



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for Lent 1

March 9, 2025

One Little Word

Luke 4:1–13

¹ Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.

³ And the devil said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

⁴ But Jesus answered him, saying, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.’”

⁵ Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. ⁶ And the devil said to Him, “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. ⁷ Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.”

⁸ And Jesus answered and said to him, “Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”

⁹ Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written:

‘He shall give His angels charge over you,
To keep you,’

¹¹ and,

‘In their hands they shall bear you up,
Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’”

¹² And Jesus answered and said to him, “It has been said, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’” ¹³ Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.

The incident in today's Gospel – the temptation of Jesus – occurs early in His earthly ministry. In fact, it happens even before He begins publicly preaching and teaching. It was immediately after His baptism that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Forty days He was out there, fasting in that harsh and lonely terrain.

In doing so, Jesus was replaying the experience of ancient Israel, when they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. In a sense, all Israel was, in Christ, reduced to one, the one representative Israelite. While the Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness those



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forty years, they were tempted to grumble and complain. And they gave in to that temptation all too readily. Why was God making this journey so difficult for them? They grumbled and groused about the manna God gave them to eat. (But at least they *had* something to eat!) Jesus had nothing. He too was being tempted. But Jesus was the one faithful Israelite who didn't grumble or complain.

Remember, Jesus is true man, with a real body, and so, naturally, this prolonged fast made Him hungry, very hungry. When we're hungry and tired, we're at our most vulnerable, and this was when the devil attacked. He said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."

Let's ponder that for a moment. There's a lot to unpack here, starting with that little word, "if." What does the devil mean by, "*If* you are the Son of God"? Is he denying that Jesus is the Son of God? It sounds like that in English. But in Greek, there's a way to say that, but this isn't it. The devil's not that crass; he's more subtle. His "if" isn't denying that Jesus is God's Son; it's actually just the opposite. He's granting the fact that Jesus is God's Son. The "if" is like our "since": "*If* you are the Son of God," means, "*Since* you are God's Son . . ." The devil is using this admission as a set-up for what follows.

Remember that, at Jesus' baptism, which happened shortly before this, the voice of the Father came from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." So, we know that Jesus really is the Son of God. Jesus knows it, and the devil knows it – that fact is not in question.

The devil's temptation lies in what he wants Jesus to *do* about the fact that He's God's Son, what he wants Jesus to make of it, given His current circumstances, how to act as a result. "If you are – *since* you are – the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." Do you see the subtlety of this temptation? Think of it this way:

"So God says you're his Son, does he? Isn't that lovely. That's what he said at your baptism, yes? 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.' Well . . . if you're so *beloved*, why has He sent you out here into this God-forsaken wilderness? Why is he letting you go hungry like this? What kind of 'beloving' is this? Doesn't God's Son deserve better than this?"

See, that's how the devil operates – kind of from the side, not usually head-on. He wants you to doubt that God really cares about you. He wants you to get the wrong ideas about God, like he's some mean old nasty God who's holding out on you and wanting to spoil your fun. That's how he worked on Adam and Eve, isn't it?

Jesus is replaying their temptation, too, here. In the verses immediately before the temptation account, Luke traces Jesus' ancestry all the way back to Adam. So maybe he wants us to have that in mind. As the one true and representative *man*, the second Adam,



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the one who overcomes the devil, Jesus gets it right.

Let's compare the two accounts for a moment. Adam and Eve were in a garden; Jesus was in a wilderness. The devil came at Adam and Eve somewhat indirectly, wanting them to doubt God's goodness. And he came at them through what? Food, of all things.

"You know, that tree there – the one God told you not to eat from – why would he tell you not to do that? I mean, it looks like a perfectly good tree. And didn't He put you in charge of this garden? That's a pretty high responsibility, isn't it? I mean, if he thinks that highly of you, why wouldn't he let you eat from this one tree? You know, I think he's holding out on you. He doesn't really care about you, like he says. Just look at that fruit! Doesn't it look good? Go on, take matters into your own hands. Take that *fruit* into your own hands. You deserve it!"

Sound familiar? Does the devil talk to you this way? It's his standard M.O., you know. Doubt God's goodness. Doubt God's Word. You deserve better. Be your own God. Make your own decisions about what's right for you. You can have it. It's what you want, isn't it? Go and get it. The temptation is always to be your own God, independent of that mean old ogre in the sky who only wants to spoil your fun.

