

Seven Summits: Elevating our Worship Life
Part Four: Worship Exclusively
Matthew 4.1-11

July 17, 2022

Some of you know that this week Sharon and I made a lightning trip out to California so that I could perform the memorial service for the mother of Corrie's husband's. We flew out Wednesday early and got back Thursday late.

On the way out I had window seats, which I love, but on the way back, flying over the Sierras and the Rockies, which I love, I got stuck in the middle seat.

But I didn't even have time to start to get grumpy about it because from the moment I sat down on the plane I had an amazing three hour conversation with the woman who was sitting next to me . . . in the window seat I wanted. She was a really sharp, deeply reflective, and very honest young woman who is really struggling with her faith.

She grew up in a Christian context, but for the past several years has been deeply struggling with her Christian parents, her Christian friends, her Christian college, her Christian church – and again and again this was the issue that her struggles boiled down to: you believe in something that claims to have the power to transform people's lives, to make them new, and yet you live in ways that are not in any way distinctive from the world around you. Your love feels shallow, your faith feels false, your life feels self-serving, and your passion to respond to the needs of the world seems confined to meeting your own needs.

How you live, how you relate, fails to give evidence of the very thing you claim to be as a made-new follower of Christ. Shouldn't your life be less about you?

So, if someone who knew you was talking about you to a stranger on a plane, specifically about how your faith finds expression in your life, what would they say?

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One of the things we believe as followers of Christ, because it is something that the Bible teaches, is that every human heart is contested ground. There are two opposing spiritual forces at play. One is the power of good, as God seeks to draw us into the riches of relationship with himself, and into the joy and vibrancy of new life in Christ and a life lived for him.

The other is the power of evil, as the Evil One seeks to draw us away from God, to rob us of the gifts God has for us, to undermine a life lived for God and encourage us to live our lives for us instead.

Everything about the Evil One is defined in opposition to the purposes of God. Devil is a word that means someone who throws something across the path to block it. It could also be translated “accuser.” Satan is a name that means adversary, opponent, enemy. And the Tempter is someone seeking to veer you away from God’s best by convincing you that your deepest desires can really be met in something other than God.

So, God gives, Satan robs. God loves, the Evil One accuses. God invites, the Tempter twists.

The passage we are looking at today is one that shows how those two spiritual forces were at work in the life of Jesus at the very moment that he began his public ministry.

The Second Person of the Trinity, God the Son, came to earth to love and to redeem fallen humanity. As he began his walk to the cross, God set Jesus apart as his unique son, and invited him into a life of faithful service.

The Evil One wanted anything but. So he sets out to veer Jesus off his path by tempting him.

How do you tempt God? How would you try to get Jesus, the Son of God, fully human and fully divine, to veer off the path of obedience?

Fascinatingly, the way Satan tried to tempt Jesus was with the truth, even to the point of quoting scripture . . . but the truth twisted ever so slightly, not quite the whole truth, so that it served Satan’s designs instead of God’s ends.

The story begins in the last few verses of Matthew chapter 3, when John baptizes Jesus. Matthew tells us that just as Jesus came up out of the water . . .

Matthew 3.16-17

¹⁶ At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Matthew 4.1

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Matthew 4.3

³ The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God . . .”

“If you are the Son of God” can also be translated “*since* you are the Son of God.”

This is where Satan tries to use the truth to tempt Jesus off the path of faithfulness.

Satan never disputes Jesus’s identity. What he tempts him with is how exactly he will be *faithful* to his identity. What will being the unique Son of God mean?

From a biblical perspective, identity is never something that is true about just me, me in isolation, me independent of any other point of reference. Biblically speaking, my identity can only be understood as something that is true of me in relationship with the God who created me and gave me life.

Jesus is not just the Son. He is the Son *of God*. He is defined by his relationship to the Father. But what exactly will that relationship with the Father look like as Jesus takes on human flesh and walks this earth?

That's where the temptation lies.

