

Encounters with Jesus: The Great Enemy Sunday, 2/12/23

Last week we witnessed the resurrection of Jesus through the eyes of Mary Magdalene and discovered that even Mary was incapable of believing what she saw without the help of Jesus to open her eyes. When we walk with Jesus and hear him call our name, we're able to say what Mary eventually came to say: "I have seen the Lord!"

Today, we're looking at another two encounters with Jesus that are intended to be read together, but almost never are: The baptism of Jesus, which we heard earlier, and the temptation of Jesus, which we'll hear shortly. The two events contrast God and Satan, with opposite but definitely not equal agendas concerning the identity of Jesus. It's immediately after God's affirmation of Jesus as his beloved Son that Satan poses the challenge to Jesus in the wilderness: "If you are the Son of God..."¹

I'm reading from the Gospel of Matthew in the fourth chapter, beginning with verse 1 in the New Living Translation. [{Read Matthew 4:1-11 NLT}](#)

Whenever I preach about evil, Satan, demons, and the like, I'm so aware of the crazy chasm that exists between what most of us believe about good versus what we believe about evil. Most Christians will eagerly affirm the existence of angels as good messengers of the benevolent God who created us, saved us from our sin, and wants to be in a personal relationship with us. We believe in the personhood of God as three in one, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that implies that we can be in a personal relationship with God in all those ways. Jesus is probably a little easier to relate to because he was fully human, but I believe that when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us, he intended that we walk with the Spirit in the same way we walk with Jesus.

On the other hand, many Christians look askance at the personification of evil in Satan, or the devil, who commands demons and other malign spiritual forces in this world. Instead, many Christians prefer to attribute all evil to bad human choices. There's no doubt that bad choices contribute to evil in the world, just as good human choices contribute to God's agenda to bring blessing to all of creation. Why should we believe that all the good in this world is overseen by a benevolent spiritual figure but the same isn't true for the evil in

¹ Matthew 4:1. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

the world? It's completely irrational, really. And how can we possibly give an honest reading of Matthew 3 and 4, side by side, and assume that God and angels are real beings but Satan is only a metaphor?

By the way, I'm not sure what particular temptation Homer Simpson is wrestling with in this picture- possibly whether to eat another donut- but humor is one way that we try to shrug off the deadly seriousness of evil and the spiritual temptations we face each day.

We meet all three persons of God at the baptism of Jesus, with both the Holy Spirit and the Father manifesting themselves to give witness to one essential reality-changing truth: Jesus is the beloved Son of God. This is a definitive rejection of Jesus as anything less than that. He wasn't just an exemplary teacher of morality, and he didn't come primarily to show us an example of how to live. Jesus came to save us from sin and death, and he can do that only because he is the Son of God, both fully human and fully God. All the other events in the ministry of Jesus hinge on this one fact. All of the books of the Bible take their meaning from this one truth. All the work of the Church of Jesus Christ throughout the ages stands or falls on this one proposition. Jesus is the beloved Son of the Almighty, and the person and work of Jesus is unequivocally approved of by the wholeness of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Give yourself a faith check at this point. Do you believe that Jesus is who he said he was? Do you believe in God as three persons? Do you believe God wants to walk with you in a daily, personal relationship? If you do, you're in the center of traditional Christian thinking. If you don't, what's preventing you from embracing these core tenets of the Christian faith?

The Bible teaches us that just as God affirms the identity and work of Jesus, there is an agent of evil, Satan, who opposes it. And that's why the very next thing we read is that "Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil."² I don't know what Satan looks like any more than I know what God looks like. I think I'd prefer that he walked around like this, because as scary as this is, at least we'd know what we were dealing with! Notice what Satan leads off with: "If you are the Son of God..."

² Ibid

Satan never denies the identity of Jesus. Instead, he asks questions that are designed to entice Jesus to question the affirmation he just received at his baptism. “If you are the Son of God...” That seems to be a strategy of choice for Satan, who used the same trick in the Garden of Eden, saying “Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?” As Timothy Keller observed, “[Satan] doesn't come in with all sorts of special effects; he suggests ideas to the heart that contradict God's word, impugn his character, and destroy the trust relationship we have with him.”³ The Biblical Christian world view is that Satan continues tempting us today, using some of the same general approaches. Since that’s true, it stands to reason that there may be something for us to learn about how Jesus resisted the temptations.

It’s more than a little naïve to suppose that we can simply rely on God’s Word to parry to attacks of Satan, just as Jesus did. Jesus is himself the living Word of God and understands the Bible and God more than we ever will. Satan, as a supernatural being, no doubt also has a much better command of the Scriptures than we do, so it’s doubtful that any of us could possibly win a Scripture recitation contest against the devil.

I believe that what appeared simple for Jesus was likely not simple- that he faced very real temptations and was required to summon strength of heart and faith in order to resist them. So, too, for us. Planting God’s Word in your heart through memorization of Scripture is of enormous benefit to anyone, but at the end of the day, resisting Satan is a matter of the will to trust in God. Each temptation presents us with the same questions: What do I really believe about God? What do I really believe about myself? And who am I going to trust, follow, and obey in this moment? Temptation isn’t just about wrestling with the choices we make. Temptation is about affirming what and who we believe.

The Apostle James gave us a succinct recipe for doing battle with these assaults on our hearts: “[H]umble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”⁴ I’ll bet you’ve heard the phrase, “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” But did you notice what comes immediately before it? “[H]umble yourselves before God.” Humble submission to God’s will is really the key.

³ Timothy Keller. *Encounters with Jesus*, p. 122. Penguin, 2013.

⁴ James 4:7. *New Living Translation* (2nd Edition)

I want you to think about something you've been tempted by recently, something that you know could hurt you or hurt someone else, something that you know violates your relationship with Jesus and grieves God's Holy Spirit. Can you think of something? That desire raging within you is Satan fanning the flames of your sin nature, so that you want what you know is wrong. Resisting evil implies standing against it with all of who you are, and more importantly, all of whom Jesus is. How strongly do you think you'll resist temptation if you have one foot in God's camp and another foot in the devil's? We can't be dual citizens, pursuing the things of the world with one part of our hearts and the things of God with the other. That's why Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other."⁵ It's all about deciding who will be the Lord of your life: Jesus or Satan. And so it should come as no surprise that the strategies for resisting Satan are really the very same strategies for growing in your faith and drawing closer to God.

The Apostle Peter wrote that "[our] great enemy, the devil...prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour."⁶ That's the bad news. The good news is that as potent as evil is in this world, it pales in comparison to the power, glory, and majesty of Jesus Christ. Satan opposes God's goodness and visits this world with increasing horror and debauchery. And very often we are complicit with that evil. But Satan's game is a lost cause of desperation. His question, "If you are the son of God..." was already answered before it was asked. The choice each of us faces with every moment of every day is this: who are we going to believe, trust, and follow? It seems like it ought to be a no-brainer, but the reality is that it's a real struggle that we all face. How about you? Who are you going to believe, God or Satan? Are the thoughts and actions you have planned for this day and week more consistent with the Kingdom of God, or the legions of hell?

What lies has Satan spoken to you, undermining your trust in Jesus? Ask God to speak the truth into your heart.

⁵ Matthew 6:24. Ibid

⁶ 1Peter 5:8. Ibid



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