

Happy New Year, everyone! It's wonderful to be with you today. I hope you had a wonderful holiday season with your family. Keren and I were really looking forward to opening presents with the kids this Christmas. We looked online for the best presents, and we heard that Slinkys were coming back in style. We watched videos of kids doing all these cool tricks and maneuvers with Slinkys. We got excited. We bought one for our kids. This was our reality two hours later [see online sermon for photo]. That's not only our reality with gifts—look at this sign from Dairy Queen this week: “Ruining your New Year’s resolutions since 1962.” Just because we have a good idea or a good plan doesn’t mean things are always going to go our way. Slinkys get tangled. Ice cream is delicious. These are light-hearted examples, but they are representative of deeper things. Everyone has big dreams. Everyone has big goals. Everyone has things they want to accomplish in life.

Don't we all want to have the best marriage possible? Don't we all want to do the best job we possibly can raising our kids? Don't we all want to excel at work? Don't we all want to be a great friend who blesses and enriches everyone in our lives? Don't we all want to be healthy, fit, and active? Don't we all want to make wise financial decisions and see our financial freedom and net worth grow? Don't we all want a closer relationship with Jesus? Don't we all want to grow in humility, kindness, and love? Don't we all want to be more generous, gracious, and forgiving? Don't we all want to walk in greater wisdom, to have a better prayer life, to be used by God to draw others closer to him? We don't only want to be a recipient of God's abundant blessings, but we also want his abundant blessings to flow through us to other people. We all want to live great lives; we want this to be a great year. It really is possible for that to become a reality, but we would be fools to think that a healthy, thriving, victorious, missional life is possible without a fight. We have great hopes and dreams, and God has a great plan. But we have an enemy who is present and active. He is lurking, he is prowling, and he is ready and poised to do whatever he possibly can to destroy your potential, dash your dreams, and ruin your life. The way you engage in this spiritual battle will determine the quality and the impact of your life. Happy New Year!

There could not be a better time to focus on this. We are kicking off the new year by continuing in our study of the Gospel of Matthew. This is week 7 and we are looking at the very first days of Jesus' ministry. Jesus planned to preach the gospel, perform miracles, heal the sick, open the eyes of the blind, and bring hope to the despondent and salvation to the lost, but before any of those things could happen, a battle had to take place, a spiritual testing, that Jesus had to endure. Jesus was tested and tempted and overcame in order to carry out all of God's plans for his life, and we are going to learn from Jesus how we can overcome the enemy, gain a victory over the enemy and over the flesh, to experience the intimate relationship with God that is possible and enjoy the kind of life we've always wanted.

“Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness 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’” (Matthew 4:1-3). Satan is opportunistic, always waiting for the most strategic time, when we are most vulnerable, to lure us into a trap. But I think this is more than simply a temptation for Jesus to fill his empty stomach; it's also a temptation for the way in which Jesus will go about his ministry. Do you know how ancient kings frequently got their throne? They gave bread to people. Before Julius Caesar led Rome, he took out a \$500,000,000 loan from Marcus Crassus to buy food to give to the people so they would want him to be their leader. Satan is saying, “Don't go through the hassle of telling people to repent, don't tell them to deny themselves and take up their cross, don't preach holiness, don't preach sacrificial love, don't waste your time with all of that. They'll love you if you give them food. Just give them food.” Jesus saw right through Satan's scheme.

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall 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.’” (Matthew 4:4-6)

Jesus was at the highest place in the temple, which means it was about a 450-foot drop to the valley below. An ancient historian who visited the temple said just approaching that peak caused people to get dizzy and weak in the knees. Satan said, “If you jump, you are God’s Son—you won’t be hurt at all. You’ll safely glide down without a thud. It will prove that you’re the Messiah. Everyone will know it, and they’ll flock to you. Show the people what you can do, and they’ll all fall in love with you.” But that’s not the kind of faith God is looking for. That’s not the kind of Messiah God sent his Son to be—not levitating off buildings but rather taking up his cross. “Jesus answered him, ‘It is also written: “Do not put the Lord your God to the test”’” (Matthew 4:7).

Two temptations down, one more to go. “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’” (Matthew 4:8). Interestingly, Satan is promising Jesus something that God has already promised to give him. The Bible promises that God will give the Messiah all the kingdoms of the world, but only after he has suffered and died for the salvation of the world. What is Satan doing here? He’s saying, “I’ll give you everything you want, everything you have coming to you—and I’ll give it to you now. You can take a short cut with no suffering or hardship. Just bow down to me.” Jesus saw right through it. “Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only”’” (Matthew 4:10). Jesus was not going to compromise.

A couple weeks ago Keren was in the kitchen and started singing Christmas songs. She was singing, “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus.” My two-year-old Luke started crying and went running into the kitchen yelling, “Mommy not kiss Santa Claus. Mommy only kiss daddy.” It’s an elementary fact that even children understand: we can only give our loyalty to one person. Jesus was going to be loyal to God, and God alone.

