

ESF Lord's day service message
3/12/2017

Overcoming Temptation of Flesh

Matthew 4:1-4

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert 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 does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

An eagle in early spring was soaring high above a river valley when he spotted a small rodent trapped in a piece of ice, floating down the stream. Sensing an easy fix, he swooped down on the mouse and began to eat it. While he was feasting on the mouse, the block of ice began to approach a waterfall. The eagle saw the danger, but believed he had plenty of time. It wouldn't hurt to indulge himself, just this once. But as he finished the meal and prepared to take flight, what he didn't notice was that the warmth of his paw had caused his foot to get stuck in the block of ice. He tried to dislodge it, but the weight was too great and he crashed over the waterfall to his death.

The first of all temptations of the devil is the temptation of man's flesh. If we fall into the devil's temptation of the flesh, we may gain a short pleasure but will suffer from the deadly trap of the devil.

After Jesus fasted forty days, the devil came to Him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." Jesus was extremely hungry at that time. His flesh yearned to eat something and must have desired anything to get food. He wanted to turned the stones into bread. But if Jesus had turned the stones to bread and had eaten them, he would have become sick or died instantly. It was the temptation of the flesh. It would have been very difficult for any human being to overcome such a temptation of the flesh. But Jesus overcame this temptation. With this

event, Jesus teaches us how to overcome the devil's temptation of the flesh.

Resist the devil

When the devil tempted Jesus in the desert, the first thing Jesus did to overcome the temptation was to resist the devil.

Whenever the devil tempts us, the first step to overcome temptation is to resist the devil. James 4:7 says: *Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.*

How can we resist the devil?

First, we must discern between the voice of the devil and the voice of God. How can we discern the devil's voice from God's voice? The devil disguises himself as an angel of God. The devil's voice is very sweet, convincing and attractive. But it always carries a destructive and deadly trap. If we listen to the voice of the devil because it is sweet and attractive, we will be caught up by the deadly trap. So to discern the devil's voice from God's voice, we must think about the result or consequence of listening to a voice. If there is any voice which provokes us to do or pursue something which gives us a short pleasure but leads to destruction, it is the voice of the devil.

Here Jesus heard the voice speak: *"If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."* Jesus was the Son of God. It was true and correct to say, "you are the Son of God." So regarding that part, the voice was telling the truth which was attractive and convincing. But with the truth, the voice was provoking Him to do something deadly: "tell these stones to become bread."

It was a deadly trap. If Jesus had turned the stones into bread and eaten it, He would have got really sick or even died instantly. Because after forty days of fasting, His stomach couldn't handle solid food.

So, Jesus considered the destructive and deadly consequence of

following the voice. And He discerned the devil's voice from God's voice and resisted the devil.

Secondly, to resist the devil, we must be obedient to God's will in all circumstances. Jesus knew that it was against God's will to perform a miracle to feed the desire of His flesh. When God sent Jesus as His Son to this world, God gave Him divine power to perform miracles. But God did not give Jesus the power to perform miracles to satisfy the desire of His own flesh. God gave Him the power to perform miracles to serve others, to lead others into believing in the living God, and to help them give glory to God.

So if Jesus had used this power to feed the desire of His flesh, He would have abused his power against God's will. For His own physical need, He had to trust in God's provision. He had to resolve the problem of His extreme hunger through waiting for God's protection and provision. He had to feed the desire of His flesh within the boundary of God's will.

As Jesus did, to resist the devil we have to resist the physical desire to do something against God's will.

God created man as a physical being who has physical desires and needs. God never condones asceticism which depresses physical desires with rigid self-will and self-mortification. God has allowed man to use physical desires to conquer all things in this world and enjoy them (Genesis 1:28-30).

So, pursuing normal kinds of desires of our flesh-sleeping, eating, resting, playing etc. - is not sin as long as it is done in the boundary of God's will (Psalm 103:1-5).

But feeding the desire of our flesh beyond the boundary of God's will is sin. James 1:13-15 says: *When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives*

birth to death.

Third, to resist the devil we must control a desire provoked by the devil at its beginning stage. Jesus did not try to turn the stones into bread with this thinking, “I may try to change the stones to bread just this one time, just once, and it may not be harmful.” On the contrary, Jesus firmly said, “no” to the devil’s word at the outset of the temptation. The devil uses this strategy to bring us into his deadly trap: “just one time will be ok,” “just try it once. It will not harm you at all.” But if we listen to such a voice and try to do it only once, we will be caught in the devil’s deadly trap. One time will become two times. Two times will become three times. And we will keep doing it until we are completely enslaved by the devil.

