

I think it's pretty easy to say - ministry has its challenges. Spend a little time with your pastor or spend a little time out in the mission field yourself and you'll quickly see just how difficult ministry can be. Even when you put your best foot forward and are totally excited to see where God takes you, unexpected challenges will arise to meet you. When considering ministry tasks you take every step you can to avoid unnecessary pitfalls, anything that might get in the way. Jesus was beginning his ministry, having just been baptized where God the Father gave his stamp of approval and said, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased". So what was next? Where would this ministry take him? Into the desert! Going out, on his own, oh and he wasn't going to eat anything for a long time. That was the big start to his ministry. Imagine that is your ministry plan - going it completely alone, setting out into a wide open, desolate, unoccupied land, without any resources to work with. That's your plan. Now admittedly, the vicar does not have much influence on the budget, but if I was in charge of mission funding, I would not be funding your operation based on that plan. So what was Jesus doing in this kind of situation? Why would he go there and be subjected to these conditions? How was his ministry going to work?

At the start of the chapter it's recorded that Jesus is led by the Spirit, so not completely alone, right? It's really important information - he's filled with the Spirit of God! He's walking in accordance with God's Word and God's will. But he's also walking out into an uncomfortable place... exposed to the elements, no comforts of home, no backpack full of water and snacks, and, on top of all that, the devil was going to tempt him. Does this scenario seem like one you'd be ok with going alone? Where it's just you and the devil... do you think the devil wouldn't wish to bother you since it's pretty clear that you have enough to deal with already? No, of course he's got plenty of ammo to throw your way! He wants to exert power over your weakness. So it was with Jesus himself! The devil took his shots and presented many temptations to Jesus, hoping to catch him in weakness. God's Word shows us the details of three specific temptations brought before Jesus. The tempter goes to work with evil intent back then just as he does today. When we take him on one-on-one we fail miserably. But Jesus shines brighter than our darkness and the destruction of the devil. With Jesus, the tempter has no power over us!

Here's the first attack from the tempter that we see, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." The initial words are a challenge! "If you are the Son of God", essentially mocking Jesus and his position. "Is it true? Are you the Son of God? Then prove it! Let's see this great power you have!" The devil nudges Jesus to change plain stones into bread. Tempting enough due to the hunger he had, but tempting beyond that was the option to leave God's direction behind and follow the devil's lead. The devil, who was imploring Jesus to use his power (that he certainly had) to satisfy his own desires, to benefit himself.

Jesus opens his mouth, not to command the stone to be bread, but to break away from the devil's scheming, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'" He responds with the Word of God found in the book of Deuteronomy. The solution for Jesus was to listen to God and to deny anything that clearly spoke out against him.

This approach of the tempter looks a lot like what we are confronted with regularly. "If you are a Christian, God wants you to be happy! So go ahead and chase that happiness - do what you want, get it when you want it." Isn't it easy to look inward and expect all your desires to be fulfilled? I can numb the

pain I feel with a few drinks, I can find satisfaction with a few clicks across the internet, I can win over this large group of people by revealing the dirty secrets of a few people who aren't up to snuff. What if these plans to find happiness don't work out? Do you become disheartened as soon as your plans are diverted? Do you then rely on your own strength and your own wisdom to provide a quick fix? The tempter comes to each of us and encourages this kind of behavior. But like Jesus, even if we are without a human companion in that moment of temptation, we do have God with us. There strength is provided in place of our weakness. God has given his Word to guide us along the path of life and he has given his word of forgiveness when we falter and give in to our sinful flesh.

