

Resisting Temptations

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[0:00] Thanks very much, Alice. Good morning, everyone. As Graham said, delighted to have you with us, whether you're here in the building, watching! on YouTube, or listening to the audio recording. It will be helpful if you have a Bible in front of you to be able to refer to the passage as we go along.

When I was about 13, the teacher-led my scripture union group at school brought us all a book. It was *The Fight* by John White. It's still in print, I believe, is considered a classic, these days. It had a very deep influence on me as a Christian teenager. Maybe you'll see the subtitle, *A Practical Handbook of Christian Living*. And so it covers things like reading the Bible, prayer, witness, and all the things you'd expect. But as the title suggests, it has a particular focus on the fact that if we are Christians, then we're in a fight. We're in a battle against the forces of evil. One chapter in the book is called *His Infernal Majesty*. And there's a picture in that that has stayed with me through the 50-odd years since I first read the book.

I want you to imagine a piano. Now we're talking real pianos here, not electronic gizmos. So we need one that's got the full works. And what we're going to do is we're going to open the top and we're going to expose all the strings and the hammers and all the fantastic works inside. We're then going to put our foot on the right-hand pedal. I think it's technically a sustained pedal. We'll call it the loud pedal. And we're going to sing to the piano. We're going to sing a note very loudly. It doesn't matter if you're as tuneless as I am. We're going to sing to the piano. And as we sing, we'll hear at least one note vibrating. Our voice in these circumstances will resonate inside the piano and we will hear something, music coming out. Of course, that's not how you're supposed to play pianos, by singing at them. So we'll close the lid and we'll take our foot off the pedal.

And if we still keep singing, then there will be no response. We can sing as loud as we want, but nothing will happen. So what's the picture? The devil, when he tempts us, it's like him singing at us, looking for a response. And some of his songs are very, very attractive. And if figuratively our lid is open and our foot's on the pedal, then there will be a response. We'll listen and we'll respond to the devil in the way that he wants us to. And the songs, as I said, are very attractive.

Sometimes there's things which in the right context would be fine. Enjoying food, sexual attraction, even anger. These things in the right context are okay, like if they played using the normal pedal, the normal keys, when the devil is tempting us, they're wrong. So we need to make sure we've not got our foot on the pedal, the lid is shut, and that we don't respond in the way the devil wants us to. And here's a particular point relating to today's passage. When the devil sang his best songs to Jesus, he got no reverberation back. There was no way that Jesus was going to give in to the devil's temptation. That's a key message as we go through the passage this morning. I want to think particularly this morning about the tactics the devil uses to tempt Jesus and the way in which we can overcome these tactics. But we need to do a little bit of work to begin with understanding what's going on in this passage. So I've got four things to think about to begin with. First of all, this is the last of three passages in Matthew's Gospel which are the preparation for Jesus' ministry. So he's about to go out and to preach and to heal and to do all the wonderful things that he did. And these three short passages tell us what happened before that. Graham took us through the first two over the last couple of weeks.

[4:23] We saw John the Baptist with his message of repentance, preparing the way for Jesus and for what Jesus would do. We saw Jesus being baptised, identifying with us sinners, and then receiving God's commendation for his son as the Holy Spirit descended on the three persons of the Trinity coming together.

And today we're going to see Jesus being tested and proving that he's ready to fulfil God's purpose for him. You may already have seen the parallels for what we will be doing at the end of the service today, those of us in the church, as we commission Danny for her service.

Louie has been prepared for her. She has been prepared in part during her time in this church, and others have gone before, and OMF are providing great support and help for her.

We are commending her because we know that she has a good Christian character and a real commitment to the Lord Jesus, which makes her really suitable for the service that she is going into. And she has been tested her faith, and her desires have been tested over the years, and she has proved that she has a genuine call, and that she is the right person to do the work God has called her to. And so we're going to be delighted later on to commissioner.

[5:51] True, of course, of any Christian work. We build on the work of others, the preparation that's been done. We need to live in a way that's commendable in our character, in our conduct, and we need to prove our faith as is tested regularly. We need to be ready for ministry, as Jesus was.