As the Second person of the Trinity, Jesus, God the Son, eternally seated with the Father and the Spirit in the Heavenly Throne room, is in a position of incredible power and privilege.

At the same time, as he takes on flesh and comes and walks among us, he does so in response to the Father's call and invitation. The Father invites the son to lay down his rights and place of privilege and power and to live his days on earth as a servant rather than as a king, giving his life in service of the Father.

The life of the Son of God *as lived out on earth* is to be a life of self-emptying duty and service.

Jesus the Prince of Glory is led by the Spirit out into the desert. There he is tempted by the Prince of this World with the truth, the truth that he is in fact the son of God, and that power and privilege are rightly his.

That's the temptation Satan lays before Jesus:

Embrace the glory that is rightly yours. Lay aside the burden of duty. Don't let yourself be put out by serving the Father, who is your equal. Assert your divine power and privilege. Let it be about you. Focus on your needs, your desires, your ambitions, instead of putting the Father and his kingdom, and his glory, first. You are loved by the Father. Since he is so pleased with you, let the Father serve the Son rather than the other way around.

The first temptation is in Matthew 4.2-4

² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.

³ The tempter came to him and said, "[Since] you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Use the power and privilege that is rightly yours to serve yourself and meet your own needs.

This is the temptation to see God as Great Harvest Bread Company. It shouldn't have to cost us when we serve God. Why should God's Son go hungry? Why should we have to do without?

Jesus resists the temptation by quoting Scripture from Deuteronomy 8.3. Yes, I have that power. But my life on earth is about something far more important than my own physical comfort. Loving and serving the Father is far more important than my own physical wellbeing.

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

How does Jesus respond to this temptation? With scripture. Not as a magic talisman, but as a thoroughly integrated way of seeing reality.

"It is written": What does it tell you that that was how he responded to the evil one all three times, by quoting scripture?

To the half truths and twisted truths and truth as proof text on the lips of the Evil One, Jesus responds with the whole truth, the truth of his life and ministry rightly seen from the perspective of the father.

Yes, that is what is true about my eternal identity. I am the Son of God. But the life to which I'm called as the Son of God while here on earth is a life lived in sacrificial service of my father.

And, in fact, that life of service will be one in which Jesus often goes hungry, even while he is feeding others.

Mark 3.20 Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat.

Mark 6.31 (right before the miraculous feeding of the five thousand) So many people were coming and going that [Jesus and the disciples] did not even have a chance to eat.

Mark 11.12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry.

But in John chapter four he reflects how thoroughly he has overcome this temptation to focus on his own comfort and his own needs and found joy in his life of duty and service to the Father.

John 4.34 My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work.

The second temptation is in Matthew 4.5-7

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. ⁶ “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

This is the temptation to see God as heavenly Bungie Cord.

The temptation is to reverse things, to focus on what God can do for us, to put God in a position where he is forced to serve me rather than the other way around

Again Jesus responds by quoting scripture, this time from Deuteronomy 6.16

⁷ Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Yes, I am his Son, and yes, he has promised his care and protection. But it is never my place to force God’s hand. God’s call is for me to serve him while I’m here on earth, not to put him in a place where he must serve me. The Father loves me. He sees me. He knows my need. I can trust him to meet my needs as he sees fit

And in fact that is exactly what the Father does. If you hop down a few lines to the end of this story, we’re told that as soon as this time of testing is over . . .

Matthew 4.11

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

The Son of God can trust the love of the Father, even as his focus is on serving the father rather than being served by the father.

The third temptation is found in Matthew 4.8-10

⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor [or glory]. ⁹ “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

This is the temptation to focus on ourselves and what we are entitled to, setting aside thought of the glory and honor that are God’s due, and focusing on the glory and honor that are our due instead.

We did a mock-up of a Time Magazine Man of the Year cover that uses this picture of a very cool Jesus in sunglasses surrounded by bright and shining glory.



