

Basic Training: No Shortcuts
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 119:107-112; 1 Corinthians 10:13; Matthew 4:1-11

Friends, our final Scripture reading tonight comes from Matthew 4:1-11. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the insert from your bulletin to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "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.'" 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.'" Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do 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 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.'" Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him."

Basic training – the stuff that's so important that everybody's got to learn it. We're hear about it in the military – a few of you might have gone through boot camp. But every job has basic training, the core of what you've got to know. I had two weeks of training in a call center; it takes three years of seminary for most pastors to be ordained. Every job is different.

There are the basics of the Christian life, too. We've gone through Matthew's account of Jesus' birth leading up to the start of His public ministry. In our new series, Matthew will take us from Jesus' baptism up through the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus gives us the basics of living in the Kingdom of God. We'll see core concepts of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and we'll be able to celebrate His love for us in all that He did and taught.

Today's passage is the start of our basic training and proof that Jesus is the perfect One to lead that training. We need someone we trust to show us the way to the Father. Have you ever thought of Jesus as a drill sergeant? Probably not. Drill sergeants get a bad rap; we all know the stereotype. One of my former racquetball buddies is a drill sergeant – fantastic guy. But his job is not to be your buddy or even your friend. His job is not to make sure you pass. His job is more serious than that. The drill sergeant's job is to make sure that, as far as it depends on him, you don't die. He has one purpose – to take green recruits and make them into a fighting force that will support each other when life and death are on the line.

Jesus expects perfection – in a few weeks, we'll hear that Christians are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. His job is to make us Kingdom-ready through His sacrifice for us and through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. He asks us to trust Him completely, without reservation. Today's passage shows He is worthy of that trust because He has personally faced the devil and sin and come out triumphant.

Jesus has just been baptized. It's a spiritual mountaintop experience. Then the Spirit does something unexpected – He leads Jesus out into the wilderness for forty days. Both the place and the amount of time are spiritually important. The wilderness was the proving ground for the Hebrews when God rescued them out of Egypt. It's where they received the law and promises of God. It's also where they failed miserably to trust Him, and the generation that left Egypt died in that wilderness. God took their children into the promised land. The Hebrews were in the wilderness for forty years. When Moses went on the mountain and received the law from God, he went without food for forty days. But he sinned, too, and wasn't able to enter into Israel. The Hebrews failed their test, but now Israel has a new representative – Jesus.

So after forty days of fasting and time with God, Satan appears on the scene. We aren't sure if he's been there the whole time tempting Jesus or not, but we're at a critical point. Jesus is at His weakest – physically, mentally, and emotionally. He is never more vulnerable than at this moment. And that's when the devil attacks.

What's so insidious about the three attacks the devil makes on Jesus is that none of the things Jesus is tempted with are wrong for Him in the long-term. There's nothing wrong with Jesus eating. Jesus' fast isn't required, so breaking it isn't a sin. It isn't wrong for Jesus to desire the love of His Father and the adoration of His people, which are rightfully His. There's nothing bad about Jesus ruling the nations – again, Scripture tells us that they belong to Him.

What's wrong about all the temptations is that Satan offers shortcuts to what Jesus desires. Just as he tempted Adam and Eve with a shortcut to what they wanted – to be like God, a really great thing – he tempts Jesus with a simpler pathway to the ends He is striving towards. Making bread out of stones would have Jesus use His power for His own selfish ends. Throwing Himself off the temple would get the attention of the religious leaders looking for a sign, but it would circumvent His humanity. Ruling the nations without proving His merit would make Jesus just another dictator.

But where Adam and Eve and the children of Israel failed, Jesus succeeds. He does so by quoting passages from a concentrated section of Scripture – Deuteronomy 6-8. It's the heart of Moses' farewell address to the Israelites. He teaches them the greatest commandment – to love the LORD with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength – and reminds them of God's promises if they obey and if they disobey. No matter what the devil says, Jesus counters it with Scripture's reminders that all depends on following the LORD and not our own way.

