

Obedience or Disobedience?

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This morning we're going to be reading from Matthew 4, verses 1 through 11. And to those of you who have ever taught English in elementary, middle school or high school, I just want to apologize right up front. In the process of finding that one thing that I want to communicate and that one thing that I want you to remember, I'm going to break the grammar rules. So, pay attention! If you're an English teacher, it's going to be like fingernails on a chalkboard. Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a forty-day period of penitence and prayer that begins on Ash Wednesday and can help prepare us for the Easter celebration to come. Lent became a forty-day retreat during the 7th century, to coincide with the forty days spent by Christ in the desert, which is relevant to the passage that we're going to be reading from today. So, would you please stand with me as we read from God's Word?

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

But he answered, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said 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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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

Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.'"

Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

This is the word of the Lord and we are grateful for it. Please be seated.

Every year, Cadet Command sends upwards of 10,000 cadets to what is called Advanced Camp. They're staggered in groups of 1200, and those groups of 1200 are broken into two groups of 600. They work together; they live together; they go to the field together; and, most importantly, they compete with one another for who gets what jobs as the upcoming leaders in the US Army. The best ones will get their first pick, and the rest of us get what is left over. Historically, the camp was held at Fort Lewis in Washington state, but I was there as they were transitioning the event from Fort Lewis to Fort Knox, Kentucky. And the facilities at Fort Knox were not ready. Not even close! I was working twenty hours a day to get ready. And, when we received our cadets, we were in the middle of a heatwave that the post was not ready for. Cadets had quite

literally died in previous regiments, and I was working to make sure that that was not the case with our group. About every five days I had to do laundry and, killing two birds with one stone, I would call Sarah while I was waiting for the load to finish. I had four hours to sleep, four hours to get the laundry done, and four hours to get a phone call in to home. And they were all the same four hours! My blood pressure was off the charts, and the doctor was telling me I had to report every morning. When I asked him if it stayed high, would he send me home, he said, "No, I'm just going to tell you to go see the doctor when you get there." Then I said, "I don't have time for this. What if I promised to just go see the doctor and we called it even?" He answered, "Look, Major. Right now, you are non-deployable." I stood toe-to-toe with him and I said, "You don't seem to understand, Colonel. I'm surrounded by cadets. If you sent me to Iraq, my blood pressure would come down!" I was having trouble sleeping. I couldn't shut my mind off as it would continue to work on problems well into the precious little time allotted for sleep. I finally asked the guys at the office if they had brought any reading material. I was handed a copy of "20 Things Every Atheist Needs to Be Able to Explain to Their Christian Friends." It was all that was offered, and so I said, "Thank you." I thought I should probably know these arguments anyway. It was definitely not on my preferred reading list.

I was holding it together, when it finally came crashing down. I was a veteran. When I could tell that the housing assignments weren't properly accounted for, I went to the housing space. I found my space. It was a little tiny room with two beds, and I spread my stuff out so that anybody looking through that window could see that this was already occupied by at least two people. But they caught on. And when it all came crashing down, I arrived in my room to find a brand-new Second Lieutenant standing at the position of attention. And I think, if we were outdoors, he would have saluted. He said, "I'm Lieutenant so-and-so reporting for duty." He hadn't even been to his Basic Course yet. Someone had discovered I was living alone, and before I could even get my door closed, I was receiving the sharpest salute I had seen in quite a while. I returned the salute, put the lieutenant at ease, and said, "Listen, Lieutenant, this is where I come to stop being in the Army long enough to sleep. If you salute me, address me as 'Sir,' or even hint that we are soldiers, I will make this living arrangement very uncomfortable for you. Outside this room, if there is even one moment of impropriety, I will make this living arrangement equally uncomfortable for you." Looking past me, he saw the book lying next to my bunk. "So, you're an atheist, too, S—?" He almost said "Sir," and I chuckled. "No," I responded, "it was the only book I could find to help settle my mind. But just out of curiosity, why are you an atheist?" Over the next few weeks, I learned of his struggles growing up in a divorced home. He told me how he and his mother read the Bible and prayed, and yet it never seemed like God ever gave them anything to answer their prayers. At one point he looked at me and he said, "I just got tired of trying to obey all the rules and never getting anything in return."

