

GREAT TEXTS -- MATTHEW 4:1-11

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 7, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The most important event in the history of our world was the coming of the Messiah. When God sent his only begotten Son into the world he sent him into enemy territory. Satan, or the devil, is described as “the prince of this world.” This means that from the time he wrested control away from God in the sin of Adam this world has been under the domination of sin. Satan, the prince of this world, bitterly resented the intrusion of the divine Son of God who came that he might save men. Even in the early days of Jesus’ life Satan stirred opposition to him. You remember the hatred of King Herod who tried to destroy Jesus when he was a baby. There are other evidences along the way, but not until Jesus began his active ministry did Satan join battle in the fullest sense with our Lord.

Let me read to you the passage of scripture that describes the conflict on which the destiny of the whole human race hung. It is Matthew 4:1-11: “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he afterward hungered. And the tempter came and said unto him, If thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him into the holy city; and he set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou art the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and, On their hands they shall bear thee up, lest haply thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, Again it is written, Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him unto an exceeding high mountain, and showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. Then the devil leaveth him; and behold, angels came and ministered unto him.”

In the Wilderness

As we look at these opening verses and read about Jesus being in the wilderness, we immediately think of the physical setting in which this took place. It happened southeast of Jerusalem a few miles in the wilderness of Judea. There are barren rock hills with no vegetation, a lonely place. Often we think of temptation as being strongest in the city. In many instances it is. It is particularly difficult for young people to come into the pressures of a large city and remain as pure and clean as they were. Yet, I would emphasize that temptation is not alone in the city. Temptation is wherever people are. Temptations can come in the loneliness of solitude. Wherever people are, Satan has a means of bringing temptation. Sometimes the most deadly temptations come when we are alone, when we are away from spiritual influences as found in the lives of parents and others. Sometimes temptation is at its worst when we are alone.

Jesus had communed with God for forty days. Those forty days must have been a wonderful experience. He had just come from the baptismal scene which had ended when God declared, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” So, in the beginning of his ministry, Jesus had that wonderful experience of communion with God for more than a month. During that time there was no desire for food, so deep was his concentration on spiritual matters. It is not impossible to fast for forty days, and forty nights. Moses did it when he went up the mountain to get the law; Elijah did it on another occasion. It is indeed a physical strain to go without food for so long, but it is quite possible for a man to do it. There was no divine intervention that enabled him to go forty days without food. It was his own dedication to the spiritual purposes of his life that made him fast that long. He seems not to have been hungry, for it says that “afterward he hungered.” Then it was that the temptations came.

Vitally Important

It is impossible for us today to realize the tremendous importance of the temptations. Jesus could have succumbed; he could have given in to these temptations. Had he done so there would have been no hope for the human race so far as salvation is concerned. There would have been no heaven because there would have been no cross. There would have been no gospel in its fullness. If Jesus had failed here you and I would have had no hope for eternity.

These were real temptations. Jesus was not permitted nor did he want to call upon his divine power. Had he done so, it would have taken away all the force. He then could not have been our example because we have no divine resources or miraculous powers on which to call. Jesus had to meet these temptations on the same level that you and I must meet them. His having met them so perfectly gives us the confidence that we can also meet whatever temptations may come.

Always Related to Power

Temptation always comes in connection with some power or some ability that we possess. Temptation is always related to power. By this I mean simply that when we have some unusual ability or force or power we are more vulnerable because we are more important to the devil and therefore more in line for his temptations. A Beautiful girl has temptations that a plain girl does not have. A brilliant

lawyer has temptations that a dull lawyer knows nothing about. An excellent athlete has temptations that he would never have if he were a mediocre or ordinary athlete. The man of wealth has problems that less well-to-do people never know. The young person with striking personality has pressures that another young person never feels. It is the person who has certain powers, who has a greater attractiveness to Satan. The man or woman who has special talents or abilities needs to be doubly on guard. Jesus, the Son of God, had infinite power and was therefore exceedingly attractive to Satan. If he could be beaten, the battle would be won. Yet Jesus could not call upon his infinite power, for he had to stand against these temptations with the same resources that you and I have available.

This story has the very familiar three temptations that we have seen as far back as the opening chapter of Genesis in the story of Adam and Eve--the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life. These temptations have been universal since the beginning of man's existence and these temptations still are battering at the doors of our lives today.

