

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

You've been working for 15 hours, a double shift. You brought enough food for lunch, but you forgot supper and all the food shops in the building are closed, and there it sits in the office fridge, seemingly peering out at you, the second half of a 12-foot sub, nicely wrapped and uneaten, and Aha, they broke the unwritten rule – there is no name on it! Would you eat it? You're doing chores for your neighbor lady who can't get out anymore. You've mowed the lawn, trimmed the bushes, now you're making her grocery run. She's given you a \$100 and her groceries only cost \$78. She never asks for a receipt and you are hungry – would you buy yourself a burger with some of the money?

You were out late at the party. You had a few drinks – probably right at the edge of sober, but everyone else is worse. You're close to home. You know the roads. Do you get in your car with a little prayer, "God get me home safe"?

You're playing pickup ball with the boys, the competition is fierce, contact is hard – the profanity begins to fly. Do you follow suit to show you're one of the boys? The conversation turns to topics of a sexual natures – around the water cooler the Christian view on these things is absolutely trashed, you're looking to gently exit the room, and she asks, "You go to church, right? What do you think?" Do you share what you believe, what God teaches, knowing it might alienate you from a good share of your co-workers, or do you go with the flow so as not to lose popularity?

Seriously, is there anyone here today who can honestly say, "I've never given in to a temptation like this"? And probably we don't even think twice, right? "It's not like I killed someone! I didn't hurt anyone, what's the big deal?" Is it a big deal? What does God say? **James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.** Why is that? Because every time we disobey God, we disrespect God. It doesn't matter the size or the scope. It's like a dad who says to his son, "Park the car in the driveway and not the street." Clearly the son hears and understands his dad, and the next day parks in the street. Does the world come crashing down? Does the car blow up? No, but it is a blatant act of disrespect nonetheless. Every time we disobey God, it's a slap to his face, and yet often we think, "no big deal," or maybe we just don't think of it at all.

I share this to help give you perspective about what Jesus does in our account today: the temptation of Jesus by the devil. As you read it, pay attention to Satan's strategy. He doesn't take Jesus to Judas' house in the middle of the night and say, "Here's your chance, kill him!" He's more subtle. Also, pay attention to Jesus' strategy. How does he fight back and win? But above all, ask, "What's the main reason that God shares this with us?"

Matthew 4:1-11 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." ⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" ⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ "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.'" ⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also 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 splendor. ⁹ "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" ¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

So why this focus on these three "formal" temptations if you will? Isn't it true, that these are the kinds of temptations which often catch us off guard, maybe because they seem like no big deal. The first – stones into bread. What's the big deal? Jesus is hungry, he has the power, he'd be full. No one would get hurt right? Except this. In order to be our substitute, Jesus can't use his power as God to make life easier for himself, and still be our legitimate substitute. When he does do miracles, he does it to help others, not to make his life easier. Satan is subtle – just some stone into bread, nothing big, but Jesus passes the test.

The second temptation – it's a temptation to doubt. Satan tempts Jesus either to doubt his own trust, or to doubt his Father's words. It seems like a Catch-22, "If I don't jump, I really don't trust my Father. If I do jump and am injured, that will prove that my Heavenly Father is lying." Again, Jesus passes the test – God didn't make promises so that we can ignore his directives to take care of ourselves and others.

The third temptation – "Jesus you have the weight of the world on your shoulders – look at how these people treat you, why sacrifice for them? You don't have to suffer, you don't deserve to suffer. Abandon your work, bow to me and your pain, your hardship is gone! Look how your enemies prosper while your life is hard – it doesn't have to be that way! Join me!" Again, Jesus passes the test! "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only!" Jesus knows that the prosperity of those who reject God is not only temporary, it leads to a fiery end.

So, what is the point of it all? Does Jesus succumb to any of these temptations? No. And that is key! Typically, the things that stand out when we think about Jesus are healings and miracles and, of course, his suffering and death and most of all, his rising from the dead. That makes sense, all of these are impressive, all of these are important, but all of these are pointless if Jesus fails to fend off temptation even once. And understand, Jesus wasn't just tempted three times. In fact, in

Luke's parallel account, he ends by writing the devil went away until an opportune time. Jesus was besieged with temptation every day of his life! And not only did he succeed on this day, he succeeded every single day from his birth to his death. He had to succeed where we so often fail so that he could give what he earned to us. Had he failed, he would have fallen prey to the curse of death and not been able to willingly give his life on our behalf. He had to succeed so that we can live with him in heaven. That's the main reason why God shares this with us, but it isn't the only reason.