The second thing I want to highlight is that it wasn't accidental that Jesus was in the desert, and the devil tempted him. Verse 1 tells us he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. As we saw last week at his baptism, Jesus saw the Holy Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove, and the first thing the Spirit does is to lead him into the place of temptation. Now, that wasn't in any way to set him up to fail. It was a test so that he could demonstrate his commitment to obeying his Father, and also to set an example for us.

As with Jesus, the devil tempts us in the hope that we'll fail, that God tests us to prove our faith and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The same word is used in Greek for tempt and test. The devil tempts us to make us fall. God tests us so that we can demonstrate that we can stand in his strength. Next overarching point is just to note that the devil is real. Very easy to have a picture of the devil in our minds as a kind of cartoon character in a red cloak, but he's so much more than that. Jesus calls him the prince of this world because its influence is so great, and he commands a multitude of evil beings. Paul describes them as rulers, authorities, powers of this dark world, and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Christians rightly focus on Jesus as our Savior. We want to fill our minds with him and for all that he has done for us. But we must never forget the havoc that the tempter can wreak when he gets a place in our lives. We need to make sure he doesn't get in, that we don't respond to his songs.

And then the last big picture point is that Jesus is fully God, but also fully man. Now there was no way that Jesus was going to give in to the temptations the devil put in front of him. If he had done that, it would have been totally against his divine nature. It simply couldn't happen. But we're not to take that and think, well, the temptations weren't real then, were they? It's all just a bit of a charade. No, it's not.

Jesus had to face the temptations as a man, as a human being. Matthew tells us he was hungry. He was very, very hungry.

[9:09] His body would be craving for food. Now at the end of the passage, Matthew tells us that angels came and attended him. I think that's an indication of just how traumatic it had been for Jesus. How hard and draining it was for him as a man to face the devil's temptations.

Yes, as God, he didn't give in. But as a man, it was really, really hard. Now that's difficult to understand. Graham pointed out last week the difficulty of understanding the Trinity.

It's also very difficult to understand the detail of how Jesus can be both God and man. But he is.

The writer to the Hebrews says he was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin.

And that is key as we think about this passage this morning. Now I said we'd look at the temptations, the three temptations of Jesus and the tactics of the devil.

So let's do that. The first thing the devil does is he targets Jesus at a point of weakness. Jesus is hungry.

He's very, very hungry. He's been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights.

[10:31] He's famished. He's physically weak. And in that condition, the devil offers him bread. But more than that, he suggests that if he's the son of God, then he shouldn't need to go hungry like this.

Just a little miracle. Turn the stones into bread and you'll be satisfied. But that would have been wrong. Jesus would have been using his divine powers for his own gratification.

And so he points out how much more important the spiritual is than the physical. Quotes in the book of Deuteronomy and says, The devil attacks when he's weak, but Jesus overcomes the temptation. The devil will attack us too when we're at our weakest. When we're most vulnerable, he will come and he will tempt us.

For me, there's a point of maximum danger at about half past nine in the evening. By that point, Bridget has normally gone upstairs and I'm sitting at my laptop and I'm trying to finish off something I've decided I need to do that day.

[11:51] I'm tired. It's a few hours since we've had our tea, so my blood sugar's low. I know there are chocolate biscuits in the cupboard and cheese in the fridge, but I also know if I start eating, then I'm never going to stop.

It's also then I'm most likely to get discouraged. To think, what's the point of me staving away like this? What is the benefit in it?

And if someone happened to send me an email or a WhatsApp message I don't particularly like at that point, then I can get unreasonably angry. I'm at my weakest and that's when the devil attacks. Now your weakness may not be associated with that time, maybe a different time, maybe to do with a place or a set of circumstances, but the devil knows what it is.

The devil knows when you're most vulnerable. And if you do too, then you can be prepared to stand up to him and to overcome his temptation.

[12:53] He targets our weakness. Second thing the devil does is he targets our pride. And that's what he's doing in the second temptation of Jesus.

He takes him up to the temple and says, in effect, So you think you're the son of God, then the normal rules don't apply to you. You can throw yourself off the temple and you won't come to any harm.

And for good measure, he also quotes it from the Bible, saying that God will send his angels to catch Jesus. But Jesus never did anything just because he could.

