

# *The Defeat of Deceit*

Luke 4:1-13

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 7, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>1</sup>Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, <sup>2</sup>where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. <sup>3</sup>The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.” <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written,  
‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. <sup>6</sup>And the devil said to him, “To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. <sup>7</sup>If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” <sup>8</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is written,  
‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

<sup>9</sup>Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, <sup>10</sup>for it is written,  
‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’  
<sup>11</sup>and  
‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

<sup>12</sup>Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” <sup>13</sup>When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:1-13, NRSV)

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Before we look at the passage we just read in Luke 4 we need to glance back for a moment to the previous chapter where two things happen which help us understand the account of Jesus’ testing in the wilderness.

First, in Luke 3:21-22 we find the account of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River. We are told that as Jesus was baptized the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove as the voice of the Father spoke from heaven saying, “**You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.**”

The scripture leaves no room for doubt as to what is happening here. Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal and holy Son of God who is absolutely beloved by a Heavenly Father who entirely delights in his life. Put simply, Jesus is God and has always been God.

But then, in the very next passage in Luke 3:23-38, we read this detailed genealogy in which Luke traces the ancestry of Jesus from his father Joseph all the back to David, back Abraham, and ultimately back to Adam himself. And once again, the scripture leaves no room for doubt, declaring that Jesus of Nazareth is also a part of the family of Adam. He is human, in other words, born of a woman just like us and subject to experience everything in this world that we experience. Jesus is fully God and also Jesus is fully human.

Here’s what we must not miss. When Jesus goes off into the wilderness to be tempted he goes off, on the one hand, full of the Spirit but also, on the other hand, in need of food to survive. Jesus is God who gets hungry, the divine which has taken on fragile human flesh. The incarnation – that’s the word the church uses to describe this great mystery – is the union of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ and it is a reality which is plainly testified to in the New Testament. And to put it bluntly, if you cannot accept the reality of the incarnation then everything we are about to see unfold in the text this morning is going to be difficult to swallow as well. What happens in the wilderness makes no sense unless Jesus really is fully God *and* fully human.

Well, because Jesus was fully human he faced everything in this world that the rest of us face. One of those things was the adversarial presence of evil. Jesus had to deal with evil just like we do. Now I understand that it is difficult for many people in this modern age to believe in the existence of the devil. Lots of people don’t even believe that evil itself exists, much less in some personified form. Conventional wisdom these days tells us that we can reduce evil to biological, psychological, and sociological factors which we can manage and correct ourselves. In other words, when people do things that are wrong we like to imagine that it’s because of their upbringing, or some chemical imbalance, or inadequate systems which exist in society.

But the Bible will hear none of it. Literally from the very first pages to the very last pages, scripture

acknowledges the real existence of an evil one in our world who is far more complex and wicked than any of us imagine. C.S. Lewis once famously wrote, “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors.”<sup>1</sup> You see, it is not only foolish, but dangerous, to deny the presence of one whose sole aim in existence is to keep us all from love, health, wholeness, peace, and life itself.

Jesus then is led by the Spirit out into the wilderness where he was tempted by the actual devil. Now, the word for ‘tempted’ here literally means to put pressure on somebody with the intent of breaking them. Again, this is what the evil one is trying to do to humanity, to us and to Jesus who came as one of us. And for forty days Jesus remains in the wilderness enduring the efforts of evil to break him.

The number forty, by the way, isn’t random or inconsequential. In the Bible the number forty is a number often used to symbolize a time of waiting and preparation and testing. Specifically, the number takes us back to Israel at the time just after the Lord delivered them from slavery in Egypt. As you may remember, Israel then spent forty years in the Sinai Desert before the Lord finally led them to the Promised Land. For forty years they were tested in at least three different ways, each threatening to break the trust they had for the Lord.

First, Israel had to trust God to satisfy their appetites. In the desert there is not much to eat, and people naturally need to eat. The test, therefore, was whether or not Israel would trust the Lord to satisfy their appetites in this desolate place. From the very beginning, however, Israel failed to trust God. They grumbled constantly for bread, at several points even complaining that they actually had it better off as slaves back in Egypt. Even when the Lord provided manna from heaven for them each morning, enough for the day, they got greedy and tried to store it up in surplus. Deuteronomy 8:3 should have made it clear for them: “[The Lord] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna...in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Still, the Israelites failed to trust the Lord and looked elsewhere to satisfy their appetites.

Second, Israel had to trust God to satisfy their ambitions. Nobody wants to live in slavery or in the desert. After 400 years of slavery in a foreign land, Israel’s ambition was to have a home, a land flowing with milk and honey they could call their own. God had, in fact, promised them that he would lead them to such a place. Along the way, however, it was required that Israel worship the Lord alone, that they trust him to satisfy their ambitions. In Deuteronomy 6:13 we read, “**The Lord your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear.**” But Israel would not submit. Over and over, in fact, they flirted disastrously with idolatry, making for themselves gods they believed they could control and manipulate. They failed to trust the Lord to satisfy their ambitions.