He also shares with us a remarkable blueprint for winning our battles against temptation more often. Didn't you just say Jesus earned heaven for me, that I'm forgiven for the times I lose the battle with temptation? Yes! And for that we love Jesus, but love goes hand in hand with respect. Think of it this way – you can't swim, but you jump in a river you think is shallow, only to be dragged away by the current. You grab onto a tree in the water and hold on for dear life. A bystander jumps and saves you just as you are losing the strength to hold on. His heroics nearly cost him his life. You are overwhelmed and thankful, and you say so many times to which the man replies, "It's ok, you're welcome. I'm glad I could help, but please don't be so foolish again, and it might be a good idea to learn to swim!" If the next week, you waded into that same river again, what would it say? Your words say, "I'm glad you saved me", but your actions say, "I have no respect for the warning you gave me, and I don't really care if I'm carried off by the current again." Do you get the point?

Yes, Jesus was sinless so that we are forgiven for the times we fall. But knowing that, if our subsequent actions show no regard for the directions he gives for this life, what does that say? God, I love you, but I don't really trust you, I don't respect you. Our listening, our follow through is the way we show our trust and respect. With that in mind, consider the example of Jesus. How does he win the fight? Each time, he quoted the Bible, did you notice that? He knew what God said – he learned it and he used that to direct his life so that even when Satan also used the Bible, Jesus knew he was twisting what it really said. Let me ask you this – how well do you know the Bible? There are many who have pointed out this irony, in the age of technology never have we had such easy access to the Bible. At the very same time, those with the greatest access (USA, Canada, and Europe) are the most Biblically illiterate in over a century. If you respect the Jesus who was sinless for you, doesn't it make sense to take time learning and contemplating what he says? Are you or your kids in Christian elementary school or catechism class? What's your reaction to memory work? A waste of time, a quick five minutes before class assignment, or the tools to fight the temptations that could put you in hell? Adults – read it, listen on a streaming service or podcast. It's easy! The tool is at your fingertips, learn to use it.

Second, learn to recognize the strategy of your enemy. Satan won't come to your door and say, "Here's a gun, go shoot your best friend!" He attacks where you are weak. Are money and nice things your weak spot? Guess where he will strike? Are you an intellectual? Guess what he's going to use to pull you away? "Oh, you're smarter than that, your understanding is far greater than the boorish folk in that thousand-year-old book." Are you popular, good looking? Guess where he will attack? A good athlete? Guess who's going to try and dominate your time with sports and take it away from time strengthening faith and serving your brothers and sisters? Satan is smart, he attacks where we have blind spots and where we get defensive. Recognize this! Be ready for it, and then, with the tools you have honed and sharpened, fight that battle.

Get as serious about growing in your Christian walk as you are about diet or exercise or getting ahead in the workplace! Did you let the foul words slip last week, fight it, don't let it happen next time. Did you visit that website again? Take action, change where you put your computer, download the filtering software on your phone or your computer. Fight it! Is your schedule so full that you can't be with God's Word and meet together with God's people as he tells us to do in the Bible? Change that going forward. "But didn't Jesus come to forgive all of these sins?" Yes, absolutely, and he has, but not so that we go on repeating them! He was sinless not just so that we will live with him in the future, but so that we live for him now.

And what a blessing that is, not just for us, but for those around us. In closing, let me share two examples. One was a junior varsity basketball coach at my high school. He noticed that away from him – when others weren't listening, or so we thought, the language went downhill. I suppose he could have just ignored it, but he took us aside and shared. He told us his own story of how that had become a habit for him and how hard it was to stop the longer it went, how he still had to fight to keep the words from coming out while he coached. He urged us, "Fight it now, you'll be glad you did." Those words made an impact not just on me, but on that whole group of young men. The battles he lost – Jesus forgave, but the battles he won were a blessing both to him, and to us.

Another was a woman I met in Florida when she was in her 80s. She was a mature Christian, she was faithful, caring, everyone called her grandma at our church. She was especially impactful in the lives of her two grand-nephews – especially encouraging them in their faith. She didn't have any children. When God called her home, I got to talk to her nephew and he shared how she hadn't always been like that. She went through some significant growing and maturing the last 30 years of her life. He shared how much he appreciated that and what an impact that made on him as well as his two sons (her great grand-nephews). That's what it means in concrete terms to live for Jesus. It doesn't get us to heaven, but it does make a big difference in our lives!

Sinless – that's amazing. But don't just remember the what, remember the why – so that we can live with him in heaven and so that we live for him here and now. AMEN.