

The Perilous Pull of Physical Appetites,
Impressing People, and Avoiding Pain
A Study of Matthew 4:1-11

Characteristic of Completeness: Bible Study

Big Idea: In the battle against temptation, victory belongs to the prepared.

Related Scriptures: Genesis 3:1-13; Jeremiah 15:16; Matthew 14:23; Luke 4:13; John 8:44;
1 Corinthians 10:13; Ephesians 6:11, 17; Hebrews 2:17-18; 4:15; James 4:7-8; 1 Peter 5:8-10;
1 John 2:16

Introduction:

- A. John Gemmill is a better fly fisherman than I am. He taught me how to fly fish, mostly in the streams that feed the Dolores River just south of Telluride, Colorado. It's been a while, but when we go, he catches twice as many fish as I do. All trout: Rainbows and Browns and Cutthroats and an occasional Brookie. He catches twice as many. If I catch twenty, he'll catch forty. Every time.

Some men might be irritated at being doubled up on every outing. Like I'm only half as good. But I like to look at it this way: John is the better deceiver.

You see, fly fishing is about deception. A good fisherman knows fish. Where they are. When they're hungry. What they're hungry for. How to sneak up on them. How to present the fly—delicately, silently, seductively—so that it looks just like something genuine and satisfying. And he knows when to set the hook.

You see, flies are lies. They're not food. They're hooks dressed up like food.

- B. We're not fish. But we're lured. Every day, temptations are cast in our path. Delicately. Seductively. Deliberately. They look just like something genuine and satisfying. But the intent is not to satisfy, but to hook us and put us in the frying pan.

The question I'd like to consider today is this: In the battle against temptation, how can we experience victory instead of defeat? How can we see through the deception and resist the urge to get ourselves into trouble? How do we keep from getting hooked?

- C. The biblical text we're studying today helps us. It's ► Matthew 4:1-11. It's where the devil tempts Jesus. And Jesus shows us how to defend.

Let me read the text one time ► through.

^{NAU} Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ► 2 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. ► 3 And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." ► 4 But He

answered and said, “It is written, ‘MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.’” ► 5 Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, ► 6 and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU’; and ‘ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.’” ► 7 Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘YOU SHALL 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 glory; ► 9 and he said to Him, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.” ► 10 Then Jesus said to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.’” ► 11 Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and *began* to minister to Him.¹

- D. From this text, I glean ► this big idea: In the battle against temptation, victory belongs to the prepared. The way to resist temptation is to be ready for it. To avoid getting duped, we must get set.
- I. I find five important ways to prepare for temptation in our text.
- A. The ► first way to prepare is to simply recognize the Tempter. There is indeed an unseen enemy angling for your soul, for your allegiance, for your life. Verse ► 1 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

The devil is real. He’s not just the personification of an idea. His name means slanderer or false accuser.² Elsewhere in the Bible he is called the “father of lies.”³ The devil and his demonic emissaries are out to lure us, to deceive us, to snatch of out of the river of life and onto the dry banks of despair and defeat and destruction.

We can laugh at the church lady on *Saturday Night Live*, but to dismiss Satan as some figment of her imagination is to be duped already.

So, to recognize the Tempter is the first way to prepare.

¹ It is interesting that the temptation of Jesus parallels the wandering of Israel in the wilderness. Israel had passed through the waters of the Red Sea; Jesus had passed through the waters of baptism. Israel was led into the wilderness; so was Jesus. Israel wandered for 40 years; Jesus fasted for 40 days. All the Scriptures Jesus quotes come from Deuteronomy, during the time of Israel’s wandering. The key distinction is that while Israel failed, Jesus succeeded.

² Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. “διάβολος” (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977).

³ John 8:44.

B. The ► second way to prepare is to learn the lures. To understand the devil's deceptive schemes. To recognize the types of temptation he brings. Our text reveals three basic kinds of lures in the devil's tackle box.

1. First, there's ► the lure of physical appetites. More specifically, it's satisfying legitimate physical appetites in illegitimate ways. It's trying to meet wholesome needs by unwholesome means. In ► Verse 2, it says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:2 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry.

- a. Nothing wrong with being hungry. Who wouldn't be hungry after forty days of fasting? Hunger is a legitimate need.

But the devil offers an illegitimate way to satisfy the hunger. Verse ► 3 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:3 And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."

What's so bad about this offer? It looks harmless and perfectly reasonable.

Exactly. Good lures always do.

But, you see, according to Verse 1, it was the Spirit of God who led Jesus into the wilderness—the place where there is no food. The Son is exactly where the Father wants Him. Jesus is there to focus on drawing close to the Father. And so, He's fasting. His priority is spiritual, not physical. So he deliberately sublimates His hunger, redirecting it to the Father in total dependence and devotion.

And so the angler casts the fly and it comes floating toward Jesus, delicately, deliciously, deceptively.

"If You are the Son of God . . ."

The devil is not questioning Jesus' status as the Son of God; he's appealing to it. "If You are" could properly be translated "Since You are."⁴ He's saying, "Because You're the Son, You've got power; You've got prerogatives; You've got options to take care of the deprivation You feel."

⁴ In Greek, this is a first-class condition assumed to be true.

“Command that these stones become bread.”

The Tempter’s selection of stones is not random. Back in Matthew 3:9, John the Baptist had just said that God can raise up *stones* to be children of Abraham. And hundreds of years before, when the people of Israel were in the wilderness, God miraculously provided water from a *stone* and bread on the ground. It’s as if the Tempter is saying, “Hey, both Your man, John, and history are with me on this one. Wouldn’t be a big deal for You. You need bread. Go ahead. Satisfy Yourself.”

- b. Let me ask you: Do you feel like God has led you to a place where you have some legitimate needs that are just aching to be met?

God wired us with physical appetites. And sometimes, He leads us to a wilderness where these appetites do not seem to be fully satisfied.

For example, we are sexual creatures. And so our wilderness can be singleness. Or a lack of intimacy in marriage. Or wanting more from an unmarried relationship than God ever intended.

And the lures are everywhere. It seems that we’re always just one step away from trouble. One gawk, one channel, one click, one weak moment. And in the moment, the lure looks so harmless, so reasonable. Who would be hurt by this? Who would even find out? What’s the difference if we’re going to get married anyway? Isn’t this natural and normal? Doesn’t everybody do this? Couldn’t this even spice up my marriage? This looks harmless.

Exactly. A good lure always does. It’s a hook dressed up to look like food.

Whatever your situation, here’s the question and the temptation: Are you going to trust God to satisfy your legitimate needs according to His will and His way and His timing? Or are you going to try to satisfy yourself according to your own illegitimate schemes?

Satan tempts us to satisfy legitimate physical appetites in illegitimate ways. That’s the first lure.

2. Now here’s ► the second lure. It’s the lure of impressing people. It’s trying to impress people instead of God. It’s the temptation to strut your stuff. To blow your horn. To show off. In ► Verses 5 and 6, it says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:5 Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, ► 6 and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ► ‘HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU’; and ‘ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.’”

- a. Interesting. The devil is now quoting Scripture. He knows that Jesus is a Man of the Word. So he doesn't come against the weight of Scripture straight on. He uses it, like a defender uses a runner's own momentum to try to push him out of bounds.

As indicated by the capital letters, the devil cites Psalm 91:11-12⁵ as a promise that God will protect, and he bids Jesus to throw Himself down to prove it.

Why would Jesus be tempted to pull such a stunt?

Here's the temptation: It would impress people.⁶ It would show off His power. It would get attention. It would play to the audience.

- b. The temptation that faced Jesus faces us: Are you going to try to use God to impress people? Are you going to try to force God to act in a certain way to serve your own selfish purposes? Are you going to misuse spiritual gifts and power for your own glory and benefit? Are you going to try to get God to serve you?

The talents and resources God has given us are to be used humbly to serve Him as a part of His body, the church. But I'm afraid it's in the church that we may be most sorely tempted to impress people and not God.

Hey look at how spiritual I am. Hey look at how much I know about the Bible. Hey look at how I can teach, or sing, or lead. Hey look at how much work I'm doing. Hey look at this event I put together. Hey look how people are drawn to me. Hey look at how I can stir a crowd. Hey look, I'm one of the movers and shakers around here. Hey look at how I look. Hey look at me.

It's the lure of arrogance dressed up like godliness.

⁵ Satan leaves out, “to guard you in all your ways” from Verse 11, perhaps wanting to downplay the idea that God will guard from external threats, but not from selfish stunts.

⁶ David L. Turner, *The Gospel of Matthew, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, (Carol Streams, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 66, 69.

I'm afraid some of the people most likely to get hooked are people like me. Preachers. Worship leaders. Anybody who exercises the gifts God has given them in front of a lot of other people.

Satan tempts us to impress people instead of God. That's the second lure.

3. Now, here's ► the third lure. It's the lure of avoiding pain. Specifically, it's the lure of avoiding the pain of God's will for you. It's the temptation to take a short-cut, bypassing the diligence, self-denial, hardship, persecution, and suffering that are inevitable parts of following hard after God. It's the enticement of the path of least resistance and instant gratification. In ► Verses 8 and 9, it says:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:8 Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; ► 9 and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me."

- a. Satan is offering what Jesus already has coming. Jesus is already set to inherit "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory." What Satan is really selling is a faster, easier way to get it all—a way that avoids the pain of the cross.

It's as if Satan is saying, "Throw in with me and enjoy now. You can have it all right now without having to go through all that pain."

- b. I saw a bumper sticker recently. It said, "Pain is optional." Now that's a good-looking fly. Some purveyor cast that sticker right out on a shelf. And somebody bought it.

But Jesus ► says,

^{NAU} Matthew 16:24 . . . "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."

Sure doesn't sound like pain is optional for anyone who really wants to follow Christ.

There are no shortcuts to spiritual maturity. No shortcuts to godly parenting. No shortcuts to good financial stewardship. No shortcuts to conflict resolution. No shortcuts to physical fitness. No shortcuts to a good marriage. No shortcuts to storing up treasures in heaven.

The rewards come only after “a long obedience in the same direction.”⁷

But Satan says, “Just charge it. There is no need to follow the steep, high road; follow your impulses. There is no need to take the path of pain; take the path of least resistance. Why wait for heaven? Let’s focus on making your life heavenly right now.”

Satan tempts us to avoid the pain of doing God’s will.

Let’s review. In the battle against temptation, victory belongs to the prepared. In order to prepare, first, we must know there is a Tempter. Second, we must learn his lures, and there are three kinds: He tempts us with physical appetites, impressing people, and avoiding pain.

- C. Now, the third way to prepare for temptation is ► to expect it. To know that it’s coming. To anticipate the deception. To look for it.

In particular, I want you to see in our text a pattern reflected in Scripture and in life: The voice of Satan often follows the voice of God. After a mountaintop experience with God, Satan tries to orchestrate a fall. After a great victory, Satan tries to bring discouragement and defeat. It’s as if the devil says, “I’ll give you Sunday; but, Monday is mine.”

Remember what happened to Jesus just before this wilderness temptation in our text? It was a mountaintop experience. As Jesus rose from the waters of the Jordan, the affirming voice of the Father says: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”⁸ Then just three verses later, the sly voice of Satan follows: “If You are the Son . . .”

So watch out for temptation. Expect it, particularly after victories.

- D. Now here’s ► the fourth way to prepare for temptation: Practice undistracted devotion to God. Find ways to focus regularly on God alone. Pull up from busyness often for reflective solitude in the presence of God.

That’s what Jesus did. Verse ► 1 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:1 . . . Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness . . .

⁷ I’m borrowing the title of a good book by Eugene Peterson: *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.

⁸ Matthew 3:17.

Jesus followed the Spirit's prompting to seek solitude. Solitude in the wilderness is not a place of vulnerability or weakness; it's a place of strength.⁹ It's a place to practice undistracted devotion to God. No people; just God. Jesus regularly practiced undistracted devotion to God. For example, ► Matthew 14:23 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 14:23 After He had sent the crowds away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray; and when it was evening, He was there alone.

And the fasting of Jesus in our text is just another form of undistracted devotion.¹⁰ It's choosing to be undistracted by the pursuit of food. It's setting aside the feeding of your body to feed your soul.

How was last week for you? Did it include times of undistracted devotion to God? If the Lord Jesus Christ Himself needed to prepare for temptation by carving out times of undistracted devotion, how much more do we? Who are we to think we can engage in uninterrupted busyness without getting hooked?

- E. We're ready to consider ► the fifth and final form of preparation. It's the one emphasized in our text. Yes, there are four others. But this one gets the most ink. This one is highlighted. The fifth way to prepare for temptation is ► to apply the Bible. It's to link God's Word to life situations. It's taking the principles of Scripture and making life decisions based on those principles.

It only makes sense. If the Bible is the truth, then the more you know the truth, the better able you are to spot lies. Biblical application is the way to be discriminating about what you swallow: nutritious truths, or lures with hooks.¹¹ And so, our Characteristic of Completeness in Christ for the week is ► Bible Study. And, in particular, we're talking about biblical application.

1. Let's see how Jesus does it. First of all, notice what Jesus says in response to every tempting offer from Satan. Jesus says, ► "It is written." "It is written." "It is written." He is repeatedly applying the Bible to His life in the face of temptation.¹² "It is written" points to the primacy of God's Word.¹³

⁹ This idea was first introduced to me by Dr. Kem Oberholtzer.

¹⁰ "Jews commonly practiced fasting in order to spend more time in prayer and to develop greater spiritual receptivity," Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 83.

¹¹ "Those who meditate hear many voices, not all of them divine. . . . We are too blind to our ego, too ignorant of others' needs, too prone to legalism, too dedicated to our own agendas to justify trusting our subjective impulses" Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 28.

¹² "Critics sometimes accuse conservatives of Biblicism—worshiping Scripture rather than God. This accusation makes sense to the critics since they separate God from the Bible. But if the Bible is indeed the word of God, then the charge of Biblicism falls away. To submit to Scripture is to submit to the Lord who reveals himself in it. Believers respond to the Author through his book" Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 66.

