

THE TEMPTATION
OF JESUS

SERIES ON MATTHEW II
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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The day was a slow paced, see what happens type of day. The sky was blue, butterflies were doing what butterflies do—except better. Birds seemed to be having an intelligent conversations. Trees seemed to be giving more shade than normal. And the clouds quietly went about their idle business. It was a great day on the side of the hill next to the sea of Galilee.

The disciples were lazing about on the grass. Jesus was at the centre of the group and the world seemed a perfect place. It was about two weeks after Jesus had called them to follow him (there were only five or six of them at this point) and they were expectant. They weren't that sure what it was that they had agreed to, they just knew intuitively that it was the right thing to do. It was all good.

They were sitting at the feet of the chosen one, the messiah, the deliverer. This man was going to be a national hero, he was going to bring about a new era where there would be no more violence, no more bloodshed, no more pain.

This man who called himself Jesus had had a very special baptism. Some had said that they saw the Holy Spirit of God descend upon him. And others heard a voice from the sky saying "this is my son, and I think he's fantastic!" Apparently it was quite spectacular—even the lawyers in the city were talking about it.

And they were getting to hang out with him, Jesus had chosen them! This guy was more than just a man, they sensed that there was something deeply divine about him.

Then Jesus spoke.

"Hey guys, come around here for a moment, I've got something I want to tell you. It's important."

Their ears pricked up, they turned and took notice.

“You know how after my baptism people didn’t see me for 6 weeks, well, I want to tell you what happened during that time.”

The disciples made themselves comfortable they loved his stories.

“I felt really strongly that I should go to the desert. It was a directive from my Father in heaven. But I tell you, it was an *awful* time.”

The disciple’s interest was no longer passive. They began to listen more intently. This has the potential to be quite juicy they thought.

“You know how I say that I am bringing about the new era, you know, the kingdom of heaven? Well as part of that I had to go through exactly what all the others who had done similar things, you know people like Moses and Elijah, those great prophets, I had to go through a period of time, an initiation if you like, for forty days in the desert. And it was pretty awful for them as well—I can tell you.

“I wasn’t eating anything because that’s what God wanted. I was so hungry. The desert is a good place to be when you need to fast because there is nothing there to eat. Nothing at all. Anyway, after forty days, I was so exhausted that all I was doing was sleeping, or just lying down, because I couldn’t move, or if I had the mental energy I would be praying. I was praying so hard about this ministry I am doing right now, that the devil thought it a good time to tempt me at put me to the test.”

The devil said to me,

“I see that you are hungry, you poor thing. When was the last time you had anything to eat? You need to look after yourself, cut yourself a break. This is no good for your body you know. How do expect to be useful to God when you are burned out before you start? Come on Jesus. Why don’t you come over here and grab something to eat.

“Look at you, you know how you think you are God’s son and all that, well, maybe that’s just a bit fanciful. Do you really think the Son of God would look like you after this short time in the desert? Do you really think the Son of an All powerful being would feel as hungry as you are right now?

“What you could do is take one of these rocks and turn it into a loaf of freshly baked bread. You could put some rock salt on top, have the dough filled with fresh herbs. Maybe have some garlic butter in the middle of it. Well, you could do that if you were the son of God.

“Why do you torture yourself so? Why do you insist that starving yourself is useful? What are you trying to prove? What is the point of it? Do yourself two favours, turn the stone into bread and satisfy your hunger and

then you can prove that you are in fact divine. Come on, put an end to this charade!”

Jesus, paused for a moment while he was recounting these moments where the seeds of doubt were being sown into his mind. It was true, he was at that time weak in the body and in the mind. It was true, that for a few moments he was actually wondering if he was the Son of God. A battle between his divinity and his humanity, his God-likeness and his man-likeness was raging inside him because when the needs of his body were so strong, the cravings of his stomach so urgent, the cramps of his emptiness so sharp, when everything about his body was ready to give it up, it certainly seemed that there was not an ounce of divinity in him at all. Jesus remembered all too well that even he was able to compromise. And he looked at the disciples and he said to them,

“I felt that I was going to die. I felt like all the Israelites in the desert moaning about there being no food. They complained and on one level were quite right that they were saved by God only to starve in the desert. And I felt that God had baptised me only to play a joke on me. But when I remembered the comment of God to the Israelites and his disappointment in them and how he told them off, but still provided food for them, then I remembered that actually, it was God’s will that I be here and God’s will would prevail. It wasn’t just my body that needed nourishment, it was my spirit. Without faith there *is* ultimately nothing.”

