

“TEMPTED LIKE US”

Over the past two weeks, we have studied Christ’s ascension back into heaven and his subsequent gift of the Spirit to the church at Pentecost. Those events belong to Christ’s state of exaltation, the state that he entered when he was raised from the dead. Today, as we return to our series in the Gospel of Mark, our focus shifts to Christ’s state of humiliation, the state that began with his incarnation and ended with his death on the cross. In the words of the apostle Paul, when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh and blood, he made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). The incarnation was an act of supreme humility and condescension. The author of life took upon himself a body that was subject to death; the giver of the law subjected himself to the curse of the law. And he did this in order to redeem us; to save those who stand under the condemnation of the law and live under the specter of death.

Thou who are God beyond all praising,

All for love’s sake becamest man;

Stooping so low, but sinners raising,

Heav’nward by thine eternal plan.

Jesus’ experience of temptation was one aspect of his humiliation. As God, Christ would not have been able to be tempted by the devil. God cannot be tempted. But as the God-

man, as the Son of God in true human flesh, he could. Here is one of the great profundities of the incarnation. Jesus was fully human in every single respect with only one exception: he had no sin. Unlike us, he did not inherit a sinful nature from Adam. However, his body was subject to the effects of sin. It was a body that could be harmed, a body that could grow sick, a body that would one day die. Jesus got hungry and thirsty. He grew tired. He experienced pain. He had emotions. And, as we see in this text, he had to endure the same temptations that we face. He really was a man just like us.

We have to admit that there is much here that we will never be able to understand. How could God, who is majestic in the splendor of his holiness, ever be tempted to commit a sin? That is something that remains a mystery to us. Nevertheless, there are a number of things that we can understand about Jesus' experience of temptation. First, we know that it was God's will that he face this particular temptation from Satan. The Spirit of God, who had just descended upon Christ at his baptism, now drives him out into a remote part of the wilderness, where he stays for forty days and faces the assaults of the devil. This was part of Jesus' role as our mediator with God. It was part of the suffering that he had to endure on our behalf.

If it was God's will for Jesus to be tempted, we can be sure that it is also God's will that you and I face the temptations that we face. Being a Christian does not free you from temptation. On the contrary, as Alexander Whyte observes,

“[O]nly death will release you from some of your worst trials and temptations...the holier you are, and the more like Christ you become, the more awful, and the more continual, will your temptations and trials become.” (*The Walk, Conversation, and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 112-13)

Temptation is a part of the Christian life. The temptations that plague us each and every day are not just a matter of chance. Ultimately, God is in control of our temptations. He intends them. We see a clear example of this in the two Old Testament accounts of how David gave in to the temptation to take a census of the people of Israel. In 2 Samuel 24:1, it says that the Lord incited David to go and number Israel. But 1 Chronicles 21:1 says that Satan incited David to number Israel. God does not do the tempting himself, but he intends it and he uses it to accomplish his purposes. Those purposes are summarized in our Westminster Confession of Faith as follows,

“The most wise, righteous, and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant

dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.” (WCF 5.5)

What might the Lord be seeking to accomplish through the particular temptations that you are struggling with at this time in your life? Might he be disciplining you for some past sin? Could he be humbling you by giving you a better understanding of the depths of your depravity? Is he leading you into a deeper dependence upon Christ alone for deliverance from your sins? Is he teaching you to be more watchful against future temptations to sin? Think upon this, and make it your habit to do so on a regular basis for as long as you live. God had a purpose for the temptations that Christ had to endure, and he has a purpose for your temptations as well.

But what were God’s purposes for the temptations that Jesus experienced in the wilderness for those forty days? God did not need to chastise Christ or expose his sinfulness, because he had no sin. Why did the Spirit of God drive the Son of God out into a barren, desolate country, where he fasted for forty days and nights (as Matthew tells us) and then, in his weakened condition, had to face these assaults from the devil? Why was the Son of God subjected to such abasement? We can understand that his participation in our humanity required him to endure temptation, but why this particular episode of temptation, a series of temptations made even more difficult by Jesus’ physical

isolation and hunger? It is clear that something of great importance took place when Jesus faced Satan alone out in that desert. Three out of the four Gospel writers record this account for us. What makes it so significant?

