



Roanoke, Virginia

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“The Devil Within”

Matthew 4:1-11

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I have taken Mondays off since I started working at this church. When our organist, Marianne, first learned I’d be in the office on Fridays, she apologized in advance for the “distraction” she’d cause—Friday is her practice day, and my study is just on the other side of the organ console.

I told her not to worry. It wouldn’t be a distraction at all. And that’s been true—I enjoy hearing her play. It never bothers me.

But do you know what *does* make it hard to focus on Fridays?

The piano or the pipe organ *being tuned*.

*One long note at a time. ♪ Over and over again. ♪ It takes a while with a piano. ♪ With a pipe organ that has thousands of pipes, ♪ you can’t imagine how long it takes.

Silver lining, I have learned a few things from the people who tune our sanctuary instruments.

For instance, I learned from John Van Beek, who tunes the sanctuary piano, that if you strike a tuning fork and it vibrates at the same frequency as a piano string, that string will begin to vibrate too—even though it hasn’t been touched. Something outside the piano activates something inside. They meet in the vibration. They’re in tune.

Temptation works like that. Temptation only has pull when a chord is struck within us because it is in tune with something outside us.

I know—it doesn’t sound quite right to say that temptation is a matter of being “in tune” with something. But I think that’s how it works. A wallet is left behind on a park bench—that’s external. There’s no real temptation to steal the money it contains unless something inside you



responds to the opportunity. The opportunity and desire share a vibration. That's when temptation takes shape.

So how do we resist temptation?

- By removing the opportunity?
- Or by addressing what's already inside us that responds when the opportunity is there?

Our passage today is about temptation.

Jesus goes into the wilderness—something of a spiritual retreat. He seeks isolation, silence, clarity... He fasts for forty days and nights. Why?

To come to grips with what just happened before his retreat. His **baptism**.

Because, at his baptism, John charged him to raise up children of Abraham. To lead the people of Israel.

But what does that mean? To deliver Israel...

- From its oppressors?
- From Herod?
- From Rome?

Then, as he came out of the water, Jesus heard a voice from heaven say, *"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

What does *that* mean?

Is he to be a king, as was meant when David was called the "Son of God?" Will it mean power? Will it mean a throne?

Jesus goes into the wilderness to wrestle with these questions. And at the end of his 40-day fast when he is hungry and alone, vibration happens—temptation comes.

Listen to what happens.

4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. **2** He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. **3** The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

(pause)

4 But he answered,

"It is written,

'One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, **6** saying to him,

"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,



‘He will command his angels concerning you,’
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’”

(pause)

⁷ Jesus said to him,
“Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, ⁹ and he said to him,
“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

(pause)

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him,
“Away with you, Satan! for it is written,
‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

The devil comes to Jesus *to be his friend*. He offers three ways to help Jesus.

The devil is presented as “the tempter,” someone external to Jesus. And, of course, there are ways we should think of temptation being external. The temptations Jesus faces may sound distant from our lives—turning stones to bread, leaping from a tower, bowing to the devil—but what they represent is very real, and just as present in Roanoke as they were in the wilderness.

And here’s the part we may not want to hear about Jesus: These temptations are powerful **because they cause something to vibrate within him**. Something in him resonates. He is genuinely drawn to them.

And that “something” is not selfish or wicked.

- It’s his desire to do good.
- To be who the voice at his baptism declared him to be: *God’s Son*.
- To live into what John charged him to do: to raise up the children of Abraham.
- To love the people, to lead them, to save them.

So, the temptations Jesus faces aren’t appeals to base instincts. They’re not obviously evil. They look like wisdom. They feel like compassion. They sound like great ideas from a friend—just needing a little compromise to get rolling.

That’s what makes them powerful. Jesus is tempted not in spite of his goodness, but because of it—because he wants to do good, just as we do.



To understand what's happening here, we need to shift our focus, at least for this sermon—from the devil “out there” to the desires within us that temptation activates, like a tuning fork does with a string.

Brian Zahnd puts it this way:

“The temptation came to Christ in the same way it comes to all of us—in the form of dark thoughts that somehow enter our mind, thoughts that we don’t always immediately recognize as originating with the powers of darkness.”¹

So today, let's imagine these temptations rising from within Jesus—as ***fantasies***.