“What did you do?” piped in an overexcited disciple.

“I quoted Deuteronomy 8.3, People don’t live on bread alone but by the very will of God. It is God who gives them life and sustains life. What good does eating do against the power of God if he wants to take away or give you your breath? At the end of it, eating is part of the mechanics of living, but it is not the source of life, God is.”

The disciples appreciated the story with knowing nods and unanimously thought that Jesus had been through quite a bit. But Jesus continued.

“That wasn’t the really hard temptation.”

“The devil then took me to the top of the temple.”

Those that had been to Jerusalem remembered that Herod’s temple was a huge monstrosity. It was built on the side of a cliff and so on one side there was a sheer face 450 feet high, as high as mount Albert, quite a bungee jump, half way up the sky tower.

“That’s quite high up isn’t it?” said the disciple who kept saying too much. “Why did the devil do that?”

“Well” said Jesus, “he saw that I was very strong about the fact that God had put me in this place for character testing so he took it upon himself to have an active part in that. He thought that he had the responsibility like he did with Job.”

“So the devil said to me,

“Alright, you don’t need to prove it to yourself that you are the son of God, that’s fine, but I don’t believe you. I need more proof. I’ve seen a lot of fakes in my time, who know how to make wooden walking sticks into snakes and stuff like that. I’ve even seen some people who claim to be healers though all they are doing is healing psychosomatic illnesses with well spoken motivational words.

I’ve seen frauds. Those who say that they’ve got a word from the lord, and I’ve seen those who live really good lives. I’ve seen false prophets come and go my friend, and they’ve all done pretty impressive things. Now, you know you will have hard time convincing anyone else that you are divine especially if you look at the state you’re in at the moment. What we need is a public display of God’s power and of his divine approval on your life.

And the thing is that I know a thing or two about a thing or two and I can tell you that if you go and look up Psalm 91.11-12, you will see that the real son of God is protected by angels. So, you can kill three birds with one stone here.

If you throw yourself off this spot and the angels come to save you, then I will be convinced of who you are, you will be all the more convinced of who you are, and the people who see it will be convinced of who you are! What a spectacular beginning to your ministry!”

Jesus looked at the disciples and saw their unbelief in who he was. He saw their hope, but it wasn’t belief. He saw them desperately wanting him to be someone he never would be. He saw their doubt and knew that if they saw the hosts of angels save him from a fall, they would believe for a time. It would be like a bonfire of paper, very impressive to look at until it ran out of fuel, it would look great for a moment, but the blaze wouldn’t last. The quick fix was not what this world needed because you simply can’t quick fix brokenness.

“What did you do?” piped in the over exuberant disciple. Someone slapped the back of his head and told him to shut up and stop looking stupid. He managed to shut up, but had difficulty with the other.

Jesus continued, “Well, I remembered the Israelites again. I remembered how they had walked through the red sea when God had parted it when they were being set free from Egypt. They walked through a walkway

carved out of ocean, and there were walls of water on either side of them. And I remembered how even after that, they still grumbled and worshipped a golden calf. The human heart is a terribly selfish thing and will do anything to satisfy its insecurities.

So I quoted from Deuteronomy 6.16, and I said that you shouldn't dare put god to the test. You should always trust him, no matter what. You should invest your energy into bowing to his will instead of trying to manipulate him to your own ends. Faith requires no proof because faith is deeper than that."

Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "but that wasn't the hardest temptation."

"The devil then took me up to this mountain where I could see the entire world. It was quite uncanny and it is difficult to explain, but there it was.

"He began to pace around a little and he looked at me and said,

"Ok, you've called my bluff. I agree, you are the Son of God, that's not an issue now. That's fine, but have you really thought about what it means to be that? Have you ever taken the time to think about the consequences of this calling?

