# Matthew 4:1-11 January 14, 2018

*The Invisible Battle, Part 2*

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Last week I introduced our new sermon series for the start of this new year, The Invisible Battle. The series’ purpose is to look at Jesus’ encounters with the forces of evil and learn from his responses, because as his followers we too are up against evil every single day. Our foundational text for the series comes from Ephesians 6:10-12, “***10****Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.****11****Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.****12****For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

It is important we remember that our primary enemy is not another human being, though our boss at work or that bully at school surely seems to fit the description. Our primary enemy, the one trying to get us to live a life that’s all about me and my sinful desires and impulses, is not another human being. Our primary enemy is Satan who started out as the highest-ranking angel in the service of the Lord, but whose desire to be God instead of a servant of God got him thrown out of heaven as a fallen angel. Here is one of the clearest passages we have about what happened to him from Isaiah 14:12-15,

*“How you have fallen from heaven,  
    morning star, son of the dawn!  
You have been cast down to the earth,  
    you who once laid low the nations!****13****You said in your heart,  
    “I will ascend to the heavens;  
I will raise my throne  
    above the stars of God;  
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,  
    on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.****14****I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;  
    I will make myself like the Most High.”****15****But you are brought down to the realm of the dead,  
    to the depths of the pit.”*

Since then, all he wants to do is render useless the words of God and destroy the works of God (that includes you and me). The battle that Satan puts the most effort into is the everyday battle for our minds. Often, we think that the invisible battle comes against us primarily through our circumstances, our behavior, our work, or our relationships. Certainly, these ways are used mightily by our adversary, but none of them are the priority. The bulk of the battles we face are in our minds, because that’s where Satan can deceive and manipulate us towards his purposes discreetly and invisibly. If I give him room in my head, he can throw ideas in there that can distort my thoughts, my emotions, and my knowledge, twisting these things around for his ends, then my behaviors and my relationships will fall the way he wants them to fall. Now, he’s not going to get me to openly turn to his evil ways (certainly you would kick me out of the pulpit faster than a speeding bullet!), but he might get me to buy into a distorted way of thinking that might render my pastorate ineffective, or the ministries of the church ineffective. The target of Satan’s tactics of warfare is your mind, is my mind, is the collective mind of our congregation. How can we be in optimum preparedness to win the battle? Let’s see how Jesus did it in Matthew 4:1-11.

*“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.****2****He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.****3****The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”****4****But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*

***5****Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple,****6****saying 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 dash your foot against a stone.’”* ***7****Jesus said to him, “Again it is 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****and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”****10****Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”* ***11****Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

First things first. Right before the Holy Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness for the greatest smack-down ever recorded in the history of the world, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. We read that passage (Matthew 3:13-17) in our Reponsive Call to Worship. The final verse in that text was, *“And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”* And now we have the heavy-weight contender stepping into the ring and picking right up on the title for Jesus that had just been revealed: The Son of God.

The way that Satan’s words are translated are not true to the original language of the New Testament - Greek. Most translations read, *“If you are the Son of God…”* The most accurate translation is, *“Since you are the Son of God…”* Satan knew exactly who he was dealing with, and Jesus knew exactly who he was. There was no need for the *“if you are…”* This points out one of Satan’s tactics. He uses truth *(since you are…)* mixed in with his dark, deceptive, manipulative ways to get us off kilter, to get us off balance, confused and moving in the direction of doubting God’s goodness and grace. Satan is a master at mixing truth with lies. That’s why it is so, so, so important that we know, we claim, and we live by the truth given us in the Bible, and why it is so, so, so important (a matter of life and death in fact) that we know and claim as Savior & Lord the One who is the Truth! Jesus Christ! Amen? Amen. Here’s a real-life example before we go further.

When our daughter Katy and son-in-law Josh lost their first daughter to stillbirth (15 years ago this March), Katy sat in her living room, literally in the dark, for days. She kept the curtains pulled, she watched no TV, she just sat like she was in another world. It was my first year here with you as your pastor, and you were so kind and caring to me. I took numerous days off to be with her to do whatever I could to help. After many days I was finally clear enough in my head to know what had to be done. As we sat there in the dark together I was led to ask, “What is the one thought going around and around in your mind that you can’t get out?” Without hesitation she said through tears, “The one thing you’ve always wanted to be, you’ll never be.” Did you hear that? How much more devilish could it be? The thought she heard wasn’t even in the first person! The thought she had was clearly NOT HER OWN! If it was her own thought she would have been hearing, “The one thing I’ve always wanted to be, I’ll never be.” Surely, it was the voice of the deceiver. The manipulator. The father of lies. The accuser. Satan. “The one thing you’ve always wanted to be, you’ll never be.” “You’ve always wanted to be a mom, but you’re never going to be a mom.”

Take the truth (that her baby had not been born alive) and manipulate that truth to kill a real hope for motherhood and you’ve got a classic spiritual warfare encounter. Thanks be to God that my own thinking was clear enough in that moment to know who I was in the ring with. I remember asking the next question – because I knew it was critical that she come to the full truth on her own. I asked, “Is that true?” It sure *seemed* true in that moment. It sure *felt* true when there was no baby to hold. But the question was out there and it needed an answer. “Is that true?” This began the breakthrough we needed. It didn’t take the grief away. The grief remained. The grief remains. It will remain until we are all reunited with Cicely one day in heaven! But a little light began to shine that day as we confronted the devil and his lies. First of all, she already was a mom to a baby in heaven. Second of all, whether through another pregnancy or through adoption, there *would* be children for her to mother. Do you see how that worked? Truth vs. lies. Manipulation of the truth vs. full, pure truth.

