

TITLE: "Every Choice You Make..."

TEXT: Matthew 4:1-11 (NT p.3)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ²He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. ³The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" ⁷Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

⁸Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ¹¹Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Introduction – Knowing ourselves and knowing God

In the beginning of *The Institutes*, John Calvin says that if we want to know ourselves, we must know God. And if we want to know God, we must know ourselves.

How DO we get to know ourselves? We humans seem to have a limitless capacity to avoid seeing ourselves as we really are. So, how DO we find out what we are like?

Jesus found out who he was through temptation and through his resistance to temptation. Perhaps we can find out who we are by OUR temptations and by our ability to resist, or not resist, those temptations.

1. Temptation to fill a need

Temptation always begins with a need. In the case of Jesus, he had been fasting and was hungry. His hunger was a legitimate need. ...Temptation happens when there is a right and a wrong way to fill that need.

Who would Jesus have been if he had said, "Wow Satan, what a good idea! I think I WILL turn these stones into bread."

Who would Jesus have been if he RESISTED the temptation? ...Well, we know who he was. Jesus was, and is, the Son of God and he KNEW he WAS the Son of God because he resisted Satan's temptation.

What temptation do YOU face every day? Jesus resisted the temptation to eat what he shouldn't, so let's look at the temptation of food from the Internet:

And God populated the earth with broccoli, cauliflower, spinach and green and yellow vegetables of all kinds, so man and woman would live long, healthy lives.

And Satan created McDonald's. And McDonald's brought forth the 99-cent double-cheeseburger. And Satan said to man, "You want fries with that?" ...And the man said, "Super size them!" ...And the man gained many pounds.

And God brought forth running shoes so man could lose those extra pounds.

And Satan brought forth cable TV with a remote so man would not have to toil to change from ESPN to ESPN 2.

And God brought forth the potato, a vegetable naturally low in fat and brimming with nutrition.

And Satan peeled off the healthful skin, sliced the starchy center and deep fat fried them. And he also created sour cream dip and nacho sauce.

And man clutched his remote control and ate his potato chips swaddled in cholesterol and Satan saw it and said, "It is good." ...And man went into cardiac arrest.

And God sighed and created quadruple bypass surgery.
...And Satan created HMOs.

God WANTS us to resist the temptation to do anything that is destructive to our bodies. God says: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; ...therefore glorify God with your body" (I Corinthians 6:19,20). Our bodies are gifts from God. Our bodies are temples of God's Holy Spirit. God asks us to take good care of our bodies and Satan continually tempts us to mess up our bodies.

Who are you? ...Who would you be if you asked God, every day, to help you resist destructive temptation?

2. Temptation to take a shortcut

Satan's final temptation was to give Jesus the opportunity to be a king on earth. Who would Jesus have been if he had said, "OK Satan, I would appreciate it if you made me king here earth?"

Once again, this temptation was so insidious, so diabolical. Listen to the conversation Jesus has with Pontius Pilate just before his crucifixion:

³³Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" ³⁴Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" ³⁵Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" ³⁶Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." ³⁷Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." ³⁸Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Who was Jesus? ...Jesus was and Jesus IS a king, but his kingdom is NOT of THIS world, it is the kingdom of heaven. What Satan was offering Jesus was a shortcut, a way for him to become king on earth right away. And Jesus is the king of heaven, right now, because he resisted that temptation and allowed himself to be crucified.

Jesus said this to his disciples, and he says it to us (Matthew 19:23-30):

“Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, “Then who can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Then Peter said in reply, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Who are you? ...Who would you be if you resisted the temptation to take short cuts in your faith?

3. Temptation to avoid pain and suffering

The next temptation of Jesus was to avoid pain. Satan told him to jump off the spire of the temple so God would rescue him. ...Who would Jesus have been if he had said, “OK Satan, I think I WILL jump off the spire of the temple and you just watch and SEE how God rescues me!”

...This temptation was truly diabolical. Satan KNEW that Jesus had come to die for the sins of the world. Satan also knew that death would be painful. Satan was saying, “You say you are God’s Son, you say God loves you, so of COURSE God doesn’t want you to suffer and die, let’s put God to the test: jump off the temple spire and PROVE that God will save you from pain and death.”

Who was Jesus? Jesus was, and is, the Savior of the world. Jesus knew that, and we know it, because he WAS able to resist Satan’s temptation to force God to save him from pain and death. And because Jesus WAS the Savior of the world, he DID experience pain and death on the cross.

We all face the temptation to avoid pain and suffering. There is pain and suffering that can and should be avoided such as taking aspirin for a head ache, wearing a seat belt or not eating that second bowl of spicy-hot chili. But there are other kinds of pain and suffering that help us to grow in our faith. One is resisting destructive temptations.

This came via email last week. It is titled "Inspiration from a Butterfly"

One day, a small opening appeared in a cocoon. A man sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then, it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could and it could not go any further.

So the man decided to help the butterfly: He took a pair of scissors and opened the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a withered body, it was tiny and had shriveled wings.

The man continued to watch, because he expected that at any moment the wings would open and would enlarge, expand and become firm, to be able to support the butterfly's body.

Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a withered body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.

What the man, in his kindness and goodwill, did not understand was that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were nature's way of forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings, so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon.

Sometimes struggles are exactly what we need in our life. If we were allowed to go through our life without any obstacles, it would stunt our growth and we would not be as strong as we could have been. We might never be able to fly.

Who are you? ...Who would you be if you resisted the temptation to avoid helpful pain and suffering?

Conclusion – Every choice you make...

Remember this: Every choice you make will either bring you closer to God or farther away from God. As you struggle with temptation, as I do, remember these words by C. S. Lewis [from his *Letters*]:

I know all about the despair of trying to overcome chronic temptation. [Failure to overcome temptation] is not serious, provided irritability, annoyance and impatience don't get the upper hand. NO AMOUNT of falls will ruin us as long as we keep on picking ourselves up each time. We shall of course be very muddy and tattered children by the time we reach home. But the bathrooms are all ready, the towels put out, and the clean clothes are hanging in the closet. The only FATAL thing is to lose one's temper and give it up. It is when we NOTICE the dirt that God is most present with us; it is the very SIGN of God's presence.

As you face your temptations today, and each day, remember that every decision you make will either bring you closer to God or farther away from God.

ASK for God's help to overcome temptation each and every morning.

And, when you fail, just pick yourself up, ask God's forgiveness, accept that forgiveness, forgive yourself, and beg God for the strength to resist once again.

Amen.