

# “Lenten Moments in Matthew’s Gospel: 1) Temptation”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

March 5, 2006

Text: “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1).

In the heart of the winter of 1545 John Calvin addressed a letter to his fellow Reformer Martin Luther asking Luther to state his views on the admissibility of Protestant participation in Roman Catholic worship. Calvin was concerned about his fellow French countrymen. Many of them were Protestants, but they were also worshipping with Roman Catholics as well. Calvin coined a phrase for this. He called it “Nicodemism,” named for the New Testament figure that came to Jesus at night in fear that if he had come in the day, he might be ridiculed by his fellow Jews.

Now, in their defense, these Protestants in France had much to fear. They were being persecuted and many of them had lost their lives. But Calvin was greatly offended by their deceit and by their compromise. He saw it as a form of idolatry and moral compromise. These people

were playing both sides of the fence. Calvin was so troubled that he wrote to his fellow reformer Martin Luther, seeking advice on how to deal with what Calvin considered a grave problem.

## I.

This morning I have read from Matthew's account of the temptation of Christ. Over the next five Sundays of Lent we will look again at Matthew's gospels and these Lenten moments that are contained in it. I am asking that each member of our church read the Gospel of Matthew as a Lenten discipline and in preparation of the celebration of Easter Sunday.

In Matthew's Gospel the temptation of Jesus by Satan in the wilderness is an important prelude to the ministry of Jesus. According to Matthew's gospel the Spirit leads Jesus into the rugged Judean wilderness near the Dead Sea. For forty days he fasted. After forty days Jesus encountered the first temptation: to turn the stones of the wilderness into bread that could be eaten. During the second temptation Satan took Jesus to Jerusalem and placed him on the temple, urging him to throw himself off, confident that if he were the Messiah, the angels of God would rescue him. In the third Temptation the Devil offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world, if only Jesus will bow down to Satan.

All of these temptations are rich in the lore of the Old Testament. They recall for the church the forty years that the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. They bring to memory Israel's rebellion against God when Israel "tested God" (Exodus 17:1-7). The third temptation was the temptation of idolatry. It was the temptation of Jesus to worship the "gods of the world" around him.

In each of these temptations Satan quotes from Scripture. In each Jesus responds by quoting from Scripture. There is one theme that is present throughout this narrative. Jesus is tested and Jesus is triumphant.

There are two themes implicit in these narratives that we will explore this morning.

## II.

The first is the critical nature of Scripture in informing our faith. One of the hallmarks of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century was the importance of Scripture. Out of the Reformation came the expression "Sola Scriptura" (Scripture alone). One of the distinctive aspects of the temptation stories in the gospel is the insidious way that Satan uses Scripture to test Jesus. It is a reminder to us of how Scripture can be abused in the church. In each of the three temptations Satan quotes Scripture to Jesus. In each temptation Jesus replies to Satan by quoting Scripture.

As Presbyterians, we believe that Scripture teaches us what we are to believe and how we are to live. It is our authority and our guide. There is no more critical task for the church today than the task of teaching the message of the Bible to children, youth, and adults as well.

Roland Bainton in his classic biography of Martin Luther, entitled *Here I Stand*, describes a pivotal point in the history of Western Civilization when Luther was called to the German town of Worms to face the German Emperor and the princes of the church. Luther was called upon to renounce his writings. His inquisitor, Eck, put this question to Luther, "I ask you, Martin--answer candidly and without horns--do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors they contain?" Luther replied, "Since your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."

### III.

The second theme is the cost of discipleship. Nothing is more central to the Lenten Season than realization that the call of Christ is nothing less than the call "to deny oneself, take up the cross, and to follow Jesus." Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it like this: "When Christ calls a person, he calls that person to die."

In the midst of a culture of self-realization and self-actualization there is nothing more radical or foreign to us than the call of Jesus Christ to follow him. Robert McAfee Brown in his book *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity*, points out that in Wiesel's novels there are three types of characters that emerge. The first is the "victim." In Wiesel's novels the victims are the Jews, whom the Nazis rounded up and sent to the death camps where six million lost their lives. The second character is the "executioner." For Wiesel the executioners were the Nazi soldiers, who rounded up the Jews, placed them in cattle cars, and gassed and shot them in the death camps. But Brown points out a third type of character that is present in Wiesel's novels, the "spectator." In his novel *The Town Beyond the Wall*, Wiesel tells of a young man, Michael, who has survived the death camps and who returns after the war to his hometown in Hungary. He is searching for something, though he is not sure what it is. As he approaches the city square, where the Nazis rounded up the Jews and placed them in cattle cars, suddenly a memory returns to him. It was the face of a man in the window, who stood by and watched as the Jews were sent to their deaths. The "spectator" is the person who stands by in the face of evil and does nothing. Wiesel concludes that you can feel pity for the victim. You can feel hatred toward the executioner, but for the 'spectator' you can only feel contempt.

I wonder how many of us, if we were pressed, would have to say that in the great drama of life we are not much more than spectators. We know there is evil in our world. We know there is much more we can do at work, in the home, in the school. But we are too often like that "faceless" person in the window. We don't want to get involved.

Someday, however, we may wake up and find out that it is too late. Martin Niemoller, a German Lutheran pastor, who was arrested by the Nazis and placed into prison for his opposition to National Socialism, had this to say after the War.

“The Nazis came for the communists and I didn’t speak up because I was not a communist. Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak up because I was not a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and because I was a Protestant, I didn’t speak up. Then, they came for me. By that time there was no one left to speak up for anyone.”

At the conclusion of the temptation narrative in Luke’s gospel we read, “When the devil finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13)

In his book *Diary of Private Prayer*, John Baillie has a prayer that says, “O God, when you call me to walk through some dark valley, do not allow me to persuade myself that I know a way around.”

May God give us his grace that during this Lenten Season we may discover anew the deep cost and great joy of following Christ.

Amen