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## TEMPTED AS WE ARE

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What would you think if I started today's sermon with something like this: "I'm going to tell you about the time I *almost* sinned." Let's try it.

Today, I'm going to tell you the story about the time I almost sinned.

So, what's the reaction?

[Audience responses]

Arrogant, right? It would make it sound like I have never actually sinned, which, of course, I have. I'm a human, just like anyone else. Having said all of that, I will tell you a story because I think it fits the sermon and because I think that you'll find it to be funny—although there was nothing funny about it at the time!

Some of you may remember that when we first moved into our house, we had a lot of trouble with the well. It would lose its prime frequently. I now know that, at the time, it had a slow leak way, way down at the bottom, near the foot valve; but back then, I just knew that I had to prime the pump fairly regularly.

Now, the way I would prime it went something like this: there was a little pressure gauge on top of the well. When the pump lost its prime, that gauge would read 0 psi. I would unscrew the gauge and pour water into the hole underneath the gauge. Then I would screw the gauge back in, turn on the pump, and most of the time that would take care of the problem.

One brutally cold January morning, I got up to prepare to go to school—but we had no water. I threw on my jacket, grabbed a flashlight, and went to the pump. Now, this particular morning the temperature was well below the normal, even for early January. I think it was in the single digits. And it was very, very dark outside. Well, I found that little gauge and began to unscrew it; but something new happened this time around. Apparently, the well was still highly pressurized because that little gauge went flying off into the woods, and I ended up wearing that cold, cold water. So now I am freezing cold, sopping wet, and I have no way to reseal that little hole so that I can get the well working. The pipes had frozen, and now I too was frozen! I was chilled right to the bone!

A few days later, when Alan McDaniel had heard the story, he said, "I know Jeff's not a cussing man, but I'll bet he came close!" By then the matter was far enough behind me that I thought that was kind of funny! In my head, the story is filed away under the title "The Time I Almost Cussed."

So, it's a funny story. But I assure you, I would never claim to be sinless, because I'm not. There are certain things that I think it's safe to say would be out of character for me, but I'm not going to stand here this morning and say, "I'd never do *that!*" You know why? That would be pride speaking, and *pride goes before a fall*.

But Jesus was different. Before we continue in Mark 1 today, I'd like to read to you two verses, Hebrews 4:15–16:

<sup>15</sup> *For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.*

<sup>16</sup> *Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.*

Jesus came to earth and lived as a man, 100% man and yet 100% God. While He was here, He was susceptible to the same temptations we are. The difference is that Jesus never sinned. Now, don't let that make you think you can't talk to Jesus about your struggles, because you can and you should. In fact, that is the whole reason the writer of Hebrews points out that Jesus was tempted as we are: He understands just how hard it is! That's why verse 16 is so important. Let's read it again!

[Read v. 16]

Now, let's turn our attention to Mark 1 again this morning. Would you turn there with me? I want to point out one thing from a verse we talked about last time, so let's start with verse 11:

<sup>11</sup> *And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*

<sup>12</sup> *And immediately the spirit driveth him into the wilderness.*

<sup>13</sup> *And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.*

Here we have Jesus, standing in the Jordan River, having just been baptized by John. We have the testimony of God's voice saying to Him, "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." I think the other people around heard, "This is My beloved Son," but Jesus heard, "Thou art My beloved Son." What this statement tells me, and tells all the witnesses present, is that God approved of Jesus' life on earth 100%. There is no need for us to imagine a young Jesus, sowing His wild oats, being some kind of a rebel without a cause. Those silent years of His youth were unblemished.

There is a short side-trip I'd like to take here about the power of encouragement. Folks, even Jesus benefited from a kind word! Do you realize that? Yes, Jesus has feelings, too! Now, if Jesus could benefit from a kind word, how much more can our friends, our co-workers, our fellow church members, and yes, our own children? Do not neglect to give out kind, uplifting words! Whenever you see the words *edify* or *edification* in Scripture, you are looking at a passage that tells you to build others up. We don't want pride; we don't want self-satisfaction; but let's work to affirm the good we see in others.

Ok, moving on! In verse twelve we find that the Spirit is *driving* (or *impelling* in some versions) Jesus out into the wilderness. The Spirit motivated Him to go where otherwise He would have stayed away. That is how the Spirit moves us sometimes. You may recall a time when you stayed in or moved into an impossible or difficult situation, but you knew it was the right thing to do. I can think of one very clearly in my own mind, but that's another story for another day! But here's the thing: if you've ever been through a really dark experience, you know that it toughens you. It makes you stronger. And Jesus would need incredible strength for the days that lay ahead, knowing that the cross awaited.

Jesus was in the wilderness forty days. Matthew and Luke tell us that he fasted for those forty days, and at the very end, Satan came to tempt Him. Do you realize how long forty days actually is? Forty days ago it was March 20. I had just come back from a family vacation. Gas was about \$3.50 per gallon (although it was more up in the Cherokee, NC area). The allies were just starting to bomb Libya, and the Japanese thought they might be able to avert a nuclear disaster by reconnecting electricity to the damaged reactor. Now, in that length of time, Jesus was both alone and hungry. He was fasting. Some of you might like to be alone for a while, but I know I wouldn't. Sometimes being alone for a few hours is kind of nice, but forty days? And nowadays when we're alone, we'll have the TV to keep us company, or the Internet, or the radio; it would be hard for us to imagine being alone—really alone! And we certainly don't know what it's like to go without eating for forty days. Baptists just don't do that! As you can imagine, the human body is nearly at the point of no return after forty days. It's emaciated and very, very weak.