Lastly, Israel failed to trust God to satisfy their approval. If the Lord truly was their God, if Israel belonged to the Lord, he would not abandon them and leave them alone in the wilderness. The Lord had promised Israel that this was the case and delivered them from slavery in Egypt to prove his point. Then Israel was given this command in Deuteronomy 6:16, “**Do not put the Lord your God to the test.**” But it was a command they quickly failed to keep. In spite of all that the Lord had done for them, Israel continued to challenge God, provoking him to prove his love and faithfulness by doing miraculous signs in their presence. “Give us water to drink in the desert where there is no water and then we will believe that we are your people!”<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, they also failed to trust the Lord to satisfy their approval.

Here’s why this matters. Israel’s story is our story. It’s the story of the human race. God has created us, blessed us, provided for us in every way, and yet we fail time and time again to trust God. Evil in this world tests us all. All along and through history from the beginning the devil has continued to do whatever he can to dismantle whatever trust we may have in God, to separate us ultimately from God and the life God has for us.

You see, God made you and me with appetites, natural desires for things in this world that we need. We crave food, and water, and rest, and work, and sex, and friendship, and comfort. These are good things which God made us to desire. Hunger, for example, is a God-given indicator in us all that tells us it’s time to eat. But along with these appetites, God also gave us boundaries on how they are to be satisfied. Therefore, we must not allow our appetites to dictate how and when they are

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper Collins, 1996), ix.

<sup>2</sup> See the account in Exodus 17:1-7 where Israel tests the Lord at Massah.

fed. When we do, we then allow our appetites to become addictions. We find it hard to eat sensible portions, and instead eat compulsively, or when we are anxious or depressed. We climb over others to gain material wealth we believe will bring the comfort we desire. We can't wait to enjoy sex in the context God told us is needed for it to become beautiful. Just like Israel, ultimately we don't trust God to satisfy our appetites in his ways and in his time.

It's also natural that we all are people of ambition. God made us, actually, to long for a place of security, to know that our lives are meaningful and have value. But something in us always wants to bring this about on our own and so for each of us there are probably a hundred moments every day when we do whatever we can to manipulate the people, events and circumstances around us to force our way towards security and meaning in life. And the result is that we yell at our children when they make life inconvenient, we push buttons to get people to go along with our plans, we guilt others into doing what we want them to do, and we withhold affection even from those closest to us to gain their attention. We try to satisfy ambition in our own way and in our own time.

Finally, just like the Israelites there is something in us that longs for approval. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, as we were created to know that we are treasured in God's eyes. But instead of being satisfied with God's favor alone, we also want the favor of the world. And if you are even the tiniest bit self-aware you will see this in yourself, this constant chasing after validation from others. So much of what we do to please others is not because we love them but because we want them to like us so that we can feel better about ourselves. Insert funny comment now so people will think I'm witty. Find a way to work my recent accomplishments into the conversation. What would people think if my kids did that? If I share what I'm really thinking people will reject me.<sup>3</sup>

Can you see that Israel's story is our story? In the same way that they failed to trust the Lord to satisfy their natural appetites, ambitions and need for approval, we also fail to trust the Lord. But then God comes to us. In the person of his Son, Jesus Christ, God becomes one of us, fully divine but also fully human. And when Christ comes in our world the evil one attacks him just as he attacks us. Understand that when Jesus is led by the Spirit out into the wilderness to fast for forty days, Jesus is being led to the place in life where Israel was

tested and failed, to the place where we have been tested and have also failed. When the evil one arrives on the scene after Jesus has fasted for forty days, he comes to put pressure on Jesus in hopes of breaking him just as he has broken us.

Had we been there at that time I'm not sure we would have seen the devil appear in physical form and address Jesus in the sort of conversation you and I might have together. No, evil tends to work more subtly than that, which means that the devil likely confronted Jesus as a string of natural ideas in his head which, on the surface, probably seemed plausible and attractive.<sup>4</sup> Evil isn't stupid. If evil showed up the way we like to portray evil showing up in horror movies, who would be lured in? We'd run the other way as fast as we can. In Greek mythology, the Sirens were dangerous creatures who lured nearby sailors with their beautifully enchanting music and voices, but lured them towards shipwreck on the rocky coast of their island. Lucifer, one of the names for the devil in scripture, literally means "bearer of light" or "morning star."<sup>5</sup> When the devil comes to deceive us, even his approach is cloaked in alluring deception.

By now the tests ought to be familiar to you.