Jesus understood why he was here, so not even for a second did he allow Satan, or sin, or selfishness to distract him from his mission. He had the perfect response to temptation. We are going to study this passage today, so we can learn how we can honor God and carry out the mission for our life that God has given us, too.

Let’s begin by looking at *the source of temptation*. The temptations didn’t manifest by themselves out of nothing; they came from someone. Twice in this passage he is called “the devil,” but that is not his only name. There are 18 different names given to “the devil” throughout Scripture. Look at ten of the most well-known:

- **The devil**—His name in Greek is “diabolos,” where we get the word “diabolical.” It means slander, which means to throw mud, to disparage and defame. He tries to cast doubt on God’s character, his goodness, and his love.
- **Satan**—This is his most common name. It means the accuser. Not only does he point out our weaknesses and failures, he says we should be condemned because of them.
- **The evil one**—Everything about him is corrupt and rotten.
- **The enemy**—He is in a war against God and God’s children.

- **The serpent**—He appeared in the Garden in Genesis; he was the one who led Adam and Eve astray.
- **The dragon**—He appears in Revelation; he is the one who tried to kill Jesus at his birth, who gets kicked out of heaven, who persecutes the church, and who uses his dark powers to control the evil governments and false religions of the world.
- **The prince of demons**—it seems as though other spiritual beings joined Satan in his rebellion against God, and he exerts control and power over them.
- **The god of this age / the prince of this world**—He has incredible power and influence over the culture, belief systems, worldview, politics, and values of this world we live in.
- **The father of lies**—He works through deception, offering false promises, misrepresenting reality, and twisting God’s words.
- **The tempter**—His number one objective is to pull your heart, your focus, and your devotion away from God. He gets sadistic pleasure out of robbing God of your praise and ruining your life in the process.

We have an enemy. If we live unaware of it, we place ourselves in perilous situations. How many times have you seen an image like this [see online sermon for photo]? Here’s a guy, out enjoying a fun time on the beach, having no clue a 15-foot shark is slowly approaching. That’s a picture of our spiritual reality. The Bible says our enemy is looking to devour us. He wants to ruin our lives.

How does our enemy carry out his plan? What are *the inroads for temptation*? It really comes down to two key words: *desire* and *doubt*. Think about this with me. How did Satan try to tempt Jesus? By playing to his desire. “You’re hungry, your body is telling you that you need food. Listen to your desires. You’re the Son of God. You’re the one who created the whole world. Don’t you want these people to know who you are, to show them your power so they bow down to worship you? Their praise and adoration rightly belong to you. You don’t want to suffer; you don’t want to die. You can have it now.” Temptation always begins with the desires that are active inside of us. Every one of us has desires. Desires for food and sleep, for love and friendship, for success and recognition, for respect and appreciation, for pleasure and fun. We have all sorts of desires that are interwoven in a complex and complicated arrangement. Our enemy, as well as our culture around us, wants to deceive us into responding to all our desires—so long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else, do what you want, do what feels right, be true to yourself. But not all desires are good desires. 1 John 2:16 tells us: “The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.” We have some desires inside of us that aren’t from God. They are self-centered, self-serving desires, and those are the ones the enemy uses to try to destroy us. “Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:14-15). It starts with *desire*, which can lead to *sin*, and sin, left to fester, always leads to *death*.

When temptation hits, we would be so wise to stop and ask God, “What desire inside of me is being activated right now?”

- Why do I feel compelled to lie to cover up my mistake? What desire is behind that?
- Why do I feel compelled to exaggerate how heroic I was in a story? What desire is behind that?
- Why do I so frequently speak poorly about my boss and those in leadership positions above me? What desire is behind that?
- Why do I spend more time on my screen than with my spouse? What desire is behind that?
- Why do I want to eat when I’m not hungry? What desire is behind that?

Don’t just look at the surface; dig beneath the surface. Get to the root. There are thousands of different specific temptations, but if you trace them to the source, you’ll see the same culprits again and again.

Spiritual guides often refer to the list of the seven deadly sins: pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. Satan pulls on these carnal desires to steer our lives off course. Don't let these sins and desires control you. Let God in. Galatians 5:16 says, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

The essence of temptation is Satan not only stirring up our desires, but it's also Satan fanning the flames of doubt. Satan knows that if he can get us to question the existence of God, the goodness of God, the wisdom of God, the love of God, or the promises of God, we're one step away from debilitating sin. This was the way of Satan in the Garden with Adam and Eve.

- Doubt God's Word—Did God really say you may not eat the fruit: Maybe what you thought God said isn't what he actually said.
- Doubt God's wisdom—God doesn't know what he's talking about. If you eat the fruit, there won't be consequences; you won't surely die.
- Doubt God's goodness—God is keeping something from you, he's withholding from you. If you eat the fruit, your eyes will be opened and you'll know so much more.