Maybe at this point he recalls his father's words at his baptism. This is my son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. And he knows the father will certainly not be pleased by frivolous use of his powers.

So again, quotes from Deuteronomy, it is also written, Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Again with us, the devil targets our pride.

[14:00] That's almost the opposite of the first situation we're talking about. This is when we feel really strong. When we're confident in ourselves and perhaps we feel in some way we're superior to others.

And maybe even that the rules that we'd apply to other people don't really apply to us. Sadly, we sometimes hear about Christian leaders who've gone wrong in one way or another.

Usually sex or money involved. And you sense very often that there's pride at the heart of it. They're so used to people telling them how wonderful they are, that they begin to believe in their own superiority, and that they can get away with anything.

Even things they would tell others to avoid. Maybe they even justify it with some kind of spurious Bible text like the devil does here. And so they fall.

Or if we think about situations where churches split sadly. Again, pride isn't very bare at the heart of it. People saying if you don't do things my way, then we're not doing them at all.

[15:06] Or dispute by neither side will back down because they'll lose face. Pride getting in the way of God's work, bringing us down.

And it can definitely happen to any of us. Maybe a particular danger for Christian leaders, but any of us can fall through pride. Thinking we're better than we really are.

Not recognising that all we are and have is from God. And we start to believe in ourselves and take pride in our achievements and perhaps to do things we really shouldn't do.

Paul tells us the right attitude in Galatians. He says, may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The devil targets our pride.

And then the final tactic of the devil is he targets our ambition. Now the third temptation is different from the other two. He's not now addressing Jesus as the son of God and enticing him at what he can do.

[16:13] He's saying to Jesus, you need to turn your back on God. You need to worship me. He takes him to a high mountain and promises him all the kingdoms of the world.

Almost saying, look what happens when you obey your father. You face humility, a simple, poor lifestyle, physical hardship.

Ultimately, you'll face rejection. Why don't you come to my side? I'll give you ultimate power and status. You just need to worship me.

If Jesus in any way had been driven by ambition, then that would have been an overwhelming temptation. But he wasn't. He was determined to do his father's will, even though it meant a life of humility and service and an awful death.

And again, he turns to Deuteronomy and says, it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only. And the devil will target our ambition too.

[17:23] The temptation will be to put our career, our comfort, our influence, our importance, whatever else, ahead of our relationship with Jesus. And it can be very subtle as it grows over time.

I've not really got time to serve in the church because I'm so busy at my work. I've got this job I need to finish over the weekend, so I'll just miss out on going to church today.

I've too much on today to read my Bible or pray. And our selfish ambition gradually squeezes out our commitment to God.

Pete Campbell reminded us last Sunday evening that we need to be seeking God's glory, not our own. But it's so easy to get it the wrong way around.

It's worth noting here, the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. If we went forward to the very end of Matthew's Gospel and the final teaching of Jesus, he says this, After his life of humility, of service, after he'd been rejected and had died on the cross, he received much, much more than the devil could offer.

[18:44] The devil offered the kingdom of the world. God gave him all authority on heaven and on earth. And if we put God first, we will ultimately never lose out.

So three tactics of the devil we need to be aware of and guard against. He'll target our weaknesses, he'll target our pride, and he'll target our ambition.

So how can we overcome temptation? Well, let me begin by telling you the wrong way. Have you ever, like me, been in a situation where you thought, I'm not going to do it?

I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to do it. Oh, I've done it. We dwell on the temptation and we end up giving into it. The devil's tune has its effect.

We listen to it, we reverberate, and he gets his way. And trying just to resist temptation in that way is setting us up to fail.

[19:47] We're trying to do it in our own strength. The key is to do what Jesus did and move your mind away from the temptation and onto what God wants you to focus on.

I mentioned that Jesus quoted three times from the book of Deuteronomy. After 40 years in the wilderness, which is paralleled by Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, Moses is giving his final instructions to the Israelites.

And he effectively says, this is how you need to live if you want to please God. If you do this, you will please God and you will prosper. And Jesus uses verses from Deuteronomy, from Moses' teaching, to counter the devil.

And for us too, the Bible is our most powerful weapon when we face temptation. It's the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.

