

First Sunday in Lent; March 9, 2025
+ Luke 4:1-13 +
“The Living Word: A Good Defense”

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the Devil for forty days. He did not eat anything during those days. When they came to an end, he was hungry. The Devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

Jesus answered him, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.’”

The Devil led him up to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. The Devil told him, “I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms, because it has been entrusted to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. So, if you worship me, it will all be yours.”

Jesus answered him, “It is written: ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

The Devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the pinnacle of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here, because it is written:

He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you.

And,

they will lift you up with their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus answered him, “It says: You shall test the Lord your God.”

When the Devil had finished every temptation, he left him until an opportune time.

What’s your favorite book? Do you know the Devil’s favorite book? I can’t prove it, but I’m pretty sure it’s the Bible. Why? Because that’s where the Father of Lies gets his favorite teachings from. The Devil has learned that when he steals God’s words and then bends them and twists them, turning Godly-sounding language into camouflaged lies...it works. The first and most striking example of this is how he spoke to Eve in the Garden of Eden. Did God really say they should not eat of any tree in the Garden? See what he did! He took God’s own words, a divine command, and quoted it! Except that he slightly misquoted it -- God had said something about not eating from a tree, but only one tree -- and the Devil also prefaced the misquote with a doubt-inducing phrase. And we know the rest of the story. Adam and Eve bought the lie and their eyes were opened to know good and evil – evil especially, evil through experience, evil thoroughly, all the evil that sin brings into the world.

They lived the rest of their lives knowing good – life in a beautiful world – and evil – all the pain of sin on the loose, followed by death. They lived knowing the good of having children, and the evil of one of those children being murdered by his own brother. They knew the good of health and the evil of illness, the good of warm sunshine and the evil of violent storms, and so on. And the Devil never stops this lying trick of using God’s Word to lie and plunge into evil. Keep reading passed those opening chapters of the Old Testament and you’ll see that the most dangerous spiritual ideas so often come wrapped in Godly-sounding vocabulary and phrases, and that when the pious-sounding lies are bought, evil comes.

In the Gospel the Devil tries it again. He tries to misuse the Word of God against the Word of God in the flesh, who came to bring salvation and to deliver believers in him from all evil. **“If you are the Son of God,”** he says. And of course, Jesus is. How Godly it sounds! But what follows? Use who you are to defy your Father’s will and timing. And Jesus fights back with God’s Word, accurately quoted, with no twist, a passage repeated and affirmed throughout the Scripture to make its meaning unmistakable: **“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.”** What my Father says is right. His Holy Spirit led me here to this place without bread, and will lead me to food when he says the time is right.

In round two – and, by the way, it’s really round two of the final assault of temptation after forty full days of temptation – but in round two, the Devil speaks another half-truth of God’s Word. It is true the Bible calls the Devil the Prince of this World. It also says he is powerful, and rules the hearts of those apart from Christ. And God has given him leash in these last days. But to give all the kingdoms of the world away is more than the Devil can rightly offer. So again, he’s taking God’s Word and bending it into a lie. Jesus does not bother to point out the error. The greatest lie, the baldest one, is that bowing down to the Devil could ever be good, even for all the kingdoms of the world. For what does a man gain if gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? **Jesus answered him, “It is written: ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”**

Finally, from the 450-foot pinnacle of the temple (that’s a little more than two Statues of Liberty high) in Jerusalem, the Devil Jesus to jump. Maybe the first two temptations make sense to us right away. If you’re hungry, and you can provide food for yourself, do it! And who wouldn’t want to be insanely rich and powerful, right? But do you see the appeal in this? It’s a struggle, and there are lot of ideas. But here is one I like. Have you ever seen one of those people climb a sky-scraper in a big city? It’s illegal, but sometimes someone tries it. And what happens? Everyone on the street stops and stares with their mouths hanging open. How would the people of Jerusalem react if Jesus didn’t climb the temple, but jumped from it – and survived! Instant fame. Instant popularity. I think that’s the implied appeal.

