

The Word is a Gift

Scripture

Matthew 4: 1-11

The Temptation of Jesus

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'^[a]"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

" 'He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'^[b]"

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'^[c]"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'^[d]"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Footnotes:

- a. [Matthew 4:4](#) Deut. 8:3
- b. [Matthew 4:6](#) Psalm 91:11,12
- c. [Matthew 4:7](#) Deut. 6:16
- d. [Matthew 4:10](#) Deut. 6:13

<p>Big Idea: The Word of God is gift for us to use on our life journeys. In this passage it aids Jesus in his wilderness journey. He suggests that we live on God's word, we shouldn't bargain with God, and we are to be obedient to God.</p>
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Today we start a five sermon excursion into equipping ourselves for our individual journeys to Jerusalem with Jesus. Our topic today is God's word and how it is a gift for us ... it sustains us on our journeys and aids us in getting to our destinations, safe.

If we were reading this from Mark, we would just be told that Jesus went into the Desert and was tempted by Satan and that is it. Mark provides limited details, but in both Matthew and Luke the flavor of the dialogue is marked in its difference.

We are clearly told that Jesus is led into the wilderness by the Spirit and that there is a clear purpose for this wilderness journey: to be tempted by Satan.

Let's be clear here: the wilderness doesn't have McDonald's, Seven-elevens, and Starbucks every mile or two. We couldn't have given Jesus a gift card from any of those enterprises and have expected it to sustain him on his journey there. The desert – the wilderness -- is a place without visible support systems, and is often biblically a place where a person or a people go in order to be tested and refined. Hagar goes to the desert and encounters an Angel of God. Moses goes to the desert and encounters a burning bush, and he takes a people back to the desert and they will be refined and tested by God.

The desert is a place of testing, leading to purification. And while the normal support structure of McDonald's, Seven-eleven's, and Starbucks may not be present, he clearly brings with him support: his understanding of God's word.

Instead of gift cards from McDonalds, Seven-Eleven, or Starbucks, Jesus has been equipped for his journey with his study of God's word and he clearly knows how to rely on it in this time of temptation. It is a gift that will sustain him on his travels.

Jesus reminds Satan that there is more to life than only eating food, he reminds Satan that we are not to bargain with God, and he reminds Satan that God is the focus of our worship.

Dealing with Satan

A famous former Mayor of New York – Fiorello La Guardia once said: “The Devil is easy to identify. He appears when you're terribly tired and makes a very reasonable request which you know you shouldn't grant”.

Jesus has been fasting and with physical nourishment in a place of testing and refinement and using his power to convert a stone here or there into bread ... and maybe a goblet of wine ... was certainly within his grasp.

But Jesus understood his call ... he wasn't called to earth to provide for us the living illustration of what it looks like for a human being to be in total and perfect relationship with God (pause) and then use that portion of him that was 100% God in order to use those creative powers in cheap displays of magic. He was called here to live his life among us experiencing pain, hunger, hurt, isolation, and all the things that go with our lives.

And notice that Jesus answers Satan's offering with a biblical reference, food is important, but we also live through God's word.

What does it look like to live through God's Word?

What is it that Jesus reminds Satan? We live through *every* word that comes from God's mouth.

There is a joke I sometimes tell – at least I think it is a joke – Moses comes down from Mount Sinai and tells the Israelites “I have good news and bad news. The good news is I got him [God] down to ten. The bad news is that adultery is still in.” I hope we can laugh at that but at the same time see it for what it says about us. The real nature of the punch-line is that God sets the conditions for the relationship, not us. Said another way: We live in God's world, sustained by God's divine economy – God's divine structuring of this household we call the Creation. And God offers us principles by which we live:

Care for others

 Love others

 Love yourself

 Love God

 Be active in your love of God, yourself, and others.

I could go on, but you get the idea And the key is that it is *every* word that comes from God's mouth, and that includes those that we would wish and hope and desire to be left un-carved into that tablet before Moses comes down from the Holy Mountain to offer it to a stiff-necked, self-absorbed people, both then, and truth be told, now.

Every word that comes from God's mouth ...

The Devil quotes scripture as well (1 John 4?)

But if every word that comes from God's mouth is to be cherished and followed, then, how are we to know when the mouths of others are distorting or altering in some way God's word? Here in this passage on Jesus journey in the wilderness, the Devil quotes scripture as well.

In the movie *Dead Man Walking* a prison guard quotes scripture to Catholic Sister Jean Prejean played by Susan Sarandon and she replies with her own summary of appropriate scripture. The guard replies: "I ain't gonna get into no bible quoting contest with no nun, I'm gonna lose".

Jeannie Prejean dealt with a close minded person by reminding him of scripture. She most assuredly is not Satan. But let us remember, Satan can quote the bible and do we have the knowledge of Jeannie Prejean in order to provide quotes and context back in order to bring clarity to the biblical meaning? I would offer we need to be able to understand scripture in our daily travel and journeys, because Satan knows scripture very well ... and if La Guardia is right ... he will offer it to us in moments that seem reasonable and appropriate and we will not even recognize that the words are demonic in their potential application because we are tired.

Sadly, I would imagine many of us are just like that guard – know enough scripture to get ourselves into a contest with someone else, and not be able to even recognize the context or what it is that we need to say when we get scripture quoted back to us

Jesus is clear – part of the gifts we need to be given for us to handle our own wilderness experiences is an understanding of all of God's word ... not just those stories that we find to our liking and preference.

We are not called to bargain with God (almost like we should know this if we truly dine with God's word)

And if we are called to live by all of God's word, then, leading our lives in humble obedience to God's word is our life projects – and it isn't something that we offer to God in some kind of contract: I'll do this for you God if you do this for me. God wants us in for the whole deal: all of God's word applies to us and we structure our lives in humble obedience to God's word for us ... not bargaining with God on what we will do or won't do if God gives us what we are looking for.

What kind of God is that?

I'll go to church this Sunday if you get me strawberry shortcake now.

How many of us deal with God on that kind of a basis: God if you just grant me this one request, I will never be back here on my knees again, asking for you to bail me out of trouble again Until the next time I will be back

We are called to live our lives in humble obedience to God

Total, unconditional, humble obedience

We are reflecting on what it means to join Jesus on his trip to Jerusalem and what things from his life and ministry and word can we pick up and put in our own kit bags for that journey.

Let me observe – if all of us are carpenters, then, hammers will always be used for all of our household problems: clogged pipes or a painting challenge.

Part of our humble obedience to God is equipping ourselves in totality for that journey, and when life's challenges causes us to need hammers, we have hammers in our bag, when life's challenges causes us to need a plunger, we have a plunger in our bag, and when life's challenges causes us to need a paint brush, we have a paint brush in our bag.

We aren't trying to paint with a plunger, clean out a toilet stoppage with a hammer and drive nails with a paint brush.

Application within context of the theme: equipping ourselves for our Journey to Jerusalem

(Below is an outline of what I said)

My operations research background: we often use the tools we had in our bag – and they were not always the right tools. Key then is to keep expanding the tools we have in our bag and not relying on a too limited set.

Corollary to above: Sometimes we need wrenches when all we have are hammers. Key is to keep expanding the size of your kitbag and making it more capable of dealing with life circumstances.

<p>This Sermon was delivered at Stratmoor Hills UMC in Colorado Springs on February 10, 2008. The copyright belongs to C. Dennis Shaw and dates from February 10, 2008.</p>