First the devil tests Jesus at the place of appetite. **"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."** You are famished, Jesus. Absolutely famished. Clearly your Father is not going to satisfy your appetite. It's been forty days! So be resourceful, satisfy it on your own terms. You know you've got the power to do so.

Then the test takes aim at the place of ambition. From the top of the world the devil looks out as he promises, **"If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."**<sup>6</sup> It's your rightful place, Jesus, to rule the world. Why get to your destination the hard way, through suffering and death? Come my way and the crown can be yours immediately.

Finally the testing focuses on the place of approval. **"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here."** Force God to prove himself and catch you before you fall. He promised he would. And after such

<sup>4</sup> Insight from N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 43.

<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 14:12-17

<sup>6</sup> It's been noted that the devil here is quoting scripture himself, though clearly twisting the words to fit his own purposes. This of course happens all the time. William Shakespeare himself once wrote, "There is no error so gross but that some sober brow will bless it with a proper text."

<sup>3</sup> I'm borrowing the way of framing these tests into appetites, ambitions and approval from a discipleship ministry called 3DM. These principles are elaborated in series of blog posts by Ben Sternke at <https://bensternke.com/>

a heroic spectacle, everybody will know without a doubt that you really are his beloved Son.

Now, I want you to notice two things about the devil's test. If you do, you will learn something about how the devil always attacks because evil, though it is cunning, isn't very creative. The same strategies are always in play.

First, evil always tempts us with good things. Notice that the devil doesn't outright try to get Jesus to betray his Father or to disown his Father. No, appetite and ambition and approval are all good things, in and of themselves, especially as they are satisfied in the Lord. But in each test the devil is trying to lure Jesus into seeking after these good things on his own terms rather than his Father's terms.

It's the same with us. Every sin has, at its root, a good and natural desire. The desire for food is natural. Trying to eat and eat and eat to satisfy loneliness or stress is destructive sin. The desire to live a meaningful life is God-given. Trying to justify your life by your own accomplishments, however, that is also destructive sin. The desire to belong and to be favored is natural. But doing whatever it takes to please others, that's sin. Any good thing in life – our children, our spouse, our career, some political or social cause, health and well-being – any good thing which becomes more important to you than God at once becomes a demonic force in your life. And the devil never creates new evil desires because the devil does not have the power of creation. All the devil can do is twist the good desires the Lord has already created and put in us. So just because it's a good thing doesn't mean it's not a temptation sent to lure you away from God.

Second, evil always uses a combination of two weapons against us, the one-two punch of temptation and accusation.<sup>7</sup>

First, when the devil tests Jesus he tries to entice Jesus to do something wrong. Make bread for yourself out of the stone. Worship me. Jump and force God to catch you. And the suggestion is that Jesus can get away with these things. Just do it. It will all turn out okay. It's not a big deal. That's temptation, the enticement that going against God isn't as bad as it's cracked up to be. But then comes the accusation, which sounds like this: "If you really are the Son of God..." It's subtle, but the devil is suggesting that perhaps Jesus isn't really as favored as he's been led to believe. Temptation

and accusation, these are always the weapons the devil uses to test us.

This all ought to sound very familiar to you. You will know the presence of evil in your life when you are faced with the temptation, the suggestion, to believe that doing something against God is no big deal. "You can get away with it. God will accept you either way. He always forgives, you know. Ah, that command is irrelevant and out-of-date." In a way, it's evil's way of playing down the holiness, the righteousness, the justice of God. But then as soon as you give in to temptation, evil sucker punches you with accusation. "Look at you. What a failure. So pitiful. How can God accept you now after what you've done and after who you've become?" It's evil's way of playing down the grace and love of God. Don't you recognize this pattern in your life? Temptation convinces you to do what you knew you shouldn't do and then the moment you give in guilt and shame come rushing in. Temptation and accusation, it's a devastating strategy that has been proven to be incredibly effective.

So how does Jesus respond to these weapons? Simply, Jesus responds with the Word of God. In all three instances Jesus simply quotes back to the devil words from scripture. As you may have picked up, all three scriptures are from Deuteronomy and represent God's warning and instruction to Israel during their time of testing in the wilderness. But where they failed to remember and honor God's Word, Jesus turns immediately to not only remember it, but honor it as his response to evil's attack.

There's a practical application here. The Bible is not a magic book. It's not that we can just wave the book at evil and turn it away like a necklace of garlic turns away a vampire. It's the truth within that evil one cannot stand. In fact, when the devil comes to deceive and to twist and to mislead, if we respond simply with the truth of God's Word it ends the testing immediately, just as it ended it when Jesus responded with scripture in the wilderness. The question, of course, is whether or not we have God's Word imbedded deeply within us so that we can retrieve it at a moment's notice when confronted with temptation or accusation.

So do you? Have you imbedded God's Word in your mind and heart so that it is there to offer defense at a moment's notice against the deception of the evil one? Consider this, if Jesus, the Son of God, didn't think he could handle life without knowing the scriptures and having them imbedded deep within him, how do we think we can?

