

## **“The Battle”**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

**Creed/Confession: Scots Confession**

**First Sunday in Lent**

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Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker which reads: “Lead Me Not Into Temptation: I Will Find it Myself”.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. On this Sunday each year we revisit the story of Jesus’ temptation by the devil as recorded in Matthew, Mark or Luke.

Matthew tells us that after Jesus was baptized he was “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” There the devil confronted Jesus with three temptations:

- “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”
- “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down (from the pinnacle of the temple).”
- “All these (kingdoms of the world) I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

These temptations have been interpreted in a variety of ways. The first is the temptation of the “quick fix” or the “Easy Button.” The second is the temptation called “seeing is believing (rather than believing is seeing). The third is the temptation to instant gratification minus suffering and discipline.

Bottom line, Jesus was being tempted to take a different avenue to Messiahship than the one to which he had been called. In turning stones to bread, Jesus could have been the rescuer of the poor and needy; had he jumped from the pinnacle of the temple he would have been easily accepted as a magician and a miracle worker; had he accepted the devil’s offer of all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus could have become a political leader and liberator. Interestingly, Jesus did miraculously feed 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish later in his ministry, but not in response to the devil; Jesus did perform miracles during his ministry, but never in response to the devil. And, while Jesus did not become a political leader or liberator, he has inspired other leaders and liberators of the oppressed. Had Jesus

followed any of these pathways exclusively, he would have missed the pathway intended for him—the pathway of a suffering servant.

It's important to note the subtlety of the Evil One when it comes to context. Jesus functioned in some of the roles that the Devil had tempted him to function in later in his ministry—in different contexts. What was a temptation of the devil in one context was in another context and with different motivations a holy endeavor. This leads us to ask: How do we know when something is a temptation from the devil in one context and directive from God in another? Some, of course are obvious. Others are not.

Often ministers will contemplate leaving the ministry. The difficulty becomes determining whether God is calling one to leave the ministry, or take a break, or move on to another form of ministry, or to get out of “professional ministry” altogether or whether the Evil One is tempting you to leave ministry because you're doing too much good by God's grace or taking advantage of our weakness to want instant gratification, the “easy button” to ministry and the ability to see results. It's tough to know. Clearly, both happen. God directs. The Evil One tempts.

It occurs to me that the subtlety of the Evil One reminds me of a time my brothers were playing “Battleship.” “Battleship” is a game in which each person has a lap-top type plastic board with grids on it. Each player is to place his/her battleships on the board (hidden from the opponent). Then, each player uses a process of elimination to discover where the opponent's ships are on his/her board. I remember in one game between my brothers, my one brother became very frustrated during the game. He had “searched” and searched for my other brother's ships to no avail. How could he keep missing them? Come to find out that my other brother hadn't put any ships on his board—he was cheating! Thus, there was a tussle on the floor of the Dalton home (one of many!)

To me this scenario reminds me of how subtly the Evil One works. We think we have things figured out. We think we know how to find the context clues. But then, the Evil One plays by different “rules” in order to trip us up. We can't even trust the context clues sometimes.

One of the main things the Evil One says to us is: It will make you happy. God doesn't want you to be unhappy. You deserve happiness. Have the affair—it will make you happy! Cheat on the test—it will make you and your parents happy to have a good grade! Shun the weird people around you—it will make you happy just to mix with the beautiful and popular

people! Act from a position of scarcity rather than a position of abundance and generosity—you'll be happy knowing you have enough money for every terrible thing that may happen to you! It will make you happy. You deserve to be happy. That's biblical—right??

The Christian faith is a battle. We are constantly tempted by the devil. This morning the confession that we are emphasizing is the Scots Confession from our *Presbyterian Book of Confessions*. The Scots Confession seems to suggest that life becomes more difficult, not easier when one is a Christian. It is a battle.

“Thence comes that continual battle which is between the flesh and the Spirit in God’s children . . . . But the sons of God fight against sin; sob and mourn when they find themselves tempted to do evil; and if they fall, rise again with earnest and unfeigned repentance. They do these things, not by their own power, but by the power of the Lord Jesus, apart from whom they can do nothing.” (Chapter XIII).

In speaking of the Kirk (which is “Scottish” for church), the confession says: “The Kirk is invisible, known only to God, whom alone knows whom he has chosen and including both the chosen who are departed and the **Kirk militant, those who yet live and fight against Satan**, and those who shall live hereafter.”

“The chosen departed are in peace, and rest from their labors; . . . they are delivered from all fear and torment, and all the temptations to which we and all God’s chosen are subject in this life, and because of which we are called the Kirk militant.” (Chapter XVII)

How do we fight this battle? Jesus gives us one way—a very important way—in this lesson from Matthew. When Jesus was confronted with a temptation he responded to the devil with scripture. This is an excellent strategy for us. But, to combat the Evil One in this way, we must know scripture! We must also seek to discern the context in which the temptation comes. We need to ask ourselves: Is this a “quick fix” or “easy button” temptation? Is this a temptation to instant gratification? Is this a “seeing is believing” temptation? Is this a temptation to disobey God just to avoid suffering and discipline?

But what of this matter of knowing Scripture? In the movie *Big Mama’s House*, an individual speaks at a church service proclaiming something from the “Good Book.” One of the listeners speaks up and says: “I think that was Tupac (a rapper).” The characters debate a moment and agree the quote was

from Tupac and not the “Good Book.” To counter the Evil One as Jesus did we must know the scriptures as Jesus did.

Several months ago a friend of mine invited me to join her on a scripture memory project that some folks from her church were doing. It was called 12-12-12. Twelve people were to memorize Romans 12 in twelve weeks. At first, we went to town. I was really proud of myself for memorizing so many verses of scripture (actually I just made it through verse 9!). But after a while I really slowed down. I found the slow down came when I started memorizing this section of Romans 12:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer . . . . Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them . . . . Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all . . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

These words were hitting awfully close to home. If I kept memorizing all of these words then they would be in the front of my mind in every encounter I have with other people. I honestly didn’t really like that constant reminder to live in a way that is so very hard to live. God’s Word is described as the sword of the Spirit—sharper than any two-edged sword.

I also found that the more I memorized scripture the more embattled I felt. More temptations seemed to come my way. More difficulties seemed to come my way. I felt more embattled. So, I stopped memorizing.

Temptation is part of life as we know it. Sometimes we withstand and overcome the temptation; sometimes we do not. If we are to overcome more often, I am convinced we need the sword of the Spirit—God’s word. I am convinced we need one another to support, challenge, hold accountable, love and forgive us when we face and sometimes succumb to temptations.

I believe we will always face the challenge of discerning the “context clues” in life. We will always face the challenge of discerning whether something is God’s call or the devil’s temptation.

I am grateful today for this community of faith in which we can face the temptations together. I am grateful for God’s Word. Most of all, I am grateful for the grace of God shown to us each and every day, whether we

succeed or fail. I am grateful for the mercies of Christ which are new to us each and every day. Thanks be to God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.