That's worth pondering, because it's often through fantasies that we cause the greatest harm. I can't help but briefly mention the latest school shooting in Minneapolis.

I don't claim to know what was going on in the shooter's mind. But in tragedy after tragedy like this, we hear of violent fantasies long nurtured in secret, then turned outward in horrific acts of violence. And even some of our responses to such violence—oversimplified solutions, like more guns to stop gunsⁱ—can be shaped more by our own unexamined fantasies than by anything that might actually heal or help.

So, painful though it is, let's be mindful of the power of unchallenged thoughts—how some fantasies can deceive and destroy.

And with that in mind, let's turn back to Jesus—our Savior—and consider *his* fantasies on *how to save the world*. Three temptations that seem, at first glance, not just plausible, but maybe even good. They *sound so right*.

First temptation- “[Command these stones to become loaves of bread.](#)”

After forty days of fasting, just satisfying his own hunger would be temptation enough. But the deeper temptation is more than personal—it's missional.

Jesus is about to begin his public ministry. What better ministry is there than to meet people's needs?

- Feed them.
- Heal them.
- Give them what they long for—and they'll follow.

The world is full of people who are hungry, hurting, and lost. Isn't helping them part of his calling?

Of course it is. But here's the temptation:

- To build a kingdom by meeting needs in exchange for loyalty.
- To reduce God's reign to a transaction—
 - [“Follow me, and I'll give you what you want.”](#) (*Cha Ching*)

¹ Brian Zahnd, *Beauty Will Save the World*, Charisma Press, 2021, p. 51.



And it works.

- Politicians do it.
- Corporations thrive on it.
- Even churches fall for it—winning allegiance by promising blessings.

Something in us vibrates when we're given the opportunity to draw people in by giving them what they want. It feels effective. It feels compassionate. And it works—as long as we keep it up.

Now, let's be clear: Jesus *will* feed the hungry. He will heal the sick, welcome the outcast, and respond to real human need—not out of strategy, but out of compassion. That's the difference.

Because as a *strategy* to draw people toward the good news of the Gospel, it actually backfires.

Jump to John's Gospel.²

Jesus is in the wilderness again, teaching a large crowd—5,000 according to the other Gospels. When he feeds them with the loaves and fish, they are amazed. And what do they want to do?

They want to *make him king*.

Free bread is a winning platform.

I am sure Jesus feels the vibration again, to accept the coronation offered because he can give them bread.

But Jesus refuses.

He walks away from the crowd. As Brian Zahnd puts it, he resists “the temptation to build his kingdom around the promise of material prosperity.”³

When the crowd finds him the next day, look at why they come— not to hear more teaching but to be given more bread. This time, Jesus doesn't offer seconds. Instead, he says something strange—something unsettling:

“**Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.**”

Suddenly, they aren't hungry anymore. The miracle worker has become a mystery. And most of them walk away.

Why? Because Jesus is inviting them into a relationship, *not* a transaction---a flesh-and-blood relationship with him, and through him, with God.

He tries to explain this to his disciples: He hasn't come to offer bread that perishes. He's come to offer the bread of life. Because in the end, bread is not enough. We need more than that to live. We need more than what bread represents—more than good food to eat, nice clothes to wear, a good salary with benefits, a dependable car, a comfortable home, a memorable vacation.

Most people know this at some level.

Most people know that beneath the surface of all that, if genuine, loving relationships are not being served by them, there's an emptiness that longs for something more—

² John 6.

³ Zahn, p. 52.



- for meaning, for purpose,
- for some deeper truth that can't be bought, only given.

The temptation to feed people in exchange for their loyalty is real—but Jesus came not to win customers, but to offer communion.