Jesus said, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me." And yet I think most of us can relate to this young lieutenant. We struggle and we pray and, more often than not, we wonder why we're having so much difficulty being obedient to Jesus. Oscar Wilde even quipped that the only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. But is that the best we can hope for in terms of our own obedience as Christians?

Jesus was about to begin his ministry. He had just been baptized by John the Baptist when he was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Would it surprise you to discover that I have often considered this story contrived, created, or arranged in a way that seems artificial and unrealistic? Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights. I mean, can you get any more biblical number than forty days and forty nights, not to mention the challenges associated with actually fasting for that period of time? (I've been hungry, but I don't think I've been hungry for forty days and forty nights. Googling it, I'm not even sure it's possible; there's some debate.) The devil himself is the tempter? Jesus is taken magically from the wilderness to the pinnacle of the temple and the Holy City? Next, they travel to a high mountain? And finally, the story concludes with Jesus being ministered to by angels? It seems artificial and unrealistic to me. However, none of these things are outside the power of God nor, if you are uncomfortable with the miraculous, are they outside the power of rational explanation. But that's not the sense of contrived I mean. I mean contrived in the sense that this situation seems deliberately created rather than arising naturally or spontaneously. Jesus and God the Father have arranged to use Satan for their purposes to teach us something.

I was once given the task of generating the background noise for a platoon-on-platoon force training. Our commanders decided that four tanks were going to square off against four tanks, but the platoon leaders in those tanks needed to have all of the radio traffic that would be associated with the coordination of an entire battalion. I drafted an enemy scenario, and the operations officer and I drafted a notional battalion plan, and we scripted the radio traffic that could result. I commandeered six Humvees and six radio operators and went about simulating the radio traffic. The best part about this is, in the midst of it, my commander said, "Hey, we probably ought to train the Tactical Operations Center for the battalion. They can use that same traffic to go through their whole thing." That was my place of duty. And so, I would get up there and we would do our briefings on this whole notional thing, and the commander would say, "Well, what do you think the enemy's going to do, Intelligence Officer?" and I'd say, "He's going to do this." Of course, he did that because I had scripted it. And the commander looked at me like I was a genius!

The temptations of Jesus in the desert have been contrived by God the Father and God the Son in order for us to get something out of it. First, Jesus knew he had been sent by the Father and, more specifically, that he had been sent by the Father to die. Only three chapters into 21 chapters of the Gospel of John, Jesus drops that famous bombshell: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." One chapter later, in that same Gospel, Jesus would tell his disciples that his food is to do the will of Him who sent him and to accomplish His work. Jesus's will was to be obedient to the One who sent him. But what was the will of the One who sent him? We read in the Gospel of Mark: "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." During our Global Impact Celebration, we talked about being called. Imagine being called to suffer and die. The temptations of Jesus were a direct assault on Jesus's willingness to be obedient to that calling. Beale and

Carson describe it this way: "The devil wants to find out what kind of Son Jesus will be. In each instance, the devil tempts Jesus to bypass the suffering that God has marked out for him, and to use his power in a triumphalist self-glorifying fashion."

So, in the first temptation, the devil challenges Jesus: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Jesus was hungry, and apparently God the Father wasn't meeting that need. Ever feel like that's where you are? "Go ahead, Jesus. Just meet that need on your own." When Jesus responds, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God," he is ironically pulling an Old Testament quote, from a time in which God supernaturally provided the Israelites with bread from heaven in the form of manna. But the principle is that there is something that is of higher priority than the very food you eat; something the necessity of which is required for life. They are the very words of God. And God again was going to supernaturally provide for that need as well. Where do we find God's Word today? Is this Bible any less miraculous than manna from heaven? While we don't have the original manuscripts, did you know that the original manuscripts can be recreated almost entirely from those Christians who quoted them in their early writings? Did you know that there are 5686 Greek manuscripts in existence today for just the New Testament? No other ancient writing even comes close. Let's not forget to mention the men and women who gave their lives protecting and ensuring that you could get a copy in your own language. Bread from heaven seems a minor miracle. Getting God's Word to you through the hands of men, now there's a challenge. And yet, it has been done. We find in these pages that Jesus claims to be that very Word of God: the bread of life, and the resurrection and the life. Jesus knew that what man needed only God could provide, and that need was so much more than mere bread. And the devil, I imagine, was caught a little bit off guard.