This is the temptation the Evil One puts before Jesus. “You know you deserve it. You know you want it. We all know who you are. So what are you waiting for? It all belongs to you. Just receive the glory that is your due.”

It’s the temptation to see God as our own personal Celebrity Agent, advancing our own causes, our own careers, our own reputations.

How does Jesus respond to that temptation? The same as with the other two versions of this same temptation. He refuses.

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Quoting Deuteronomy 6.13, he brings us to the heart of this passage and of this encounter.

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Try to put that in your own words. How would you paraphrase that?

“Worship the Lord your God,”

This word contains the word picture of getting down on your hands and knees with your face to the ground in front of someone in power such as a king as a way of acknowledging their power and authority and putting yourself in their service. It was an expression of profound awe and reverence and respect and submission.

Jesus says to this temptation: I am commanded in Scripture to worship the Lord my God . . . Flatten myself before God in a posture of utter devotion and yieldedness and availability. And I will.

“And to serve him only.”

That's a word that means using the gifts and resources that I have to render service to someone else as that person's subject or slave. It was a word that was used not only to describe priests serving God in worship, but also to describe anyone using their gifts to serve and honor God in any way, such as when Paul refers to serving God with his whole heart by preaching the gospel of his son in Romans 1.9.

Jesus says to this temptation: I am commanded in Scripture to serve him only. To make the entirety of my earthly life an offering to God alone, utterly relinquishing all that I am and all that I have for his sake, and in his service. And I will.

This is the defining moment for Jesus' public ministry, and it happens even before it starts. Right here, before he ever preaches his first sermon or performs his first miracle, Jesus settles the most important question of his ministry. Will it be about the Father, or will it be about me?

His entire ministry reflects his faithful answer to the question: what does it mean to be the Son of God?

Think of the way again and again throughout his years of ministry Jesus put his duty and service of the Father ahead of his own needs and desires. Instead of a life that was about him – meeting his own needs, seeking his own glory, requiring God to serve him – his was a life that was all about the Father.

Listen to these verses from John's gospel that show how thoroughly Jesus integrated this perspective into his earthly life, allowing his entire life on earth be a life of duty and service rather than one of power and privilege.

John 5.19: I tell you the truth. The Son does nothing by himself. He only does what he sees his father doing.

John 5.30 I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.

John 8.26 He who sent me is reliable, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.

John 8.28-29 I do nothing on my own, but speak just what the Father has taught me. . . . For I always do what pleases him.

John 8.49 I honor my Father. I am not seeking glory for myself.

John 14.10 The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.

John 17.4 (his prayer on the last day of his life) I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.

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So what does this have to do with us?

The very same temptation that Satan put before Jesus in the wilderness he puts before each one of us.

Jesus was the Son of God uniquely. At the same time, Sons of God, children of God, is a term that used to describe us too.

I John 3.1

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

Obviously not in the same way that Jesus was. We don't have a divine nature. But we do have the divine spirit residing within us. We have a new identity. We are God's children.

How faithful are we to the life to which God calls us while we are here on this earth?

How much does our identity shape the life we live?

How tempting for us, too, as ones chosen by God, loved by God, redeemed by God, seated with Christ in the heavenly realms, how tempting for us to focus on the power and privilege that are ours as God's children, and to overlook the life of duty and service to which we too are called in the few short years that we walk this earth.

The example that Jesus sets us today is not just one of standing strong against the evil one's attacks, important as that is. The example he sets us is nothing less than deciding once and for all what a life of faithfulness as a son or daughter of God means.

Is my life about my power and privilege, or is it about my duty and service?

Who is my life ultimately about? God or me?

Do those God places around me see a life consistent with my new identity as a child of God? Or do they just see me?

Jesus says: It is written: Flatten yourself before God in a posture of utter devotion and yieldedness and availability, and make the entirety of your life an offering to God alone, utterly relinquishing all that you are and all that you have for his sake and in his service.

What is your response to God's invitation?

And the Evil One says, "Nah. Make it about you."

What is your response to Satan's temptation?