It's at this point when Jesus is isolated and weakened (both physically and emotionally) that Satan comes to tempt Him. I will deal briefly with the specific temptations, but only briefly. I want to point out in the overall context, though, that Satan knows when our guard is down. You see, there are a number of ways to catch us off guard: when we're angry, when we're tired, when we're frustrated. It's at those times that the little things that we can normally contain in our own strength are most likely to spill out. That's when we'll say the unkind words. That's when we'll be disrespectful to our spouse or our co-workers. That's when the little things that annoy us will pop out in all their ugliness. But Jesus didn't harbor those things, because if He had, they would have come out during the temptations that Satan presented. That is why we need to say with the Psalmist, "Search me, O God!" Let God root out those little things before they explode into big things when we are weak.

According to Matthew and Luke, Satan's first temptation ran along these lines: "If you are really God's Son, turn these stones into bread." Now, Jesus was never forbidden from transmuting objects. He turned water into wine. He made a few loaves and fishes into a feast for thousands. So what's the problem? The real problem is that this is an attack on Jesus' position. At His baptism forty days before, God had affirmed, "Thou art My beloved Son!" But now it would seem God had forgotten about Him. He's been alone and hungry for forty days. If Jesus had started to harbor the ugly little thought, "Where is God when I need Him? Why has He left me all alone to suffer?" He would have failed this test. But Jesus passed the test, because He knew that the Father would break the fast at the proper time, whenever that might be. He would not get ahead of God. I've told you before that Dr. Ron Cottle has a saying which I think is very true: "Ninety percent of the will of God is timing." So the first test was really an attempt to see if Jesus felt secure in His position as God's Son.

When we say, "I'm only human," or "Brother So-and-so says it's all right," or "I need to do this thing even though I know it's wrong," we are forgetting whose child we are! We're human, but we are God's child! We're not Brother So-and-so's child. And what we really need to do is please our Father with our behavior, because He knows what is best for us.

The second temptation in the wilderness went something like this: Satan took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple, and said, "Prove that You are God's Son by throwing yourself down from here." Then Satan quoted Scripture, assuring Jesus that He would be protected by God's angels. Again, this is an attack on Jesus' position in God. "Jesus, You really believe that you are God's Son. That's great. Now, how about we show everyone else?" What better way to gain the acceptance of man than by a display of power! If He were to jump from those many stories up into the busy temple area, people would see that and be amazed that He could survive—undamaged! But Jesus knew better than to presume upon God's power (which, by the way, is the major flaw with the poison drinkers and snake handlers). We don't put God

to the test. We don't put God into a position of having to save us from our own foolishness. When viewed in context, we find that Satan had taken a bit of Scripture and had twisted it to tempt Christ. "Jesus was sorely tempted to gain the approval of men by the exercise of power apart from the will of God. And how we are tempted that way! There is no difference at all."<sup>1</sup>

The last temptation was a short cut that would allow Jesus to avoid the cross. Satan told Jesus He would let Him have the kingdoms of the world, uncontested, for a price: Jesus would have to worship Satan. One act of worship and it would all be over! No cross! No humiliation! Think of the good that would come of it—Satan's influence removed from the world. Jesus could rule the nations in peace and prosperity, ending wars and conflicts and exploitation. All of this good for one simple act of worship, and no need for the suffering and shame of the cross. After all, if He were really God's Son, how could God expect Him to suffer so? What kind of father would do that? Satan offers what seems to be a much more reasonable solution.

Jesus answers the third time as He had answered the first two times: He used Scripture. As Christians, our one weapon is the sword of the Spirit, which is, according to Ephesians 6, the Word of God. If you don't know Scripture, you don't have the weapon you need to fight Satan! And Jesus did fight Satan. His last answer is contemptuous: "*Begone, Satan! You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.*"

The point for us today is that Jesus was tempted just as we are tempted. Sometimes we are tempted to think that God has forsaken us, and we may think that we are left to fend for ourselves. Other times we may be tempted to think that we deserve a show of special favor from God. We think we ought to be able to tell God how to act on our behalf. And yet other times we are tempted to take the easy way to some good goal. We justify our selfishness.

Let me give you some final examples. Let's say that, as a Christian, I know that it is a covetous act to gamble. But I justify my desire to gamble by saying, "Well, if I win, I'll give God some of this money. I'll help a lot of people." Those might be noble intentions, but that is not God's way. The Bible tells us, "Thou shalt not covet." Another person might think, "You know, my husband isn't very spiritual like Mr. Wright. If I divorce my husband, I can marry Mr. Wright and we can just be the best little Christians ever!" Again, that's just not God's way. Scripture tells us exactly what to do regarding an unspiritual spouse, and we need to follow Scripture.

Jesus was faced with temptation, just as we are. He never did an "end run" around God's Word, though; instead, He used God's Word to keep His priorities straight. And what is the point of Jesus' example? Is it to make us feel bad by comparison? No, not at all! It is to encourage us that He knows how we feel!

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Stedman, "Jesus Came." 1974. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/mark/jesus-came>.