That is why we must resist the devil at the beginning stage of temptation. When the devil tempted Joseph to follow the desire of his flesh through an adulterous woman, it was a deadly temptation. But Joseph overcame the temptation by resist the devil at the outset. He did not think, “I may do it just once. It will be ok if I do it just once.” He simply said “no” to the seductive temptation at its outset and avoided falling into the devil’s trap (Genesis 39:10-12). Say “no” to the devil at the outset of his temptation. And you can overcome the devil’s temptation.

Fight the devil with the word of God.

The devil is so cunning and wise that you cannot win over him by any human wisdom or will power. The devil is a spiritual being, and he is wiser than any human being. The devil does not appear to us as an ugly monster. The devil always appears to us like a good, innocent and charming being. Paul puts the devil’s disguised and deceptive appearance like this in 2 Corinthians 11:14, “...*Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.*”

So it is very hard for us to recognize the deceptive devil.

There is only one thing that can expose the devil. There is only one thing that gives us wisdom and power which surpasses the devil's wisdom and power. It is the word of God.

The Great Wall of China is so massive it can be seen from outer space. It was meant to keep the enemy out. But it failed? How? The enemy could bribe a gatekeeper to let them in. The Gatekeeper of our hearts must be faithful to the Word of God or the wall of restraint will do no good.

The word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). The word is a powerful sword of light. Hebrews 4:12-13 says, *“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to the dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered...”*

The word of God helps us not only defend the devil's attack, but also crush the devil. Psalm 119:9-10 says, *“How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.”*

Jesus used nothing but the word of God when He resisted the devil and defeated him. Jesus overcame the deadly temptation of the devil with the word in Deuteronomy 8:3: *“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

To be able to use the word of God as a powerful sword of the Spirit, we have to sharpen it in ordinary times. We have to exercise it to use it properly and accurately when it needs to be used. This is why we have to study the word of God diligently and constantly apply it to our real lives.

Ask yourself always why you make certain decisions, think certain ways, behave certain ways: *“Do I think, do and make decisions according to the word of God, or do I think, do and make decisions according to my own understanding and judgement?”*

Before you follow your own thinking or feelings check them with the word of God. Before you pursue any desire of the flesh, check the desire with God's word, whether it is in the boundary of God's will or not. If not, know that it is temptation. Seek the word of God that justifies your desire. God will give you the right word with which you can defeat the devil's temptation.

Pursue and desire the spiritual

Pursuing something spiritual is a positive way to overcome the devil's temptation of the flesh. With the word, "*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God*" Jesus meant that man is a spiritual being as well as a physical being, and that man needs spiritual food as well as physical food. He pursued spiritual food while He desired to have physical food. By pursuing spiritual food, He overcame the temptation of the flesh.

When we believe in Jesus as the Son of God, God makes us as His children. As His children, we receive many blessings- power of prayer, freedom and gifts of the Holy Spirit etc. The devil provokes us to use these blessings to feed only our physical needs without seeking God's holiness. The purpose of the devil is to entice us to follow the desire of the flesh without feeding our spirit which will eventually corrupt us, sicken us, demolish our faith, and destroy our lives.

But the Holy Spirit always encourages us to pursue our spiritual desire as well as physical desire. The Holy Spirit helps us desire and pursue something healthy, noble, beneficial, constructive and holy.

While we pursue the desire for something noble and holy, we have no interest in feeding the evil desire of the flesh. That is why Paul says to us, "...offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instrument of righteousness" (Romans 6:13). Our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. So we must take care of our body to welcome the Holy Spirit, to be a place where the Holy Spirit is pleased to dwell.

While we offer our bodies to do something holy and righteous, and continue to fear the holy God, the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with the gift of self-control. The gift of self-control from the Holy Spirit is different from the self-control by our own will power. The gift of self-control from the Spirit gives us supernatural power. It drives out evil desires from our hearts. This also helped Joseph overcome the deadly temptation of lust. He was able to overcome the temptation by constantly fearing God, “How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God.” (Genesis 39:9).

Feed your desire to pursue something holy. Fear the Lord who is holy and who wants you to live a holy life. When you are enticed by the attractive and irresistible temptation of the devil, keep pursuing the holiness of God. Fill your heart with the word of God. Spend time with people who pursue God with pure hearts. Use your time and talents to serve the Lord. The Holy Spirit will enable you to overcome the devil’s deadly temptation of the flesh.