Second Temptation- *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...”*

Again, we're imagining these temptations not as conversations with a red-suited devil on Jesus' shoulder, but as internal fantasies—ideas stirred up during forty days of hunger and solitude. So picture this:

- Jesus imagines himself standing atop the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem.
- Below, a crowd gathers.
- He leaps—falling, falling—*the people watching, gasping...* and then—he's caught midair by angels.
- Cheers erupt!
 - What harm has been done?
 - Look at the good accomplished:
 - No doubt left.
 - Wouldn't that prove he's God's Son?
 - Wouldn't that silence the skeptics?
 - Wouldn't that win the crowd's trust— even when their desires aren't met?

This is the *Grand Gesture Temptation*—the temptation to prove we matter by doing something dramatic, undeniable, impressive;

- to prove ourselves,
- to silence doubts about us,
- to force belief in us.

We know this temptation. Maybe especially in our younger years, we fantasize about doing something that finally earns respect or admiration—maybe even the attention of someone we hope will *finally* see us.

The culture is saturated with it:

- The cowboy who saves the town,
- The superhero who saves the world,
- The underdog who shocks the critics,
- The romantic who makes the big, impossible-to-resist, gesture.

Recently, our family watched the Netflix film *K-Pop Demon Hunters*, which—believe it or not—has over 236 million views- more views than anything that has ever been on Netflix. On the



surface, it's a wild anime adventure with girl bands, cults, and music magic. If I explained the plot, you might think I'd lost the thread.

But beneath it all there is something deeply relatable: It is about young women longing to be seen, to be admired, to find what makes them matter. They end up saving the world.

It's fantasy—but it resonates.

Because we all want that:

- To be validated.
- To prove we're enough.
- To have people *see* us,
 - *believe* in us.

That vibration—the temptation to prove something—is real for Jesus.

And what makes the temptation especially compelling is that the people *want this* from him. They would love to have proof that he is the messiah in the same way that we long for proof of God's existence. Remove the doubt, silence the critics and make faith easy... maybe even irresistible?

But Jesus knows that is not how faith works precisely because that is not how life works.

And so he doesn't jump. He refuses the stunt. He resists the temptation to *prove* himself—or to demand that God do the same.

Because faith isn't about *forcing* a conclusion. It's about trusting in relationship, even when questions remain.

If we're going to join Jesus in his Gospel cause, it won't be because we've mastered our doubts. And it won't be because God protects us from the cost of living by faith—or from dying.

It will be because we choose to answer vulnerable love by loving vulnerably.

Certainty will not save us.

What saves us is selfless love freely given—a love that invites us, but never coerces us, to become selfless too.

And that brings us to the third temptation—*“All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”*

If the first temptation was about meeting needs, and the second about proving worth, this one is about **taking over... taking control**. It's the temptation of empire—using power to conquer, command, and coerce. Brian Zahnd puts it well:

“It is the temptation to become a king in the way of kings.”⁴

And the way of kings—whether its Pharaoh, Caesar, or any modern ruler—is the way of force.

In Jesus' case, who wants God's will to be done, it is the temptation to *force the good*! It is the temptation of the “benevolent dictatorship”: to dominate the world in the name of peace, and—if necessary—to use violence to achieve it.

⁴ Ibid, p. 55.



This temptation is hard to resist—especially when others with far worse intentions are wreaking havoc. Shouldn't Caesar be overthrown? If charity begins at home, shouldn't someone take out Herod?

That's how wars start. That's how cycles of power and violence perpetuate themselves—when we believe the only way to *change* the world is to *take it over*.

But don't dismiss this as a temptation only for kings. Shrink it down to everyday size, and it's the voice that says:

- Whatever it takes to win the argument.
- Whatever it takes to protect your reputation.
- Whatever it takes to fix the problem—
 - even if it means
 - manipulating,
 - pressuring,
 - or bulldozing others in the process.

It's the temptation to believe that **good ends justify any means**, that noble goals erase moral responsibility for what we do along the way.

And how can this temptation not vibrate within Jesus—the desire to force the good and destroy forever the enemy?

But Jesus refuses. He knows you cannot build the Kingdom of God with the violence of Caesar. You cannot

- force love,
- manipulate faith,
- coerce peace,
- or legislate a heart to be moral.

So, later, when Peter draws his sword in the garden, ready to meet violence with violence, Jesus says: “**Put away your sword.**” And when Peter insists, Jesus says even stronger: “**Get behind me, Satan.**” Same temptation for Jesus, still vibrating, but Jesus doesn't give into it.