In the first temptation Jesus blew the devil out of the water quoting scripture, and so Satan's going to come at him with scripture: "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 lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Now, if you're at all familiar with the Gospels, the four stories of Jesus's ministry, then you are aware of the stubbornness of the Pharisees. Jesus does miracle after miracle, and still the Pharisees demand a sign. They wanted the Messiah to come in on a white horse, throw off the power of Rome, reestablish the Jewish kingdom and, most importantly, make them all rich and powerful. Until they saw that sign, they would not believe. The devil's temptation was that if Jesus threw himself down from the temple and the Pharisees saw Jesus lifted up by the angels, they could not deny that he was the Messiah. They would accept him, and he would not have to suffer. What's interesting to me is that Jesus's response to Satan actually deals with the sign that the Pharisees are demanding as well. He responds, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." No. No trying to manipulate God into doing what you want him to do, or trying to manipulate God so that you can avoid suffering and find an easier way. To manipulate God is to not be in a position of obedience, it's to declare that you know better.

In the final temptation, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, the very kingdoms Jesus had been sent to suffer for. And the devil says, "All these I will give you

if you will fall down and worship me.” It's a subtle temptation. In essence, the devil is saying: “You can trust me more than the Father. The Father is calling you to suffer. But if you will worship Me, I will give these kingdoms to you.” It's a direct attack on the goodness of God. Satan is in essence saying, “I am gooder than God.” (There it is. Did you catch it? I hope my mother-in-law is watching!) Why would a good God call you to suffer? Has anybody ever asked that question of their own lives? It seems like I find myself there every other day, especially as I get older. My lower back hurts, my knees hurt. (I have a hard time complaining, though, because I've met a lot of you guys!) Jesus again quotes Scripture: “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” He is quoting from a passage in Deuteronomy, where Moses is exhorting the Israelites: “When the Lord your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, to give you--with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant--and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the Lord. Him you shall serve.” Although this text is referencing the promised land of Israel, the promised land here is a type. It's a description of what we are going to inherit. Did you guys hear that? I don't have to build anything; I don't have to dig anything; I don't have to plant anything. And yet I can eat until I'm full. Oh my gosh, I cannot wait! For you and me, God's goodness rests on the hope of Christ and what He accomplished on the cross. He has made those who believe joint heirs with Jesus of the very kingdom of God that is to come. What is gooder than that?

What we find then, in these three temptations, are three foundational principles that, when we cling to them, ensure that we will remain obedient and faithful, confirming our election. Do you want to be obedient? Then know that your eternal life depends on the very words of God. Do you know them? Could you spar with Satan in the way that Jesus is sparring with Satan? Could you spar with your neighbor? Number two, trying to get God to do what you want is not obedience, it's declaring that you are gooder than God. And number three, which is the foundation of them all, God is goodest.

After the crucifixion, Jesus appeared to his disciples and said to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” We've got to be obedient to that sending. What has Jesus sent you to? There will probably be some suffering in it. Has He called you to confront your addictions? Has He called you to live out your wedding vows? Has He called you to honor your father and mother? Has He called you to provide for your children? What is Jesus sending you to do, and are you obedient in that sending? How hard would it be for the devil or other false teachers to persuade you, if you lived as if your life depended on the words of God? There's a good chance I would be out of work as your pastor. What if we just resigned ourselves to what God wants? Don't you know that life in obedience to God is abundantly more than life in disobedience? And yes, that is factoring in the suffering. A life of obedient suffering is by far more abundant, infinitely more abundant, than a life of disobedient ease.

God has more in store for you than you can possibly fathom. What if we resigned ourselves to what God wants, as if we are fatalistically resigning ourselves to a most

unfortunate fate? Never forget, you are resigning yourself to an infinitely gooder God. Let's pray.

Lord, we come before You humble, knowing that often we fail. Often, we find ourselves in disobedience. And yet, You showed us what that obedience looks like. And not only did You show us obedience by obediently doing what Your Father had sent You to do, but by articulating to us how we can be obedient, too. Lord, help us to live our lives in Your Word. Help us to subordinate our will to Yours. And help us to remember how good You are. In Your name, amen.