And Satan, predictably but powerfully, wraps the lie in yet another Bible verse: God has promised to protect you, so go for it! The fascinating thing about this temptation is that the Devil this time accurately quotes the Bible passage! No twisting or bending! Except: he leaves out everything else the Bible says about danger, including the passage that tells you to use steps when available: **Jesus answered him, “It says: ‘You shall not test the Lord your God.’”**

Jesus is the Word of God incarnate. So he knows the Word better than the Devil, and the Devil cannot prevail no matter how hard he lies, or how creatively. And in all these temptations, you see Jesus the Living Word on the defensive.

Much of the life of Christian faith is a defensive battle. Next week we’ll talk about offense. But today is for defense. St. Paul knew about defense, which is part of the reason his “Full Armor of God” encouragement in Ephesians chapter 6 is so memorable. **Put on the full armor of God, so that you can stand against the schemes of the Devil.** What follows in those verses is almost all about defense. You must be ready to defend the faith that Christ has given you through his Word with his Word. It is first to reject the idea that the Bible is old and irrelevant and see it as the eternal and always-relevant Word of God. It is to love it because in that written Word is the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ your Savior. And it is to strive to know that Word as well as the Word in the Flesh knows it.

It also is to let go of the excuse that the Word is too hard to understand. Was there anything hard to understand in the three passages Jesus used against the Devil? **Man shall not live on bread alone, but by every word of God. You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only. You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.** Seems pretty easy, to be honest. But there's another one of Satan's tricky lies: "It's too hard to understand, so don't even try. Remember...one time you tried to understand this one chapter in Ezekiel and you couldn't. And there's this one section in Revelation that no one really understands. Therefore, don't even try to understand any of it! All those easy passages that you could use to dismantle my tricky little lies, definitely don't bother with those!"

"And look how thick it is!" he says. "As busy as you are, how could ever get to know a book that big?" But this is why God has given you a church. This is why he's made you part of this body of his. You have help here. You have help from each other. The Devil wants you to forget all that, and to drop your defense.

This may be a lot of guilt for you deal with. It is for many Christians. We are generally not good at arming ourselves with God's Word against the Devil's schemes. So now please allow yourself to be relieved of any and all guilt. Jesus, the Word of God, became the Word in Flesh to deliver from every temptation you've ever fallen into, every Devilish half-truth that you went for, and every twist of Bible truth you've failed to see through. And he came to deliver you from every failure to hold up the truth of the Word. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews that we heard earlier: **we [have a high priest]**. These words teach you that Jesus did for you what the high priests of the Old Testament did for the people. He sacrificed. He sacrificed himself, the Lamb of God, and by the blood he shed your sin is washed away. **We have a high priest who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.** You have a Savior who stood up and used the Word of God perfectly against every one of the Devil's schemes for forty days and forty nights. That holiness of Jesus is draped over you by faith. And here is the result of the perfect life of Christ for all who believe: **So let us approach the throne of grace with confidence.** You are free, with the holy life of Christ over you, to approach the throne of God. You are free to go to him confidently today and to receive his grace, his undeserved gift of salvation in Christ. And you are free to do it confidently, knowing God's grace in Christ is yours.

But don't stop there. There is a purpose for this grace, besides salvation. It does even more for you. Go to God's throne of grace, freely and confidently **so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.** It is grace – undeserved love – that moved the Father to send his Son to overcome the Devil for us and to die for our sins. But God gives grace on top of grace. It's also his undeserved love to help you in the moments of your own temptations.

So do not beat yourself up over past failures. Leave them all at the cross of God's holy Son. Remember his perfect defense against the Devil, that saves you. Be free from guilt and confident of God's grace. And receive this aspect of his grace, too: in undeserved love he supplies you with his Word to defend yourself – your Christian faith and your Christian life – against Satan's schemes. Pick it up. Read it. Love it. Know it. Use your church to help.

Christ has delivered you from sin by defeating the Devil for you. That's God's grace. And so is this: He's given you his Word to defend yourself from that same Devil. For Christ's sake, use the Living Word as your defense. Amen.