When temptation hits, we would be wise not only to look beneath the surface to see what the root desire may be, but to look even deeper, at where doubt in God, his Word, his wisdom, and his goodness, has created a condition in our heart where this temptation has any appeal in the first place. We need to be reminded that God's word tells us: "The one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6). After Jesus rose from the dead, what did he say to Thomas? "Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27). Temptation festers and feasts in response to doubt but temptation withers and dies in response to faith.

Now that we've looked at the source of temptation and the nature of temptation, the last and most important focus is *victory over temptation*. What I want every one of us to know and believe deep down is that victory is possible. No matter how strong temptation hits, no matter how persistent it remains, no matter how many times in the past you may have failed, victory is possible. God's Word promises it. In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul writes, "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it." Victory is possible. Jesus shows us the way. Let me show you the four elements Jesus demonstrates for us that provide the pathway to victory over temptation.

1. Intimacy with God. Physically speaking, Jesus may have been more susceptible to temptation because he hadn't eaten for forty days and was starving, but spiritually speaking he was as strong as he had ever been. He had just spent forty days with God away from all distractions. That sense of intimacy with God strengthened him against attack. The best defense against weeds is a healthy lawn. The best defense against sickness is a healthy immune system. No one has to worry about adultery when they are madly in love with their spouse. The first defense against temptation is to prioritize time with God. Turn your phone off, close the door, if it helps you get down on your knees, and spend time each day talking to God, listening to his voice of love over your life, declaring your love to him, and strengthening the resolve of your heart.

2. Familiarity with God's Word. Every temptation is a lie. It promises happiness but leaves us in despair. We need to have the wisdom to see through the lies and discern the truth. That comes from God's Word. Every single time Satan tempted Jesus, how did Jesus respond? He quoted Scripture. Satan wields deception; the Scriptures are the truth. Jesus responded to all three temptations by quoting Scripture. Temptation disorients us; Scripture reorients us. The Psalmist asked, "How can a young person stay on the path of purity?" The answer? "By living according to your word" (Psalm 119:9). The major decisions

in life can be hard to navigate. God's word is like a GPS, showing us the turns to take and the turns to avoid.

I know a lot of people at this church who finished reading through the Bible for the first time last year. It's a wonderful idea if you've never tried. Listen to this testimony from a woman in our church who just finished reading through the Bible last year:

Full transparency, I had never read the Bible all the way through before. Picked it up several times, "tried," and always succumbed to the attitude of it being difficult to understand, so "must not be for me." But in 2024, with encouragement and accountability from a good friend, I finally did it. I missed days. I wasn't perfect. I didn't understand everything but learned more than I thought possible. I was able to deepen my conversations with God and often sat in awe of his wonder and grace. Reading the Bible helped me talk with God and hear his voice. And I've already started to read it through again. If you're thinking about it, DO IT! And find a good friend to do it with you.

If three or four chapters a day is too much for you, start with one a day. You can go through the entire New Testament in a year reading one chapter a day—that's about five minutes, only Monday through Friday. No matter what approach you take, get into God's word!

3. Contentment with God's provision. Every time the enemy came, what did he try to convince Jesus of? You don't have enough, you need more. More food, more recognition from people, more respect, more praise, more admiration, more, more, more! Temptation is always about getting more, which means victory against temptation comes from realizing that God is our provider and will always give us enough. Paul said in Philippians 4:11, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." In the Old Testament, God gave his people ten commandments: don't lie, don't kill, don't steal, don't commit adultery—all these things which we aren't supposed to do. What's the final command? "Do not covet." Don't desire the things that aren't yours. If we can follow the tenth commandment, most of the other ones fall into place. Contentment causes temptation to wither like a leaf in winter.

4. Patience with God's timing. Everything Satan came to tempt Jesus with was already going to be his, in God's perfect timing. The fast was nearly over and Jesus was going to eat bread anyway, but Satan told him to do it now. God was already going to make Jesus in charge of the nations, but Satan told him to do it now, rather than wait on God's timing. After Jesus died and rose again, the angels in heaven said. "You were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). This was God's plan; this was God's promise. Temptation tells us to take the short way, the easy way, to get what we want right away without suffering. If we are willing to be patient and do it both God's way and in God's timing, he will often give us way more than we ever could have imagined, and certainly way, way, way more than sin would ever have delivered.

Intimacy with God, familiarity with God's word, contentment with God's promises, patience with God's timing—this is the way to victory, this is the path Jesus showed us. No matter the temptation we might face, Jesus will provide us with power to overcome it. Hebrews 4:15-16, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." No matter what season of difficulty or temptation you are going through, Jesus has been there. He understands. He has not only been there, he has been victorious. If we look to him, he will deliver us.

We all want this to be a fantastic year. With our walk with God, our marriage, our kids, our families, our work, our health. We want to live a life of love, generosity, kindness, and victory. It is possible. We have

an enemy, we are at war, but Jesus has won the battle. He's paved the way for us; he's given us the playbook. If we look to him and rely upon him, there is no telling what God can do in and through our lives this year.