Finally, once Jesus rebukes Satan for the third time and sends him away, the Father sends support. Angels minister to Jesus. The servants of the Father give Jesus what He needs. They provide for Him. They are once again proof of the Father's love for Jesus and His care for Him, even in what could have been seen as His abandonment.

God has a lot to say to us through this passage. I usually have three points for us, but today I've got four. (I've got to change it up sometimes, right?) When it comes to our relationship with God, Jesus' battle with Satan in the wilderness speaks volumes. Here's the first thought I'd like us to pursue: *we can trust Jesus to lead us through temptation because He was tempted like us in every way, yet was without sin.* Hebrews 4:15 states it and we see for a fact.

In our everyday lives, we need experts who have been there before us. We need school teachers who have read the classics of literature or passed AP Chemistry. We need a plumber who's fixed a hundred leaky sinks and a mechanic who knows his way around the components of our car. Nobody wants to be somebody's first heart operation. Nobody wants to climb Mount Everest with a Sherpa who's never made it to the summit.

When it comes to our souls, we need the One who has been through all the craziness of human life and come out pleasing God in every way. We need someone without sin to lead us into a new life where we can overcome sin with His help. Nobody else besides Jesus qualifies. It doesn't make sense to follow anyone else because no one else has lived a blameless life since birth. It would be like trusting a weekend warrior handyman to fix a nuclear rocket.

It's important to me to know that Jesus rejected sin at His weakest. There are sins that tempt me when I'm at my best, let alone my worst. But Jesus was able to turn down temptations when He was literally weak at the knees, so far into a fast that His temptations from the devil were probably like hallucinations. That's just how devoted He is to the Father and to us, that at His lowest, He still has the Father's words and will in His heart and mind.

If Jesus is like this at His least and we know that He now is at the right hand of the Father, sending the Spirit to empower and guide us and through the Spirit strengthening us, we have the means to defeat the temptations we face. He is not only our example; the power to overcome sin comes from Him. No matter how hard you try, you will never find anyone else, any other philosophy or faith, that you can trust like Jesus to lead you in the way you should go. If you haven't decided to follow Him or if you thought you had to defeat temptation on your own, turn to Him and experience a new life with victory over darkness and sin in your life.

Another thought for us today: *temptation often approaches us as a friend with good intentions before it shows its true nature.* Something that's not apparent is that the devil doesn't question who Jesus is. The word translated "if" can also be translated "since." Satan's not asking Jesus to prove His identity. The first two temptations seem well intentioned. If we were to interpret the concept, Satan is saying, "You're the Son of God – you don't have to suffer like this. You made the stones when you created the universe. No reason to be hungry now." Or take the temple. He's saying, "You shouldn't have to wait for your people to recognize you. You are the rightful heir, the Son of God! Show your people that the Father won't let a thing touch you and they'll follow you faithfully wherever you want them to go." It's only in the final temptation where the truth is plain that the devil wants Jesus to bow down to him.

The same thing happens much later in Jesus' ministry. When He explains His Father's plan to His disciples – that He has to go to Jerusalem, be condemned, and die on the cross – Peter, the leader of the disciples, says, "No you aren't. Not on my watch. You're too important to die. You're the Messiah who will lead Israel to great things; we'll all die before you do." And while the words are Peter's, Jesus knows who inspired them when He says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Most temptations we face come in the loving, caring voice of a friend – whether a person or a voice in our head. It’s that voice that says, “You deserve this.” “You should have this.” “You’ve earned it.” “Nobody’s going to find out.” “Nobody’s going to care.” That doesn’t mean we live in a constant state of denial where we take every suggestion for our own well-being as temptation. God often blesses us with good things for which we can give thanks. But when having those things means sinning, falling outside of God’s design for us, shortcutting His path for us, then we know where that voice is coming from.

In Michigan, when you buy a car, having seat warmers is not evil. It might be necessary! But buying an expensive car that’s the envy of your friends isn’t. When troubles come in our marriages, it’s OK to see a counselor or to talk privately with a close friend. It’s not OK to gossip or to seek out someone we think will be better. As I learned in my own life, it’s not a problem to own some favorite movies or books or albums. But spending your savings on stuff that will not last is a problem, especially when so many people in need can benefit from what we spend on our pleasures. We need to be careful about those voices in our lives that tell us what we want to hear - especially when those voices offer us questionable shortcuts to what we desire.