Adam and Eve fell for that temptation – and what a fall it was! The curse fell, and death came into the world. And death comes down to us. Jesus came to reverse the curse, to do something about sin and death and all the misery that comes in its wake. So the devil wanted to stop him before he got started. The devil tried the same line of approach with Jesus that worked with Adam: God doesn't care about you. You're hungry. You're entitled. You can do something about it. Take matters into your own hands. Go for it. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."

The devil's temptation started with that little word, "if." It's the little word that sets up the big trap. If God cares about you so much, why does he let you suffer like this? If God forgives sins, why not go ahead and sin some more, since He'll forgive you, anyway? You see, there's a little grain of truth in the set-up, but then the devil twists it and uses it to lead you off in the wrong direction.

Well, in response to the devil's little word, "if," Jesus had a little word of his own: "It is written." He didn't entertain the temptation, but stopped it cold in its tracks. "It is written." It stands written, and therefore you can take your stand upon it. It's a sure thing, a solid footing. God has spoken, and His Word is true. Don't listen to the devil's lies and half-truths. Instead, shut him up and shoot him down with the reliable and trustworthy Word of our loving God. "It is written."

"It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" There's more to life than serving your belly and satisfying your physical cravings. Just satisfying the desires of your flesh – apart from and independent of God's word and will – that would be to fall into the devil's trap. Jesus didn't fall for it. We too often do.



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But that's why Jesus came – to do what we can't. He is our one true and faithful representative, our stand-in, our Designated Devil-Hitter. Jesus does what we don't, which is to refuse temptation, stop it cold in its tracks. Finally, there's a man who will say no to the devil! Adam didn't, we don't, but Jesus does.

And here's why it's so absolutely vital and necessary that He does: so as not to get diverted from what He came to do. For Jesus came to reverse the curse, and the devil didn't want Him to do that. Jesus came to save you, and the devil doesn't want that to happen, either. Anything to keep Jesus from accomplishing His mission.

So the devil plays on Jesus' status as God's Son in order to get Him to use His sonship for His own purposes and pleasure. Thankfully, it didn't work. "It is written," Jesus replied. The devil tried to tempt Jesus with all the kingdoms of the world – which Jesus was entitled to and would end up getting anyway – but the devil offers Jesus an easier way to get them than the hard road of the cross. But the temptation didn't work. Jesus answered him, "It is written." The devil tempted Jesus with the offer of quick success and power and popularity, to "throw yourself off the temple where everybody can see and they will acclaim you as Messiah, because God will surely protect you . . . if you are, *since* you are, the Son of God." There's that "if" again. But, of course, it didn't work. For Jesus has a little Word of His own: "It is written."

Jesus would not be deterred or diverted from the road He had taken, the way of the cross. For that was the only way that He could accomplish His mission and save sinful mankind – and save you. There were no shortcuts or sidesteps. Straight ahead, full speed ahead – that was the only way for Jesus. He went to battle with the devil as your divine Champion. And he won! You don't, He does, and yet He gives you a share in His victory! Jesus would let nothing stop Him from going to the cross, to carry your sins there on His sinless back – a back that would endure flogging and beating for your sake. Jesus was faithful to His Father's mission. This is the good news from the account of Jesus' temptation. Nothing would stop your Savior from reaching His goal!

And reach it He did! All your sins are paid for, by virtue of God's Son dying for them in your place! The curse of death that comes from sin has indeed been reversed, as Jesus' resurrection demonstrates. Your enemy, the devil, has been defeated. Now, when he comes at you with temptations, you can say, "Take it up with Jesus! He is my Champion. He stopped you in the wilderness, he defeated you on the cross, and he'll stop you here right now." Help me, Lord Jesus! You're stronger than I am! I'll take my stand on your completed work. God's Word is sure. Help me to say with you, "It is written."

The devil comes at us with his little word, "if," twisting and turning and leading us astray. Jesus comes out on the field of battle as our Champion, and comes with a little word of His own, "It is written." Because He would not be deterred from going to the cross, you can take your stand with your Champion, Jesus, confident in His strength and His victory, a victory over sin, death, the devil, and yes, even temptation.



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Let this world's tyrant rage;
In battle we'll engage.
His might is doomed to fail;
God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen