

The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. 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."

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

¹ Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

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

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.'"

⁷ Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

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

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

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

-- Matt 3:13-4:11

Upon returning to France after a trip abroad, the French artist Gustave Dore realized that he had forgotten his passport. When he arrived at the border, he hoped that the guards would recognize his name and let him in.

So when it was his turn, he said: "I am Gustave Dore. I forgot my passport."

The guards, of course, were sceptical. "If you really are Gustave Dore, then you'll show us something that Gustave Dore would do. Here's a pencil and some paper. Draw these people for us."

So Dore sat and began to draw. Within a few minutes, it became apparent to everyone who watched that this was no impostor—this was the real Gustave Dore. Yet the guards were only doing as they thought they should do: challenge the absurd claim that some passport-less tramp was in fact one of France's premier artists of the time. However, Dore proves his identity not with a passport, and not by hundreds of admiring fans saying "this *is* Gustave Dore!"—but by the quality of his work that stemmed from his very being.

The text before us today has been preached in many different ways—sometimes with the ludicrous idea that good Christians can beat temptation because whatever Jesus can do, *we* can do better. Although I don't want to discount the idea that temptation can be overcome in Christ, I want to suggest that today we take a different tack into the text—that the story of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness is also about identity.

Matthew did not write to produce an accurate historiographical account of Jesus' life. It was not even written as an evangelistic tract to be handed out in the market

square. The Jesus People of the 1st C needed no such convincing. Rather, what they needed to know—and what we, the followers of Jesus in this day and age also need to know—are two things. First, that the Kingdom of God is here and that we, as followers of Jesus, now are a part of this Kingdom. Second, we need to ask “who is this Kingdom’s King?”

Our story begins at the Jordan River, where Jesus prefigures the rest of his earthly ministry by obediently entering into a symbolic washing and death. From this, he is raised and a voice from heaven confers upon Jesus a new identity: “*This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.*”¹

It is telling that in Luke’s Gospel, after Jesus’ Baptism is where Jesus’ family tree is placed. It is as though Luke is reminding us that Jesus is no freak accident, but a carefully planned person who is the culmination of centuries of hoping and waiting. In Luke, Jesus’ identity is wrapped up in his relationship to his ancestors. However, Matthew’s insight is different. Matthew doesn’t pause here to show us the family photo album. Instead, he plants Jesus alone in the desert, for it is when Jesus is alone that his identity shows through. When the normalizing cues of family, friends, and familiarity are taken away from him, how will Jesus act?

Enter The Tempter; an old hand at making humanity stumble. He sweeps in and says to Jesus, “*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.*” *If you are the Son of God.* The Tempter casts doubt on Jesus’ identity, asking him to prove

¹ Mt 3:17

it—and in another sense, to rely on his oldest trick to cast doubt on the character of God Himself.² “*If you are the Son of God, do the smart thing. You’ve fasted forty days. Turn the stones to bread. Be practical. Have a little common sense. See to your basic needs.*” In his book *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen summarizes the first temptation of Christ as the temptation to be *relevant*—to do the sensible thing instead of doing the Kingdom thing, two ways of being that are not always the same. If we were to ask how we are to live as sons and daughters of the Kingdom, we may reply that at times it means being foolish and *not* turning stones to bread.

Jesus replies to all three temptations with Scripture, not because he’s some Sunday Schooled robot who got gold stars for memorizing Bible verses, but because this is where his identity is most invested: in the words of His Father. Jesus doesn’t think up something clever to say because in the face of what is logical and sensible to do, sometimes all that is left is to recall the ‘foolishness’ of God. All temptation leads us to believe something false about God—that He is untrustworthy or uncaring or unkind. The Tempter tries to warp Jesus’ perception of God and therefore Jesus’ self-identity. What Jesus does in reply is to return to Scripture because he knows that therein is the revelation of God—the best picture we have of who He is.

“We do not live by bread *alone*,” Jesus says, “but by every word from God.” Jesus isn’t saying that bread isn’t important—no, he simply says that bread is not the source of life, *God* is. And when Jesus says that, he is also saying that bread is not *his*

² Gen 3:1-4

source of being—the Father is. Who is this Kingdom’s King? The Son of the Father, the Source of All Life.

