

Grace, peace and mercy be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

After his baptism Jesus overcomes temptations to misuse his God-given powers by consulting Scripture and following its teachings. Mark, the first gospel to be written, a copy of which Matthew had before him, simply states that Jesus was tested. Matthew and Luke, written later, elaborate on that. Jesus' identity as Son of God and his mission as Servant of God were, no doubt, tested throughout his life. He was constantly being tempted to use his extraordinary powers to take shortcuts to successfully completing his mission and to make even his own life more comfortable. These tests or temptations are presented not only as examples of Jesus' overcoming his own challenges, but also as typical examples of how his followers are tempted and how they are to overcome them. Jesus' method, asking “What does Scripture say?,” is the method all Christians are to use in order to remain faithful to their identity as children of God and their mission as servants of God.

In a way, this scene from our Gospel resembles how rabbis would debate. Each one would quote from Scripture to bolster his point. Arguments were settled by determining which side presented the truest and fullest picture of what Scripture really and completely says. Matthew and Jesus establish the basic hermeneutical principle: the best commentary on any verse of Scripture is the rest of Scripture itself.

In content this scene unpacks what was said of Jesus by God at his baptism. He is simultaneously God's Son, in being, and God's Servant, in doing. In verse one, wilderness: The locale of the desert is not important. It is a symbol for a place of testing, and reminds of the Israelite wanderings. They failed where Jesus succeeded. Even Adam in the lush and plush

circumstances of the garden failed. It is not circumstances, but attitudes, which explain the difference.

The Spirit: The same Spirit who descended upon him at baptism, now leads him through the trials and tests and temptations of life. That Spirit does not shield him from negatives but strengthens and enlightens him to conquer them.

To be tempted: The Greek word used here has two senses: to tempt and to test. On the human side the appropriate sense is “tempt.” On the divine side, since God tempts no one the sense is “test”. God can use the efforts of evil people, even of Satan himself, to accomplish his purposes. Satan here tries to seduce Jesus, but God views it and uses it as a test.

In verse three, If you are the Son of God: “If” here means “since,” expressing assumption, not doubt. Satan appeals to human pride, goading Jesus to “prove,” himself by miraculously feeding himself. If Adam, who was not even hungry, would literally bite the bait amidst a garden of plenty, why would not Satan think Jesus would amidst a desert of stones? Jesus would later work miracles to feed others, but he would not use, misuse or abuse his power as Son to feed himself.

In verse four, it is written: Jesus tells Satan why he will not do the common sense thing or take the easy way out. Scripture says so. It says “no.” That’s enough for Jesus. Case closed.

Not on bread alone: Jesus does not deny the importance of food. He just refuses to make it more important than it is, to give it exclusive or supreme importance. That place is reserved for God’s word, a resource open to all his followers as well. Jesus is quoting from Deuteronomy

8:3.

In verses five to seven, having rejected the first temptation because he trusted God to supply his need, Jesus is again tempted on the basis of that very assurance. Satan himself quotes Scripture to bolster his challenge that Jesus can throw himself down from lofty heights and land safely. He quotes Ps 91: 11-12 to tempt Jesus to do this to “prove,” that God, through his angels, will, as promised in the Psalm, ensure that even the slightest mishap, like stubbing one’s toe, is impossible for those who trust God. Satan is like the religious person who takes a quote from Scripture out of context to justify his or her position. Jesus counters by citing another passage that the devil’s interpretation is wrong, thus establishing the basic hermeneutical principle that any verse of Scripture must be interpreted in the light of the rest of Scripture. The demand for the miraculous- like the case of the Israelites demanding a miracle at Massah- is not acceptable to God. The servants of God cannot demand that God miraculously intervene to meet their manufactured or exaggerated needs to prove himself.

Jesus as a human had to learn what it meant to be him, the unique Son and Servant of God. He rejected each temptation to misuse his unique position and powers, even for a good cause. And he used Scripture rightly, all of Scripture, not just what served his preconceived purposes. He clearly wants us to do the same. We can only derive the strength and light that Scripture affords when we approach Scripture properly- as an obedient child and servant. Where Adam failed, where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded. He did not twist God’s words as did the snake, but really listened and obeyed. He, of all people, accepted the limits of his life, limits imposed by his Father, and those limits actually freed him to do what he did. Limits are not barriers, but boundaries, freely accepted as contexts for behaving and being. These boundaries of being human should be looked at like all problems that come

into our life, both should be treated as opportunities to grow spiritually. We are really points of awareness or spiritual beings having a physical experience and we must learn not to accept the realities we see with our physical eyes but with are spiritual eyes.

Trust in God is not leaving everything to God. It is leaving everything to God's way and will. And God clearly does not want us to just sit back and order him around. We must participate in his will by doing those things we can, so long as they are consistent with his revealed word and will. Leaving everything up to God means that part of “everything,” includes what he reveals he wants us to do. The religious stance that says let God do it is an aberration of “Let God be God.” God can and does order us around, though always with the caveat that we can freely say “no.” Of course, there are consequences to “no” as there are to “yes.” Trust in God does not get us off the hook. It is not to be used as a justification to only pray and leave it all to God. Jesus certainly did not do that. Jesus accepted everything about God, even as he left everything to follow God. This is very different from leaving everything to God. He accepted the limits, the boundaries, the context- his humanity- within which he would do and be what God wanted of him. Let go and let God; does not mean we do not do our part to bring God's kingdom here on earth by forgiving others, helping those in need, visiting the sick and those in jail.

Jesus accepted the limits of his humanity and refused to use his extraordinary powers, powers other humans could only imagine having, in order to make his life more pleasant or more successful as humans define those terms. Yet, in accepting those limits, the limits of being a creature, he received strength. He was confirmed in his mission and thereby empowered to reject rejection, the rejection of his own people. He would not let their behavior determine his. He would not place himself above the laws of nature and turn

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stones into bread though he would multiply bread to feed others. He would not do magical tricks to wow and woo people into accepting him though he would miraculously cure others. He would not compromise himself privately to succeed in his mission publicly. In accepting the limits of his freely chosen humanity, he actually did accomplish and continues to accomplish his mission, but as God wants it done. Consulting God’s word confirmed him, assured him, that he was on the right path. Amen.