

“Standing Firm”

Introduction: Have you seen the bumper sticker that begins, “Lead Me Not Into Temptation”? It ends, “I Can Find It By Myself!” Well, apparently, the Holy Spirit thought Jesus might need some help. So, after Jesus was baptized, we hear this: “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” Did you see that coming?! Did Jesus, I wonder, see that coming? I’m thinking he might have been hoping for some celebrating, for some coffee and cake and upbeat conversations following his baptism, not a forty day fast and some challenging temptations!

Last week, as we considered the baptism of Jesus, we noted how he declared his willingness to fully identify with sinful humanity by stepping into the water with us, explaining to John the Baptist, who was shocked to see Jesus coming to him to be baptized, “it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” His baptism, in other words, pointed ahead to the cross and the sacrifice Jesus would make on our behalf to reconcile us to God and start us on the path of living the life that is truly life. To carry out this mission, we read how Jesus was equipped with the power of the Spirit and the love of the Father.

But, how would Jesus use this equipment? Would he be faithful? Would he stay on the path of servanthood, or would he be tempted to serve himself? Would he be the savior that we need? Those seem to be the questions that lie behind the rather shocking direction Jesus heads right after his baptism. What are these temptations? How does he meet them? How is it helpful to us?

I. Facing Temptation

A. As we begin, what is temptation? It’s an enticement to make a choice that harms our relationship with God, with one another, or with our neighbor, or possibly with all three! Temptation is an attempt to have us go against the good purposes of God and pursue our own purposes. Now, as we think about the temptations Jesus faced, it’s important to notice that God does not do the tempting. Satan, or the devil, the one appropriately called the “tempter,” does. James, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, wants us to be clear about this. In his NT letter he writes:

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 (Jas. 1:13).

Three more observations are helpful to make here.

1. One is that temptation itself is not sin. Giving in to it is where the problems begin.
2. Two, while God does not tempt, he very well may test, even using our temptations as a testing ground. As James begins his letter: “Consider it pure joy my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials (lit. “temptations” the noun form) of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (1:2-4). In fact, the Greek word translated “tempted” can also be translated “tested.” Depending on the context, its purpose can either be to bring one down, or build one up.

3. Three, there is a personal force of evil at work in the world who is behind temptations, and who seeks to twist and destroy God's good purposes and lead his people astray. As Paul encourages the Ephesian church: "take your stand against the devil's schemes." He goes on to warn that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil (Eph. 6:11-12), the same force that Jesus met in the wilderness. What, specifically, did he need to stand against?

B. Notice that the tempter did not doubt who Jesus was. That Jesus was the Son of God was not in question. The question was: How would Jesus use his power? Would he use it to serve himself, or to serve us? So, the temptation to turn stones to bread was a temptation to doubt the Father's provision and pursue his own desires. The temptation to jump off the highest point of the temple and trust angels to rescue him was a temptation to manipulate the Father in a "if you love me you will do this for me" kind of way. And the temptation to receive the kingdoms of the world by worshipping Satan was a temptation to gain power and prestige by any means possible, the ends justifying the means. Put together, the tempter was seeking to lure Jesus to avoid the cross, to trying to go directly to Easter by skipping Good Friday. Had he done so, had he skipped over hanging on the cross in our place, Jesus would not have been the savior we needed, and his kingship would have been a sham.

How was Jesus able to stand firm in the face of such temptation? By using his equipment, resting in the love of the Father and drawing on the power of the Spirit. How do we see this?

II. Standing Firm

A. First, the love of the Father. It is often concluded that since Jesus had been fasting for 40 days that he must have been in a very weak state when the devil went after him. Yet I have never forgotten the observation of the late Dallas Willard when I heard him teach on this text. He said that rather than being weak, this period of fasting had actually made Jesus stronger. Yes, physically he was hungry. But spiritually he was strong because he had learned through practicing this discipline that he didn't need to give in to his desires, serving himself, to feel content and happy because there was "food" beyond that desire consisting of the Father's love and care for him. On that love he could feed and in that love he could rest. Through fasting we learn not how to "make it" without food, but how God cares for us when we don't feed our desires, whatever they may be. Compared to the Father's love, no temptation for Jesus measured up.

B. Second, Jesus stood firm as he wielded the power of the Spirit. We see this if we recognize that the Spirit didn't just drive Jesus out into the wilderness in his Jeep, open the passenger door and push Jesus out saying "See ya in 40 days!" The Spirit remained with Jesus as his Helper as Jesus wielded what Paul calls the "sword of the Spirit," which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17). Jesus meets each temptation with "it is written," followed by a promise of God from the book of Deuteronomy, which recorded how God was with his people Israel during their time in the wilderness, for 40 years, of which Jesus' 40 days was a kind of mirror, promises that had to do with the character and love of God.

C. Importantly, while Israel in her wilderness experience, grumbled for bread, flirted with idolatry, and constantly put God to the test, Jesus did not. It becomes evident here that another spiritual discipline Jesus had put in place in his life, in addition to prayer (which we saw at his baptism, Lk. 3:21), and fasting, was meditation on the scriptures, to the extent that they came to mind just when needed to fight off the lure of temptation. Such disciplines or practices are ways to open ourselves to God, to put ourselves in the arms of the Spirit so that he might be with us in helpful ways.

III. Helping Us

A. Not only is Jesus affirmed as the savior we need by virtue of his standing firm in the face of temptation, but he can also help us in those times when we find ourselves facing temptation. In principle, the temptations Jesus faced are common to all of us. They involve serving oneself, whether it's seeking revenge instead of offering forgiveness, or cheating on an exam, or being unfaithful to a spouse, or gossiping about a co-worker, or compromising our beliefs to conform to the culture around us, just to name a few. Temptations always put our felt wants and needs on center stage.

B. As Paul reflects on how Israel fell to temptation, and so was not able to be the blessing to the world that God had called her to be, he warns the church in Corinth with these sober yet hopeful words:

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. 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 endure it. [1 Cor. 10:11-13]

C. What is that way out? The writer of Hebrews directs us to look at Jesus:

...let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. [Heb. 4:14-16]

That mercy and grace can be found in the Father's love and in the Spirit's power, both of which are found in the word, the word the Spirit has inspired, and the Word made flesh in Jesus. I appreciate how Tom Wright, in his book, *Simply Christian*, speaks to the power of this word. He observes that when Jesus sent his followers out to share the story that Jesus was Israel's long-anticipated Messiah and the world's true Lord, it would've made little or no sense to their listeners. It would have been a stumbling block to Jews – who ever heard of a crucified Messiah? And it would've been foolishness to the Gentiles – there's only one God who has come to call the world to account and he also rose from the dead? Preposterous! [cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-25] Yet, they found that telling this story carried a power. It was not just a human word; it was a divine word that brought new life—born again—was how they explained it, and it then empowered that new life to grow and bear fruit.

May that very same word equip and enable us to stand firm in the Father's love and the Spirit's power no matter what trials and temptations come our way.