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is important because it is yet another demonstration of the Bible's federal theology. We saw another example of federal theology in the preceding passage in Mark, where Jesus had to undergo John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins even though he had no sins of his own. Jesus had to be baptized because of his solidarity with us in God's plan of salvation, because of his union with us in the covenant of grace. That is what we mean by the phrase "federal theology." It describes how God enters into covenants with mankind through the use of covenant mediators, covenant representatives. Adam was the first covenant mediator, representing all humanity in the first covenant, sometimes referred to as the covenant of works. Adam, along with his wife Eve, were the only human beings to have experienced something comparable to what Jesus experienced in his wilderness encounter with Satan. Like Jesus, they too were without sin when the serpent crept into the garden and enticed them to break God's law. And, because of Adam's representative role, their failure had tragic consequences for all mankind, resulting in the fall of the entire human race. And that is why the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness for those forty days. In this encounter with the Tempter, Jesus is shown to be the new covenant mediator, the last

Adam, the One who has the power to undo the effects of the fall. In a sense, it is the Garden of Eden all over again.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, yet he did not sin (see Heb. 4:15). And for this reason, we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. Jesus knows the power of temptation. He knows our frailty. He knows the extent of our need. And this gives us great confidence as we draw near to God through Christ's mediation, because we know that he looks upon us with perfect understanding and perfect compassion.

But some might question this. Some might doubt that Jesus is truly able to sympathize with us in our temptations. How can he sympathize with us when his identity as the Son of God gave him an advantage that we do not have? Jesus was able to withstand every temptation that he ever faced. As a man, he was tempted as we are, but his identity as the Son of God enabled him to overcome temptation's power. Isn't that a bit unfair? We find a helpful response to this argument in C.S. Lewis' classic work *Mere Christianity*. Lewis admits that Jesus' identity as God did give him an advantage when it came to resisting temptation. But Lewis also points out that this is the only way that Jesus is able to help us. We need someone stronger than us to save us from our sin. A man who is drowning in a river does not respond to the man who gives him a hand from the river bank by saying, "No, it's not fair! You have an advantage!" Yes, the man on the bank has an

advantage, but that is just the point. That advantage is the only reason why he can be of any help to the drowning man. (*Mere Christianity*, 61) And so it is with us. The only way Jesus can be of any help in saving us is if he is not caught in the torrent of sin himself.

Another objection that could be raised when it comes to Jesus' ability to sympathize with us in our temptations is the claim that Christ's temptations were somehow less difficult than the temptations that we face. We give in to temptation all the time. How could Jesus really know what we experience in our temptations when he has never fallen to temptation's power himself? How can he truly identify with us in our struggle against temptation? On the surface, this might seem to make sense, but it is actually the direct opposite of the truth. The fact that Jesus never succumbed to temptation means that he knows its power even better than we do. Think about it. It is only the man who keeps on resisting a temptation who comes to experience the full force of that temptation. The man who gives in with little resistance never knows just how difficult it would have been to keep on saying no. He gave in far too easily. So, in this sense, Jesus knows the power of temptation better than any of us. He is the only man who stood up to its full force for an entire lifetime, and he never gave in to it.

The Son of God subjected himself to Satan's temptations to sin in order to save you from your sin. Do you know that you are a sinner? Not just imperfect or flawed or prone to

make mistakes, but a wretched, willful sinner? If you do know yourself as a sinner, then you can take comfort in these words from the 19th century missionary scholar John Duncan:

“Sin is the handle by which I get Christ. I take a verse in which God has put Christ and sin together. I cannot always put my finger upon Christ and say, ‘Christ belongs to me;’ but I can put my finger upon sin and say, ‘Sin belongs to me.’ I take that word, for instance, ‘The Son of Man is come to save that which was lost.’ Yes, lost, lost, - I’m lost; I put my finger upon that word and say, ‘I’m the lost one; I’m lost.’ Well, I find that ‘the Son of Man is come to save the lost;’ and I cry out ‘What God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.’” (Stuart, *The Life of John Duncan*, 97)

Here, in our text this morning, we have two verses in which God has put Christ and sin together. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the most holy and almighty God, was tempted to sin. Christ set aside his glory, came into this world, and lived in a state of humiliation for over thirty years until he was put to a shameful death on a cross. Why? Because you and I really are miserable sinners. We continually break God’s law, and we live under its curse; but Christ perfectly fulfilled the law, and he broke its curse. We grow resentful and embittered as we face the hardships, indignities, and infirmities of human life in this fallen world; but Christ endured the very same things while maintaining perfect

submission and trust towards his heavenly Father. We succumb to temptation all the time, often with very little resistance; but Christ felt the full force of temptation over an entire lifetime, and he never gave in. That is why he is the Savior. As B.B. Warfield once wrote:

“As we survey [these things about the life that Jesus lived]...we are not only observing the proofs of the truth of his humanity, and not merely regarding the most perfect example of a human life which is afforded by history, but are contemplating the atoning work of the Saviour in its fundamental elements. The cup which he drank to its bitter dregs was not his cup but our cup; and he needed to drink it only because he was set upon our salvation.” (*The Person and Work of Christ*, 145)