- a. Remember the first lure—the lure of physical appetites. “Command that these stones become bread.” The devil invites Jesus to satisfy His legitimate need for food in an illegitimate way. Verse ► 4 gives Jesus’ response:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:4 But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.’”

Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. It relates back to God’s provision of manna in the wilderness as a means of teaching the people of Israel to depend on Him. So, in essence Jesus is saying, “The Bible says we should first and foremost depend on God, and when we do, He’ll supply all our needs. So, no thanks on turning the stones to bread. I’m trusting my Father to provide for Me in His way and in His time, as I surrender to Him. I’m not going to bite.”

- b. So ► the devil casts again, this time the lure of impressing people instead of God. “Throw Yourself down; God will catch You.” Verse ► 7 gives Jesus’ response:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:7 Jesus said to him, “On the other hand, it is written, ‘YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.’”

Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:16. It refers back to the place in the wilderness where God brought forth water from the rock and Israel tested the Lord, wanting Him to serve their selfish interests.¹⁴ So, in essence, Jesus is saying, “The Bible says we’re here to serve God, not the other way around. I’m not going to test the Father to see if He’ll do something to help Me show off. So, no thanks on throwing Myself down. I’m here to serve, not showboat. So I’m not going to bite.”

- c. And ► so the devil casts again, this time the lure of avoiding pain. “Fall down and worship me. I’ll give you the world on a platter, right now, without the cross.” Verse ► 10 gives Jesus’ response:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:10 Then Jesus said to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY.’”

¹³ Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 143-144.

¹⁴ Exodus 17:1-17.

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:13. In essence, Jesus is saying, “The Bible says we are to serve God. Not you. Not ourselves. Not anything or anyone else. My Father’s way is the way of the cross—the way of self denial, the way of surrender to His greater purpose. So, no thanks on the falling down for you. I’m not going to bite.”¹⁵

2. Like ► any good fly fisherman, particularly in a small stream, after several casts with no bites, he knows the fish are spooked, and he moves on. Verse ► 11 says,

^{NAU} Matthew 4:11 Then the devil left Him . . .

But the angler will be back, on the assumption that fish are long on hunger, but short on memory. He’ll wait for another opportune time. In the parallel account in ► Luke 4:13, it says,

^{NAU} Luke 4:13 When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an *opportune time* [emphasis mine].

3. Looking back ► we can see that Jesus was ready. He took pains to be prepared. In the battle against temptation, the victory belongs to the prepared.

“But,” you say, “I have so many responsibilities; I don’t have time to prepare.” Well, okay then. I guess you’re off the hook. I guess you don’t need to prepare as much as Jesus did. I guess you’ve got more important things to do than Jesus did.

Jesus didn’t wait for the marathon to come and then decide to train. He didn’t wait for the exam to arrive and then decide to study. He didn’t wait for the enemy to attack and then try to remember where He put his weapon.

He recognized the Tempter. He learned the lures. He expected temptation. He practiced undistracted devotion to God. And He applied the Bible. He was loaded with Scripture aimed at life. “It is written.” “It is written.” “It is written.”

- II. In the battle against temptation, victory belongs to the prepared. But is the preparation worth it? Getting ready is hard. Preparation is painful. There’s suffering.

So let me pose the question everybody thinks, but nobody utters: Wouldn’t it be better just to give in and then ask for forgiveness?

¹⁵ It is interesting that the Apostle Peter, in essence, told Jesus to avoid the cross in Matthew 16:21-23. Jesus said to Peter: “Get behind Me, Satan!” According to Jesus, a key issue was: “you [Peter] are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.”

Let me show you that this is just another lure. Let me show you that, when we prepare ourselves to follow the Lord and not the lies, God gives us what we need. He provides.

A. Verse ► 11 tells us:

^{NAU} Matthew 4:11 Then the devil left Him; and behold, angels came and *began* to minister to Him.

Notice a very important detail. Back in Verse 6, in the second temptation, Satan offers what he can't really provide: the protection of angels if Jesus would just throw Himself down. How ironic. When Jesus resists the temptation, God supplies—through angels ministering—the very thing Satan offered but could not deliver.¹⁶

We don't miss out on anything worthwhile by resisting temptation and following the Lord.

^{NAU} Psalm 84:11 . . . No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly.

B. This idea is corroborated in 1 Peter 5:8-10, where it ► says:

^{NAU} 1 Peter 5:8 Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ► 9 But resist him, firm in *your* faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. ► 10 After you have suffered for a little while, ► the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen *and* establish you.

Did you get that last part? Note the order of events.

► ^{NAU} 1 Peter 5:10 *After* [emphasis mine] you have suffered for a little while, [then] ► the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself ► perfect, ► confirm, ► strengthen *and* ► establish you.

Yep. The preparation is definitely worth it.

¹⁶ Turner, 67.