That leads into the next point that’s directly related: *there are no shortcuts when it comes to our relationship with God.* Everything that Jesus is tempted with is His to have...eventually. It’s just not the right time. Taking the shortcut defies the will of God, so Jesus doesn’t do it. Waiting on the Father’s proper timing means everything. At the perfect time, the Father will place everything in Christ’s hands.

We all know this is true in our personal relationships. You don’t make a friend without spending time together. You don’t ask someone to marry you that you haven’t spent a lot of quality time with. Even when you’ve been married a long time, those bonds are only as strong as you do things together and work things out together. We just got a new cat for Christmas named Mittens. It’s no accident that right when I was writing this part of the sermon, he came up to me and meowed loudly for me to pay attention to him. He climbs right up on my computer desk and sits himself down right behind my keyboard. Even cats, which aren’t the most social animals, know you need time together!

As we discovered last week, there are no hard and fast rules about submitting to God. We simply find more joy the more we do it! There’s no set amount of time we have to spend with God each day. Still, we need to put in the time. Sometimes in our personal relationships, we try to make up for our lack of time with gifts – flowers or special dates or “quality time.” Sometimes we use gifts to shortcut the process of relationship building, but it doesn’t really work. It really doesn’t work with God, because there’s nothing we can give Him other than ourselves, our time.

So I encourage us all to put in some time with God this week. Get into your Bible and read. Try something short and encouraging, maybe Paul’s letter to the Philippians. If you’re struggling, try some of the Psalms, written by poets like King David in situations very much like our own. But just do it. Spend some time in prayer. Find a way to serve somebody. Don’t shortcut the process of growing in God’s grace.

And there's a very good reason why we can't take shortcuts and must come to know our faith and our God well: *to overcome temptation, we must know Scripture better than the devil*. In the second temptation, the devil quotes Scripture to try and convince Jesus to do his bidding. Satan takes it out of context; the passage continues beyond what he quotes to say that God protects His own in order that they may honor and serve him, not for their own selfish ends. Jesus rightly quotes Scripture back at the devil. That's what Jesus does in every temptation.

Any real temptation is going to be hard to overcome. That's because it's going to seem right to us. It's going to appeal to our natural selves. Whatever the temptation is, it's going to strike where we are weakest. In our natural state, before God's intervention, we go along with whatever we're tempted by. It's only by God's grace we can resist. But the means we have to resist doesn't come from within us but from outside of us. It comes from God and from the holy words He has spoken over the centuries.

Ephesians 6 tells us we need to have the full armor of God in order to stand our ground in the day of evil. It mentions the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the boots of the good news, the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation. Those defend and protect us. But we only have one weapon, one offense, one instrument that can take down the enemy. It's called the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. That's it. Nothing else will take down evil except God's Word. When we use it, it will defeat temptation and cause it to flee from us.

Take the time to get to know Scripture. Put down the screens and pads and laptops; put down the novels and games. Those things are good from time to time, but nothing is going to prepare us better for all this world has to throw at us than the Bible. We need to know it well enough that when we hear it misused, we understand what's going on. When we take Scripture to heart and write it on our hearts and minds, we will know when someone tries to mislead us, and remembering God's Word will set us on the right path. It takes time to learn. But it's worth it. I guarantee it.

Training in righteousness is hard. Hebrews 12:11 says, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." As we walk through the early days of Jesus' ministry, as we see His deeds and learn His words, we'll be challenged and convicted. We'll be convinced that we need Him, that we need His grace in our lives. But always remember what we learn here today from the temptation in the wilderness – Jesus has been there. Jesus may be our spiritual drill sergeant, but He is also our truest companion and closest friend if we desire it of Him. He sticks closer than a brother. He has overcome sin on our behalf. Let's learn from Him and grow more like Him.