The second temptation has Jesus at the top of the Temple, staring down a drop of a couple hundred feet. *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down.”* Then, as if trying to out-Christ the Christ, the tempter literally takes a page from Jesus’ book: *“you will not strike your foot against a stone.”*

I imagine Jesus paused as though standing at the top of a high dive that opens up onto an empty pool. Only an idiot would throw himself off there. Yet, think of the commotion it would cause if he floated to the ground like a feather there, at the religious navel of unbelieving Israel! Think of the show! Think of the spectacle! There could be a choir of flag-bearing children singing Amazing Grace, a three hundred piece brass band, dancing bikini girls, fireworks, spotlights, and lasers—you absolutely must have lasers. And maybe Bono could MC the entire thing—or maybe not, because Bono’s appearance would risk upstaging the Amazing Jesus and His Two Hundred Foot Plunge. No, we should settle for Richard Dawkins. Yes, *that* Richard Dawkins. Who better to laud the power of God than the man who is famous for hating Him? Think of the cheers, Jesus! Think of the publicity!

But in the face of the temptation to be spectacular and heroic, Jesus turns away. He’s not about the show. Let the crowds have their ticket money back, because he’s not jumping. *“Do not put the Lord your God to the test”*—and there is no reason to test God because Jesus *trusts* Him. You see, we only test the people we don’t trust. But this is not the nature of Jesus’ relationship with His Father. Jesus *trusts* God; trusts Him

all the way. There is a note of irony in the end, for the trusting Jesus eventually *does* jump. And he dies. No crowds to applaud him as he gets up and waves. No homecoming queens sidling up to kiss him. He just dies.

Who is this Kingdom's King? The Son of the Father, the one who trusts in God even when it leads him to the cross.

The Tempter then takes Jesus to a high mountain, where he shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says "*all of this can be yours. Just give me my due.*" Here we see the devil trying another way in. Instead of tempting Jesus to be practical or to be spectacular, he tempts him to take the bull by its horns. Here, the temptation is not to become a figurehead of a monarch, but of taking charge. Satan offers Jesus the authority to establish a utopia, a society where government solves all the problems of the world. This is not far from the hope we put in government to this very day—that if we just elect the right people or put the right laws into place, we can turn this thing around. Yet establishing an earthly kingdom was never on Jesus' mind—especially not at the cost of the lifeblood of politics: compromise. Though politicians will often be called upon to make difficult decisions, the compromise Jesus is tempted to make here is one that no Christian should ever make: to say that God is not sovereign, and that power, no matter how it is gained, is the only means to any desired end.

Thus we may ask for the last time today: who is this Kingdom's King? The Son of God, the one who instead of coming at the head of a conquering army, lays down his life and dies.

Having heard this story, the turn for us comes when we ask “*if this is what the Kingdom’s King is like, then who am I in light of the one to whom my life is given?*” In other words, who are we in light of who Jesus is?

When we find ourselves in the desert, we will find that much of what we base our identity upon has more to do with what we do, how others see us, and what we control rather than who we follow and how much we are like him. Jesus is led into the desert because it is there that he has no external cues that give him a self-identity. When he is in the desert, the only thing that preserves his self-identity is his relationship with the Father. Are we—the desert people of God—to be any different? It is a countercultural thing I suggest to you today: that your identity is not wrapped up in how much you can self-actualize, but in how much like Christ you become. Your fruitfulness is not dependent upon how deep you dig your roots into the earth, but in how deep you dig your roots into Christ.³ Christian self-identity is not to be taken from how many mouths we feed or how ecstatic our worship is or how many laws we can get passed in our favour. Christian self-identity is a matter of how well we know the Father through the Son.

What can we say then? Is it ever enough to say “*this is the target, now hit it!*”? No, such a proclamation only leaves us cold. The key to growing in Christlikeness is the counterintuitive idea that we take up the burden of letting go. Our responsibility is not necessarily to develop our ethical lives to the point that we no longer need Jesus, but

³ John 15:1-8

that we constantly recognize our neediness and walk humbly with our God.⁴ And when we are confronted with the temptation to make God in our image and establish human kingdoms that seek salvation in relevancy, spectacle, and power, there is only one thing we must say: *“Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”*—and then walk on in brokenness before God.

- 1.) How are you tempted by the need to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful?
- 2.) How has your relationship with Christ affected your self perception?

⁴ Micah 6:8