Being rejected once doesn't deter the devil. He persists and takes Jesus up to a high place so that he can show him all the kingdoms of the world. "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to." If you've ever been up on the top of a mountain, you know the feeling of surveying the scene and taking in the sights. Back in Arizona I've climbed up to the top of a peak by my high school just after the sun sets where I could look down at the sprawling cityscape, full of lights and buildings as far as the eye can see. Going back to what the tempter was showing Jesus - humanly speaking, this was an impressive sight! Look at the kingdoms of the world! There was power to be claimed. See, the devil belongs to this world, having no rule over heaven and no place in heaven, so he pushes all of his chips to the middle of the table. All in! But here comes the catch, the last part of his proposition to Jesus - "If you worship me, it will all be yours." The tempter is like a seedy salesman trying to sell an unfair deal, "That's it! A simple 1-to-1 exchange. Look at everything you'll get in return - the riches of the world! The command over every nation on earth! Power! Dominion!"

That same offer stands for us, too. If being a Christian is too difficult, give it up! Come over here and grab the money you deserve! Nobody cares how you got it. Sometimes you'll have to undermine your coworkers to gain control and lead them in the direction you see is best. Once you have influence and enough money in the bank there's nothing left to worry about. All of us are told to take everything that the world has to offer in place of being a child of God.

Once again notice where Jesus goes. Not to the edge of the mountain to see if it's all worth it, but straight to the Word of God. Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'" There truly is ONE who is worthy of honor and praise. There is ONE who is rightfully master and Lord of all. It is God!

One more temptation. One more high place. This time it's the top of the temple. Maybe the devil thought to himself, 'Jesus won't turn away from God, so he must be willing to turn TO God.' And so he leads with similar words as before, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here." But it doesn't stop at that point, he includes some Scripture this time, quoting from Psalm 91, "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." If Jesus wasn't willing to abandon his relationship with God, then maybe he would be willing to put his life on the line when it's backed by one of God's own promises. If God employs angels on the behalf of humanity, wouldn't he easily have those angels keep Jesus alive if he were to step off of the top of the temple?

Jesus refuses to move forward without considering all of what God has to say. He won't ignore the boundaries and parameters that God has established. The tempter, on the other hand, had taken the great comfort of a psalm and turned it into an opportunity to sin, he took the safety net of God's promises and twisted it into a trap! So Jesus speaks one more time from Deuteronomy, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." The devil was asking Jesus to make God prove his love by saving Jesus from a spot that he absolutely did not have to be in. It would be like you standing next to the stove with your finger just above the burner and saying to God, "Prove it!" Ah, but he has! At the appearance of sin, God promised a Savior. When the time had fully come he sent that Savior. God set up baptism to claim you as his child. Jesus instituted Holy Communion and invites you to receive forgiveness through his own body and blood. Again and again God says, "I love you", a love that lasts.

The devil did not make a dent in Jesus' armor. He didn't lead him to doubt, even for a second, the faithfulness of God his Father. He didn't succeed in enticing him away from being the Savior. Although he was tempted in every way, just as we are, he was without sin. At the conclusion of this temptation the devil left Jesus alone... until an opportune time. The devil couldn't afford to abandon his attempts to throw off Jesus from carrying out his mission as Savior. In fact, as we continue into Lent we'll see how the tempter would use every trick he had - turning a disciple into a traitor, turning entire crowds against him, and even cruel crucifixion on the cross. Each time trying to overcome Jesus, yet on that cross it was actually Jesus overcoming the tempter and his power. For there the ultimate sacrifice for sins was made on our behalf.

Are you beginning to understand Jesus and his ministry now? Why he was led into the desert to face the tempter head-on? Please don't look at it as simply an example for us to follow. Even Jesus at his physically weakest there in the desert is so much better than us at our absolute best attempt to stand up to the devil. Looking at his ministry as only an example would disappoint you in the long run. Jesus and his ministry provide true hope and real results. Jesus took on the tempter and left him utterly defeated. Jesus held tightly to God's Word and proclaimed its truth proudly. Jesus won salvation FOR US so that we belong to God, not the devil. Though we fall into temptation and sin, we are not caught in the devil's clutches because we belong to one who is greater! The tempter has no power over us because he had no power over Jesus! God has taken away your sin by the sacrifice of his Son. Our hope is secure. Our hope is in Jesus. Amen.