"Let's cut to the chase Jesus, you are a 30 year old virgin. That's admirable, but your calling demands that you die without having had sex! Are you mad? I was there when you were growing up and you were so pure, so chaste, you never even undressed a woman in your mind. That's great, but sex is such a wonderful thing. It's a gift from heaven why deny yourself?

You'll never enjoy owning a house. You'll never have an income or a job or a trade. You'll never be a dad. Don't you think that family is important to what it means to be human? Procreation is an instinct that humanity is driven by. How human are you if you deny those urges? How can you relate if you don't experience what they are going through?

Here's another thing Jesus, you are not human if you never sin. So think about it, if you were to do one small sin, that would make you identify with the whole world. And if you were going to do one small sin, then you could probably do a really big one without any trouble—prove your humanity! Prove your humanity once and for all and then your work will have more oomph and more power. Come on Jesus, be authentic, be real, be yourself however bad that might be...and suddenly the words of the devil have a terribly 21st century sound to them.

"Come on Christian. How can you relate to the world if you don't actually participate in it! A little compromise doesn't hurt, it helps you relate.

Succumb to the pressure of your environment just a little, that way you are a part of it. Come on Christian, compromise just a little here, and well, actually while you are at it, go the whole hog, you've come this far!

The devil in the 21st century plays the same tricks with different words.

"Come on, Jesus", said the devil, "you know I hold all the keys to this world. Look around you, and tell me that God is in control. Look! I make people rich, I control their destiny by inciting their appetite for power. It's me who inspires great art, it's me who inspires people to study the sciences. Your time is over, this is my reign. Your chosen people have forsaken you and are following their own human-made intellectual rules and regulations. You've seen them, you've even accused them of being a whore in their relationship to you, you've rejected them time and time again because of their sin, because of their attitude to you.

"Come on Jesus, who's really in charge? You are about to go through 3 years of agony and you know it. You are going to die a gruesome and painful death on a cross, you will be humiliated by your own creation. And even after your time on this earth things won't change. Your way of doing things is flawed because the power lies in the people not in God. It seems that I am the only one who knows how to manipulate humans. I know all the in roads to the soul.

Come on Jesus, I'll give you all of this world, because you know it's mine to give. I'll give it to you, if you just concede that I am actually the one in charge here, and not God.

Come on Jesus. Come on. You want power? I'll give you power. You want women? I'll give you women. You want the heart of people? I'll give you their hearts...come on...

And Jesus looked at the disciples. And he saw the corruptness that lay within. The desperately self-serving nature that they all possessed. The desire to manipulate others for their own ends. And Jesus knew that Satan was absolutely right.

Throughout history there seem to be more cases of those who reject God than those who are faithful. And even among the faithful there are times when even they, yes they too, concede to the pressure of self interest and the devil. It is true. And Jesus saw before him the opportunity to just short circuit the whole deal.

Rather than fight selfishness, use it for people's benefit. Twist and coerce their hearts into doing something that though they may not want to do it, would ultimately be more useful for them. In the same way people fall in love with money, they could fall in love with God. He could make them love God, make them love each other and make them be at peace.

And Jesus looked at the disciples and he saw in them the future. A church community would be built from them, where people would fall in love with Jesus because he would bring them prosperity, or happiness, or contentment, or take away their loneliness and pain, or heal their sickness. He saw that there would be a church that was built upon these men that would use self-interest of financial survival for gaining converts. And he saw the bitter irony of how many in the church would use the same tools as the devil in the name of Jesus.

“What did you say?” asked the quirky disciple.

“I said to the devil, that it is written again in Deuteronomy 6.13 that you should worship no-one and nothing but God. I said to the devil, that love and selfishness do not mix. That freedom and manipulation are at odds with each other. You can't manipulate someone into freedom. You can't make someone free if they don't want to be. I worship God because he has chosen the difficult but honest road. A road that leads to real transformation because it lets people love him without self-interest. I choose the hard road because it is not about benefiting God, but about benefiting those whom he loves.”

A gentle quiet descended upon the group as they pondered how they actually identified with the temptation of their messiah and how inspiring it was that he actually got through it.

“What happened next?” asked the disciple.

“The devil went away, but, the temptations still remain...Everyday, though at times it rips me to the core, I choose to worship my Father in heaven and respond to his calling on my life. I suggest you do the same.”