

IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD

Matthew 4:1-11

What tempts us? The old Lay's Potato Chip commercials convince you that you can't just eat one chip. One leads to another, then another, and so on. We look at something on our cell phone which leads to something else, and on and on. As men we look at an attractive woman, then it turns to more than just looking. We hear gossip and find how easy it is to share with someone else. When it is something that doesn't require too much effort for us to do, when we are convinced that no one will notice, when we convince ourselves that it isn't a big deal, then it is so tempting.

But notice how Jesus was tempted. We are told that He had fasted for 40 days. That is significant because the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after they had given in to temptation at Mt. Sinai to worship the golden calf instead of God. You might think that after 40 days Jesus would have been so famished that any promise of food would be so tempting. But we know that when people starve for several days the hunger is tremendous. Then the stomach shrinks and the hunger goes away. People who starve that long have to be almost forcibly fed. It wasn't the physical hunger that was tempting to Jesus when the devil said to him, "Tell these stones to change to bread." How would that be tempting to us? We can't turn stone to bread. How could that be so tempting?

But the devil began that temptation with the words, "If You are the Son of God?" He was not tempting Jesus because of Jesus' hunger, but because it would be tempting for Jesus to prove He is the Son of God. He did have the power to turn stone into bread. After all, He is the almighty God, who created the universe.

"If You are the Son of God" That is a temptation that Jesus faced daily. We see Jesus in His ministry doing miracles—healing the sick, chasing out demons, feeding the 5000, calming the storm, bringing the dead back to life. But Jesus never did any of this to prove a point. He always did it in response to human need. In Matthew 12 we read:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees told Jesus, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." But Jesus replied to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves a sign. Yet no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah, because just as Jonah was in the stomach of the sea creature for three days and three nights, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights.

Jesus was, of course, talking about His resurrection from the dead; but that was for the future. Right then and there He did nothing to prove to the Pharisees or to Himself that He is the Son of God.

“If You are the Son of God.” Why would that be a question for Jesus? He is God almighty. He knows everything, right? When we confess our faith in Jesus in the Apostle’s Creed we speak of His ministry on earth in two sections—His humiliation and exaltation. His humiliation is talked about in the words, “He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.” His exaltation is covered with the words, “He descended into hell (this was to proclaim His victory over evil on the cross), on the third day He rose again from the dead, He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father almighty.” This is based on St. Paul’s words in Philippians where he says:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

In Jesus’ humiliation, He refrained from using His power as God almighty. He did no miracles until His baptism when the Holy Spirit came upon Him, not to give Him faith as the Spirit does to us in Baptism, but to give Him the power as Messiah to do the works which would show that He is the Savior promised in the Old Testament. All that Jesus did in His humiliation was done with only one thing—His faith in His Father. Even the very fact that He is the Son of God was not a matter for Him of scientific knowledge, but of faith. And where did he get that faith? From the same place we do—from the Word of God in which he had been raised. Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were told by God to not eat the fruit from the tree or they will die. But the devil’s temptation was to say, “Trust yourself, not God. Prove that you will not die if you eat from the tree.” In the same way the devil is tempting Jesus to prove it, to trust in Himself, not the Word of His Father.

“If You are the Son of God.” The devil says that a second time when he takes Jesus to the top of the highest point of the temple. He adds to that taking the Word of God out of context with the quote from Psalm 91: “He will command His angels concerning you,” “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone” I don’t know about you, but if I am at the highest point of the temple, the last thing I’d do is jump off. But Jesus is being tempted to prove He is the Son of God. It isn’t just that as God He could safely jump off, but according to tradition the Messiah would appear from the top of the temple when he came from heaven. This would prove beyond a doubt that Jesus is that Messiah.

In the final temptation Jesus is shown all the earth. The devil says it is all Jesus' if He bows to worship the devil. It is like Adam and Eve when the devil tells them, "Eat this fruit, and you will be like God." For Jesus that would sound like, "Bow to me. Don't depend anymore on Your faith in the Father. Trust in what You see before You, what is so easy to do, what puts You in the driver's seat, not the Father."

What we see now in all of that is not just how tempting all that was to Jesus, but how it is part of how Jesus substituted for all of us. He doesn't give in like Adam and Eve, the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai, like all of us have and will. He holds to what He has—faith in His Father's Word.

The story of Jesus' temptation is often taught as Jesus giving us an example of how to fight temptation. He used God's Word each time. The remarkable thing is that all of His quotes come from the book of Deuteronomy, the words Moses spoke to Israel before they entered the Promised Land, the words they failed to heed. He did what they failed to do. And that is the main point of Jesus' temptation. He held to His faith, not so much to give us an example, but in our place. Yes, His example helps us in facing temptation. As we just sang at the beginning of the service in Luther's famous hymn, "One little word subdues him." In other words, one little Word of God can totally defeat the devil. But nevertheless, we do give in. As we say in the explanation of the petition of the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "We daily sin much and are in need of forgiveness." Our faith fails, but Jesus didn't. Even as He suffered on the cross and had His very Father turn His back on Jesus, He still held on to that faith. And by it He defeated temptation for us. We teach that we are saved by faith. But that doesn't mean so much our faith in Jesus, but the very faith by which He endured all temptation and suffering for us.

We have begun our yearly Lenten journey to the cross of Jesus. That is the main answer to temptation. "If You are the Son of God." Jesus proved that not with a miracle, but by obeying His Father and dying on that cross and rising from the dead. In that we have certainty that our sins are forgiven. In that we can face all temptation because indeed He is the Son of God.