Satan tempts Jesus to abuse his power, his position, and his calling for selfish purposes. He doesn’t attempt to deny Jesus’ Sonship, he attempts to get him to use it according to the world’s expectations for such a role. You have that kind of power? Well, how about you use it to do some magic! Turn stones into bread – you’ve gotta be hungry! Jump off the highest point and show everyone how powerful your God is and how the angels will come to save you! Oh, how they will follow you then! And you will receive more and more accolades, people from all over, young and old, will flock to you – you will have everything a Son of God should want or expect – *if* you’ll put me first. If you’ll *bow* to me. Each time Jesus responds with pure truth.

* *“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”*
* *“Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”*
* *“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”*

Truth always trumps deception. The hard part is not being deceived while we hold firm to that truth – because often truth doesn’t *seem* to be winning, or we don’t *feel* like truth is winning, or like it even matters. Then we can easily fall into discouragement, which gives the devil a foothold to start crawling around all over us to the point where we might even give up on trusting that God’s promises are true. Been there? A bunch of us have at different seasons of our lives.

This is why we need each other. This is why we need to stay connected, active, and intentionally growing in our faith through the ministry of the Body of Christ – the Church. This is why we read our Bibles. This is why we study the Bible in small groups, to read it together, to talk about it together, to laugh and cry about the things that happen in our lives together, to pray for a greater faithfulness together. Fighting discouragement and feed faith is why it is so important that our children and youth are in those Sunday school rooms on Sunday mornings together – connecting with peers their own age – and connecting with a faithful adult who, in partnership with the family, will help to guide them to know and live out God’s truth. We are so prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, O take and seal it. Seal it for thy courts above. We are so prone to wander away from the truth and find ourselves eating bread that does not satisfy, testing God with “If you’ll do this, I’ll do that,” and becoming rulers of our own little kingdoms expecting every inconvenience to be erased and every comfort to be ours. We earned it, after all. Right?

I don’t think that most people ever choose to run for political office because they want power. I think that most people choose to run for political office because they want to effect change; they want to make a difference for good in the world. The battle for the minds of our politicians, at every level, is raging folks. Power, influence, and financial gain soon become the temptations that slither up to those who could bring about true goodness here on earth. We need to pray for them.

I don’t think that any person ever delivers their marriage vows with the intention of breaking them. The battle for the permanence, faithfulness, and the true beauty of marriage as created, ordered, and blessed by God is raging. Apathy, criticism, jealousy, unforgiveness, and ‘the grass is greener’ attitude slithers up to every husband and wife whose marriage could be a reflection of the love of Christ for his church. We need to pray for husbands and wives.

I don’t think that any parent and any child ever hope that they will get to the point that all they do is fight. The battle for families, for the hearts and souls of teenagers, is brutal. The thoughts that your mother or your father is stupid, or clueless, or living in the dark ages, or doesn’t want you to have any fun at all slithers up to every middle & high school student and drives a wedge between them and the ones who love them the most and who want them to have the very best life ever. We need to pray for parents of school age children, for the children, & for the youth.

I don’t think that any pastor or youth minister ever thinks they are going to be the one who falls into an illicit affair… Or any employee takes a job with the intention of stealing from the company… Or any student goes to school with the hopes that they become a cheater… Or any hardworking person makes a determined effort to become a workaholic.

“*Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

If we are aware, we have a better chance at victory. If we are alert, we have a better chance at victory. If we are grounded in biblical truth, the truth that does not change, the truth that comes from the One who is the Truth, we will have victory. It doesn’t mean our lives will be trouble-free. In fact, it might mean we are a bigger target. But as we become more aware, and alert, and more grounded in God’s truth, the quicker we will spot & identify the attacks for what they are – spiritual warfare – and defeat them in Jesus’ name!

Pastor & author Erwin Lutzer says this, *“What the devil wants to do in the temptations against Jesus, is to take the fabric of God’s love toward Jesus and tear it. He wants to put daylight between the words of the Father and the experience of Jesus to get Jesus to doubt whether the Father spoke truth.”* That’s what he wants to do with us.

Pastor Jim Grier calls the devil a splitter. What he wants to do is split Jesus from the will of the Father, and that’s exactly what he wants to do in my life and yours. He wants to make sure that we are not in fellowship with Christ or with one another. He wants to split us apart.

Several weeks ago, we became aware that there were some mice in the church kitchen. So, I went over to the market and bought a couple traps. We put peanut butter on the devices to lure in the enemy. Sure enough, we got some. We killed the enemy. Not one, not two, but three of them! Did we get them all? Surely not. They are clever & sneaky little rodents.

It might seem that Satan’s lies are just a small thing. But the thing is, there are always more. Always. So, learn the truth, brothers and sisters. Learn it, keep learning it, apply it, and walk in it, and daily victory will be ours! What does victory look like? Victory looks like spiritual health and wholeness (showing forth love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control) which totally affects our physical health, mental health, emotional health, relational health, and congregational health and wholeness! And take this as a final thought: Isn’t it great & comforting to know that after a hard-fought battle, angels will come and minister to us as they did for Jesus, just when we need it the most! Think about that and keep your wits about you, your dukes up, your feet under you, the Holy Spirit in you, and give thanks and praise to God who alone gives us the victory through Jesus Christ the Lord! Amen.