

## **“The First Temptation of Christ”**

### **Matthew 4:1-11**

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When the film was released in 1988, it created a storm of controversy. Major religious leaders blasted the film in fiery sermons, condemning the subject matter as pornographic. In recent years, however, “The Last Temptation of Christ” has been cast in a more positive light within the Christian community. Some Christian groups, including Promise Keepers, have re-examined it and found it an acceptable hypothesis of what it might have been like for Jesus to be both fully man and God.

The film that Martin Scorsese directed is based upon a 1951 novel by Nikos Kazantzakis. It follows the life of Christ from his perspective. His thesis was that Jesus, while free from sin, faced every temptation common to humans, including fear, doubt, depression and lust. The criticism of the book and film developed over the vivid portrayal of those temptations. Many could not imagine Jesus harboring such thoughts and fantasies.

I’m not sure what the last temptation of Christ was, but based upon scripture, I have a clearer indication of what the first ones were. Let’s look at them and that experience through the lens that Matthew provides.

After Jesus’ baptism, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, the desolate hills between Jerusalem and the Jordan River. This was a time of reflection for Jesus, which included grappling with some tantalizing temptations to abandon his mission or at least alter the way he would go about it.

I’m not surprised he faced strong temptations. Every promise made among friends will be tested in a hostile environment. As a result, Jesus had to decide early and often whether his ministry was going to be about him or them, the people that needed him. Would his focus be upon doing what was easy or right, being served or serving others, testing God or trusting Him? Would he become addicted to comfort and control as many of his religious peers?

He had to come to grips with all of this and the fact that the world was not going to be changed by another political or religious leader with a big ego, quick solutions to serious problems, a lust for power or the need to impress people. Only one type of leader would make the world better and safer, a humbled, principled, disciplined, generous servant that reflected the heart of God. Would he be that kind of leader?

To borrow an idea from Steven Vincent Benet’s short story, The Devil and Daniel Webster, Jesus decided he would not sell his soul to the devil in order to make his life easier, amass a fortune, gain power over others, receive wild acclaim or grab a false sense of security. With his power and ability, he could have done this, but he would have made the greatest sacrifice of all. He would have abandoned his mission and purpose, turning his back on God and us. For him, that was too great a sacrifice. As we now know, he would rather give his life than do this.

**I marvel at Jesus’ level of commitment.** After all, he was no seasoned veteran. When he entered the wilderness, he was, according to Tom Ehrich, “new in his awareness of call, excited about his unfolding mission and eager to serve.” He seemed to be equally eager to remain faithful to the God that called him.

**What about your level of commitment?** What has God called you to do and be? How has He offered to partner with you to make the world better? What promises have you made to Him and others? What distractions do you face? How strong or weak are you?

**How do you remain as committed as Jesus and keep the promises you have made?** How did Jesus? I think he had a clear sense of identity and purpose that guided his decisions, a

close relationship with God who strengthened and empowered him and a loving community of faith that nurtured and encouraged him.

When Jesus faced the temptation to become addicted to control or comfort, he had to recall that his objective was not to be served but to serve. His mission was to confront evil, expose injustice, correct wrong, offer compassion for the victims of injustice, release the oppressed and build bridges of hope and goodwill to all people. He came to inspire people to achieve their potential and liberate them from anyone or anything that prevented it. He came to make hope visible and any temptation that undermined it was rejected.

**Do you have a clear sense of identity and purpose and the commitments you have made because of them?** Do these commitments influence your decisions, especially when confronted with strong temptations? Like Jesus, are there some things you refuse to do because of the commitments you have made as a husband or wife, a parent, a neighbor, a citizen or a church member? Is it becoming harder for you to keep your word and fulfill your commitments?

**Do you need help in order to remain faithful?** Sure you do. Everyone does. All of us are weak and vulnerable at times and have poor memories. From where do we get the wisdom, strength and resolve we need?

I think they come from God and fellow pilgrims that love us. Our text highlights the close relationship that existed between Jesus and his heavenly Father. The same Spirit that led Jesus to the wilderness for this time of testing remained with him through the entire process, ministering to him when it was over. If Jesus needed and relied upon the Spirit, how much more should we? “Deliver us from evil,” needs to be on our lips, too.

Follow the story in Matthew. Immediately after this wilderness experience, what did Jesus do? He called his disciples. This bold adventure and perilous journey would require traveling companions that would walk with him, listen to him, encourage him and pray for him. He knew deep down in his heart that this would not be the last temptation of Christ.

Again, if Jesus needed a support group, how much more do we? All of us need friends that will hold us up and hold us accountable. We need companions that will ask us tough questions. “Do you really want to do this? What will the consequences be? Who will be hurt or helped by this decision? Perhaps you need to think about this more before moving forward.”

This morning, I offer you this kind of loving support through this church. We invite you to journey with us as we seek to honor God through committed lives. Help us along our way and let us help you.