### Lust of the Flesh

In the early part of our text the tempter came and said, "If thou art the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." It is not sinful to be hungry and it is not sinful to make bread, but it would have been sinful if Jesus had called on his miraculous power to make bread. It was not sinful later on for him to make bread for the 5,000 and at another time for the 4,000, but it would have been sinful here because it would have been perverting divine power for selfish purposes. Here, Jesus made no bread. He answered, rather, by quoting from Deut. 8:3, "It is written ... (These words ring out through the story) Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." This temptation was aimed at the lust of the flesh. An innocent, wholesome desire for food can become sinful under certain circumstances. Man has other desires that are wholesome and right when fulfilled in their proper place and in the right way, and that are sinful and can damn the soul if used in some other than the right way. Man has physical desires of a sex nature in which realm there is danger that has blasted the eternal happiness of many a person.

In Friday evening's newspaper there was the sordid story of lust of the flesh in our town among young people. The story was a lead article on the front page and it told of young white girls yielding their virtue to Negro men. It happened in our town, under the influence of sensual rock and roll music. One was a school teacher who had to resign in disgrace; two were workers in offices; then there were the teenage girls. Lust of the flesh has cost the souls of many a person. The Negro men who had such an attractiveness for young girls were men who play rock and roll; they were leaders of that kind of music and had played for racially mixed parties. Are young people so mature that they can listen to the recorded music of Negro entertainers hour by hour and then realize that it is wrong to fraternize with them in night clubs? Lust of the flesh is dangerous and deadly.

### Pride of Life

The second of these great temptations that came to Jesus was of an entirely different nature--the pride of life. Jesus was taken up to the pinnacle of the temple. Josephus says that at a certain place the pinnacle towered 300 feet above the valley below. Satan's proposal was, "This is the way to make a great spectacular impression on the people. Cast yourself down from the temple." Taking a lead from Christ's practice in this same scene, he quoted scripture. Satan quoted the ninety-first Psalm, verses eleven and twelve, skipping part that did not suit his purpose. "He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and, On their hands they shall bear thee up, Lest haply thou dash thy foot against a stone." Jesus answered again, quoting Deut. 6:16, "It is written, Thou shalt not make trial of the Lord thy God." This was a temptation toward sensationalism. It was an appeal to use a trick, or a stunt, as a shortcut to prominence. It was shallow and it would not have lasted. The crowd would have called for some other spectacular trick on the tomorrow. The only way for Jesus to influence the lives of these people was the slower, more difficult way that eventually led to the cross. There was no quick, easy way to win this world back from Satan.

Man has a way of saying, "The end justifies the means." Thus he often takes shortcuts that are wrong and sinful. Not so with Christ. The means as well as the end must be right. End and means have the same relationship as river and lake. If the river has poisoned water in it, the lake also will have poisoned water in it.

### Lust of the Eye

Finally, there comes the third temptation--the lust of the eye. The devil took him to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. Oh, what an attractiveness there was there! Jesus wanted those kingdoms! In fact, Jesus had come into the world to get those kingdoms. He did not seek the physical, earthly glory of them, but he had come to win the allegiance of everyone of those kingdoms Satan now offers him. Jesus wanted those kingdoms not for his glory, but for their salvation. Suddenly Satan promised it all, but there was a catch--"If thou wilt fall down and worship me." Jesus would not pay that price. There is no compromise in Jesus; there is no expediency. It was not wrong to want those kingdoms, but it was wrong to achieve them Satan's way. Instead, Jesus went to the cross, giving his life rather than take the easy way of compromise.

As you and I think of the issues of our world, how we do need to have that same strength and say, "Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, (quoted from Deut. 6:13) Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." The lust of the eye in our time leads men to be covetous for things. It is the materialism that curses our generation; it is the materialism to which we Americans are so

prone. It is refreshing to see people forego the expenditures that their incomes would permit in order not to live in the sensual, materialistic way.

### Two Principles

In these few verses of scripture there is a great warning for each of us. Two things stand out above all the rest. One is that we need to meet temptation in the mind before it is met in the act. We need to do some serious thinking before we face the temptation to act. It is important what people think; what they see and what they read are vital. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." In the New Testament in Philippians 4:8 we read, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." Temptation is not conquered if we wait until the overt act stands in front of us; temptation is conquered in the mind before the act presents itself.

Secondly, temptation is conquered only if we have a standard of values to which we have given our allegiance. Jesus was able to overcome these almost superhuman temptations because he was dedicated to God's standard. It stood out through the whole story as he said, "It is written." If you and I know what is written, and if we are loyal to what is written, we can stand whatever temptation may come. Our generation is not known for its moral stability or its strength. Our generation is known for its complacency, its willingness to go with the crowd, and its willingness to compromise. But we Christians are different from the world. We are going somewhere that the world is not going. We must stand against temptation.

God's great example in Christ gives us strength to stand and gives us power to overcome. "We have not a high priest that cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities: but one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need." (Heb. 4:15-16). Christ stood and we can stand. As we close this lesson, will you come to Christ, take on his strength, go with him through life and someday have the joy of his salvation. Will you come?