If we know it well enough, if we've been reading it and learnt it, when we face temptation, there may well be a verse or a passage that comes to mind to make us strong.

[20:54] Or we may be able to set our minds on all that we have in Jesus, of God's goodness to us. Alistair Begg is a well-known preacher and writer and he says this, If you are in Christ, you are no longer the person you once were.

You have been made a member of a people who will last forever. So when you face temptation, stop for a moment and remember your Creator. Contemplate the goodness and holiness of God,

both in history and in your own experience.

And thank him for his abounding mercy as he deals with you. Don't forget to remember. And the best way to stand up to the attacks of the devil to temptations we face in our lives is to focus on what we have in Jesus and of all his goodness to us.

And sometimes we then just need to remove ourselves from the situation we're in. That's not giving in to the devil. Paul says to Timothy, flee the evil desires of youth.

And it's not just young people who have evil desires. All of us will be tempted. But however loudly and sweetly the devil sings, we can shut that out by focusing our minds on what's good and right.

[22:20] Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. And when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

None of us is perfect like Jesus. All of us will face powerful temptations. But there is always a way out if we focus our minds on what is good and what is right, if we use our time in a way that's productive and conducive to growing in Jesus.

Let me finish with this. You will fall. We all fall. We all fail over time. As we grow in Christ, if we're Christians, that should happen less often.

But it will happen because we're not perfect. We may carelessly have left the piano top open. We may deliberately have put our foot on the loud pedal.

But the devil's song has achieved what he intended. The good news for all of us is that whatever we've done, when we fail, there's always a way back to God.

[23:37] And that's because Jesus overcame an even greater temptation than the ones we're looking at today. In the Garden of Gethsemane, the day before he died, Jesus faced up to his death.

He's had a very intense evening with his disciples. They didn't really get what he was telling them. In his hour of need, he's asked them to pray and they've fallen asleep.

He's tired. He's every reason to feel deeply discouraged. And he knows what lies ahead of him. He knows he's going to be mocked.

He's going to be beaten. He's going to be nailed to the cross. And he's going to have the full wrath of God for sin piled on him. And his whole being shrinks away from it.

Everything in him as a man says, this is too difficult, too hard to do. And he prays, my father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.

[24:42] But then he says, yet not as I will, but as you will. And it was God's will for him to suffer. That was the only way in which we could be offered forgiveness for our sins.

So Jesus goes to the cross. He doesn't call down 12 legions of angels to prevent him being arrested. He doesn't pay attention to those when he's on the cross saying, if you're the son of God, come down from that cross, save yourself.

And because he's overcome that temptation, because he's taken the punishment for our sin, there's forgiveness for everyone who trusts him.

Perhaps for some people here, you need to trust him for the first time. Perhaps what I've been saying, in some ways you find difficult to understand because you've never tried to follow Jesus in your lives.

But you need forgiveness for all the wrong you've done. You need to trust in Jesus as the one who can bring you peace with God and security for the future.

[25:51] Perhaps some of us need to return. We need to get back to the cross and we need to experience God's grace again and again and again as we confess our sins.

We can always know forgiveness when we come in repentance and faith, confessing our sins and knowing that because Jesus led a perfect life and died our death on the cross, our Heavenly Father is willing to forgive us.

So let's make sure that we are right with God this morning. And let's go out into this week aware of the devil's schemes, ready to overcome and particularly fixing our eyes on Jesus, focusing on him as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, but also as the one who is now with God in heaven, acting as our high priest and also as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Let's trust him. Let's go in his strength, knowing that he is able to preserve us and to help us in our time of trial. Let me pray and then we'll sing together.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the way in which Jesus was so able to overcome the temptations of the evil one. That the devil could try his worst, and yet Jesus was able to completely conquer him at the point of his temptation in the wilderness, but particularly as he died on the cross and won the ultimate victory for us.

[27:34] Help us to have our trust in him, to recognise him as our hope for eternity, and help us too to fix our eyes on him so that when the temptation comes, we will be able to stand up against the evil one.

We will be able to overcome and to remain strong in Christ. We thank you for our time together. We pray you'll be with us as we continue together now. In the name of the Lord Jesus.

Amen. Amen.