nonetheless, Lent becomes about trying to do that very thing, to pray. We must remember that Luke points out that Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit, yet at the same time, Luke points out that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. This leaves a big question. Why does the Holy Spirit lead us into the wilderness just as he allowed the accuser to test Job? Simply this: to strengthen who we are as children of God and to make us realize that we have authority in Christ over every trial and temptation.

In closing, this season, and every season of Lent, becomes about recognizing our human weaknesses and the need for God's intervention. Remember that "One of the great truths of life, from which even the Son of God was not exempt on earth, is that after every victory comes temptation. God's Word warns, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." A vitally important truth for every follower of Christ to fully comprehend is the idea that one who is filled with the Spirit is controlled by the Spirit, and thus, when we as believers **are not** filled with or

by the Spirit, the only source of power is our natural strength. The Holy Spirit can help us identify and then address those wilderness temptations, and it is about asking the Spirit to fill us with the same strength and faith of Christ. Remember this: until Christ returns, both the temptations and the presence of God are with us. Lord, help us face our daily temptations and say no to the devil and his ways. Amen