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<sup>7</sup> Insight from Timothy Keller in a sermon entitled *Scripture* (preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on March 9, 2014).

But Jesus' response with scripture here is more than just a model for us to imitate, because frankly we can't always imitate it. I've known this truth about the power of scripture for much of my life and yet time and time I have failed to respond to temptation and accusation as Jesus responded. And so Jesus' response is far more than just a model to be copied but his response actually becomes our salvation. You see, Christ has gone with us to that place of testing, that place where the evil one tries to deceive us into pursuing our appetites, ambition and approval apart from God and God's ways. But unlike Israel and unlike us, Christ responds with perfect obedience and trust. Even when the devil comes back at a more opportune time and confronts Jesus in the garden the very night before he is to give his life on the cross and tries to lure Jesus away from his God-ordained mission, Jesus endures the testing and declares the he has not come to do his own will but rather he has come to do the will of his Father who sent him.<sup>8</sup>

Listen closely. In Christ we see that the holiness of God must never be downplayed. To say that sin is no big deal is to repeat a lie that was born in hell. Sin is of infinite offense to an infinitely holy and righteous God. It always provokes his wrath, always is met ultimately with justice. But in Christ we also see that the grace and love of God must also never be downplayed. In fact, God is such a God of love and mercy that in Christ he comes to take upon himself the consequences for our sin.

What this means is that we can now be set free. This is the heart of the message of God's Word, that if we will only place our faith in the One who lived as we could never live, but then who then died so that we can now live, we will be set free. This means that when the devil comes to us with temptation, seeking to deceive us into believing that sin is no big deal, we can defiantly respond in faith with God's Word that declares that sin is such a big deal that it led to the death of God's only Son. So now, how can I possibly imagine that it is a good idea to choose to sin against a God who would do this for one like me who is so unworthy? And then when the devil comes to us with accusation, during and after those times when we do fail to trust God, we can also defiantly respond in faith with God's Word that declares that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! My identity is no longer in anything other than the fact that in spite of my sin, in Christ I have now been made God's beloved son or daughter. In Christ, very God who came to be one of us, the Lord has satisfied in us every appetite and every

ambition, giving all who would simply come in faith all the approval we will ever need.

Do you realize that nobody can do ultimate harm to you unless that person can imbed lies in your heart? If your dad tells you when you are young that you will never amount to anything, and you believe the lie, that lie can destroy you. So many of you are sitting here this morning enslaved and burdened by one lie or another that you have allowed to take root and grow in your mind and your heart. Hear this. Only the Word of God, fulfilled for us in Christ, can set you free. It's why our baptismal usually sits at the entrance to our sanctuary and why the words spoken to Christ are etched on the front so that they can confront you every single time you come to worship. It's why we train parents here to speak those same words to their children as often as they can, imbedding in them the truth which turns away all temptation and accusation from the evil one. It's why we speak these same words over you in blessing every time you come forward to be anointed after receiving the Lord's Supper. "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in whom I am well pleased."

Yes, those words were spoken by the Father to Christ at his baptism, but because Jesus had come as one of us and stood there in our place in the river, and then in our place in the wilderness, and ultimately in our place on the cross, we now live with the confidence and hope that we stand in his place in the resurrection, in the very presence of his Father who is now our Father, who says to us in the face of the lies of the evil one as he has said to Christ in the face of the lies of the evil one, "You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

It's the truth. Believe it, and be set free.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Luke 4:1-13 again. What stands out to you from this crucial text?
2. We are told here that it was the Holy Spirit who led Jesus out to the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Why would the Spirit lead the Son in such a way to such a place?

<sup>8</sup> See Luke 22:39-46.

3. Look one at a time at each of the three temptations. What is at the heart of each temptation?
4. Do you believe in the existence of the actual devil? Why or why not?
5. Appetites, ambitions and approval, in what area are you most feeling under attack these days? In which of these do you sense the devil trying to get you to turn to something other than the Lord to satisfy this yearning? Be specific.
6. How does the message of the gospel (i.e. God has saved us by grace made available to us through the loving sacrifice of his Son) silence the *temptations* of the devil (i.e. the underestimation of God's holiness in believing the lie that sin is no big deal)? How does the gospel silence the *accusations* of the devil (i.e. the underestimation of God's grace in believing the lie that our sin excludes us from God's favor)?
7. If Jesus didn't think he could handle life without knowing the scriptures by having them rooted deeply in his heart and mind, why do so many of us think we can?
8. What specific Word from God do you need right now in your life to silence the destructive and deceitful temptations and accusations of the evil one?

**Table to Table Question**

***A question for kids and adults to answer together***

The devil is real. Should we be afraid of the devil?