And in resisting it, look at what Jesus does: He goes to his death not with a sword but with *love*. It may sound impractical—but history has proven over and over that *reconciliation, not vengeance, brings lasting peace*.

Just as a tuning fork causes an internal string to vibrate, these three temptations strike chords within us as they did with Jesus—our desires, our fears, our arrogant self-righteousness, our certainties our longings for significance, control, or reassurance.

I wish *we* could make it past these temptations as cleanly as Jesus did. Personal history and the history of nations have proven that we can't help but try to

- buy love,
- prove our worth,
- and justify terrible means to achieve our ends.



But we can work on it. When we feel the vibration, perhaps we can turn to God as Jesus did—grounded in trust, rooted in love—asking God to strike different chords...—chords that resonate with love, grace, and the ways of reconciliation.

Jesus walks out of the wilderness hungry, yes—but not hollowed out. He doesn't just leave the wilderness—he helps us through the wilderness and stay *out of tune* with fear, pride, and vengeance.

Let's pray for God's help in staying out of tune.

Charge

Go from this place mindful that temptation strikes the strings already in your heart. Walk in Christ's way—choosing love over power, patience over pride, and reconciliation over vengeance. Let your life resonate with God's grace.

Benediction

May God give you courage to resist what would lead you astray. May Christ, who endured the wilderness, guide you in paths of love and peace. And may the Spirit tune your heart to echo God's selfless love. Go in peace—and get out of tune with fear, pride, and vengeance.



ⁱ Studies Addressing the Fantasy that “More Guns will Stop Guns”

1. "Good Guys with Guns"—The Myth of Arming for Safety

- **Mass shootings remain largely unhindered by armed bystanders or officers.** Multiple high-profile incidents—Uvalde, Buffalo, El Paso—have demonstrated that even trained and armed individuals often cannot prevent large-scale violence once it starts. Often, the attacker ends the act before intervention is possible. [TIME+1](#)
- **Armed presence may escalate violence.** A 2021 study found that school shootings occurred at a 2.83 times higher rate in settings with armed guards compared to those without and suggested that shooters may become more aggressive in the presence of weapons. [Vox](#)

2. "More Guns, Less Crime?"—A Refuted Hypothesis

- **Academic studies critical of it.** Research by Ayres and Donohue has repeatedly debunked the "More Guns, Less Crime" thesis, showing that increased gun prevalence does not reduce—and may even increase—violent crime. [RAND Corporation](#)
- **Scientific consensus doesn't support right-to-carry laws reducing crime.** Reviews have found that these laws often result in higher rates of violent crime, particularly assault. [The Washington Post](#)

3. Effective Alternatives and Targeted Interventions

- **Community-based programs reduce gun violence.** For instance, New York City's *Cure Violence* model showed a **14% drop in shootings**, with results sustained over time and positive spillover into nearby areas. [arXiv](#)
- **Focused enforcement works.** Boston's *Operation Ceasefire* targeted key offenders and gang-related violence, leading to dramatic reductions in youth homicides and gun assaults. [Wikipedia](#)

4. Mixed Evidence on Gun Control Laws

- **High-capacity magazine bans:** Some studies show fewer mass shooting deaths in states with these bans; others find overall impacts limited. [Wikipedia](#)
- **Assault weapons bans:** A 2019 study linked such bans with a significant drop in mass shooting fatalities during their enactment, although overall homicide impacts were modest. [Wikipedia](#)
- **Other gun policy measures:** Evidence is mixed, but there's compelling support for child access prevention laws and background checks, while stand-your-ground laws are linked with increased homicides. [The Washington Post](#)

In Summary

- **"More guns to stop guns" largely fails to deliver on its promise.** The idea of armed civilians serving as an effective bulwark against violence has weak support and, in some cases, correlates with worse outcomes.
- **Targeted, community-focused approaches**—like violence intervention and disciplined enforcement—show genuinely positive results.
- **Gun policy reforms have mixed but promising evidence**, particularly when focused on prevention and responsible ownership rather than proliferation.

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