

# Whom Shall You Serve?

Deuteronomy 6:1-15, Luke 4:1-13 (ESV)

November 21, 2004

Whom shall you serve? God or the devil? Whom shall you serve? God or yourself? Whom shall you serve? God or your country? God or your race? God or your favorite cause? God or anyone or anything else? Whom shall you serve? We realize, of course, that not serving is not an option. To live is to serve someone or something. To breathe is to have a master. The question, then, is not whether you shall serve. The question is, Whom shall you serve? Shall you serve God or not? In particular, shall you have the faith and courage to serve the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, or shall you settle for something less? Therein lies the question.

This is the question that the devil asked Jesus in the second, central, and main temptation in the wilderness. “The devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, ‘To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’” “If you...will worship me, it will all be yours.” “If you...will worship me.” That is all he asked. Of course, that is everything.

By the way, we have to remember that the devil is a liar! We have to remember not to believe anything he says. I do not believe for a moment that all the authority and the glory of the kingdoms of the world had been delivered to the devil. It may appear sometimes that the nations of the world have been given over to him, but I do not believe it. Their authority and glory had not been given to the devil, and they were not his to give to whomever he willed, so he could not have given to Jesus what he did not have.

Nevertheless, this is the offer of glory with which the devil tempted Jesus: “To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.” Jesus, of course, understood the underlying question. Jesus knew what was at stake. Jesus realized the consequences of his response as he looked toward the cross. The underlying question both in the wilderness and on the cross was, “Whom shall you serve?” The temptation was for Jesus not to serve his God and Father, not to fulfill his calling, not to be who he was, but instead to flee from the wilderness, to come down from the cross, and so to turn his back on all humanity. That would have been the easy thing to do. That would have been the self-serving thing to do. That would

have saved his life. “Whom shall you serve?” Does it seem to you a simple matter? The future of the universe hung in the balance. Jesus knew.

And he answered with a quote from the scriptures, from the word of God, decisively exposing, rejecting, repudiating, and eliminating what the devil was offering. “Jesus answered him, ‘It is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.”’” Here it is, in all its beauty and simplicity: “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” Jesus answered with a quote from the scriptures, a Bible verse that he remembered and with which alone he dismissed the greatest lies and temptation of the devil. “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” Jesus did not answer from philosophy! Jesus did not answer from history. Jesus did not answer from personal experience. Jesus did not answer from psychology. Jesus did not answer from politics. Jesus did not answer from feelings. Whom shall you serve? “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” Period. End of discussion. Next question.

I am not saying this was easy! This answer, given before he ever preached his first sermon, set his face toward the cross. Jesus had to know that. This answer set him along the path to his death. And yet, without hesitation, he gave this answer for himself and so for us. He served God alone both for the glory of God and also in order to save us. Thanks be to God!

In that sense, in regard to the decisive battle between good and evil, the victory was won. God in Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. We cannot save ourselves, nor do we need to save ourselves, because he has already done it for us. And yet, the question and his answer continue to have an ongoing application for our answers to temptation and thus for our lives. What Jesus did for us was not only salvific but also exemplary and instructive. When the devil still asks us, as he does every day, “Whom shall you serve?”, let us remember and be guided by the brave and faithful answer Jesus gave, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.” Yes, he did this for us once for all in the wilderness and on the cross. He also did it so that we might follow him in this way every day of our lives.

Perhaps at this point we could strengthen our understanding of what he accomplished by looking at the other two temptations, also, and how he responded to them. First of all, after forty days of fasting—obviously humanly impossible, and clearly a sign of God’s sustaining mercy—was Christ was tempted, not to extravagance, but to the apparently simple satisfaction of human hunger by the transformation of a single stone into a single loaf of bread. What harm could have been done by this? The most obvious is that Jesus would have misused his power to help himself instead of to serve others. Again, Whom shall you serve? The

underlying temptation was for Jesus to quit relying on the hidden grace of God, to quit believing in the sustaining mercy of God, to abandon faith in God his Father, to take matters into his own hands, to take care of himself, and to provide for his own food. This was the temptation—not simply to eat, but to give up on God, to serve self, and so to eat. In response to this, Jesus quoted Moses to the effect that our lives are based not only in food but even more in the will and mind and purpose of God. Christians have realized that even when we do have access to food, it is of no benefit without God’s mercy. Therefore we pray yet today, “Bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies....”

The third temptation became more severe, particularly in that the devil himself began to quote scripture. ‘Throw yourself off the temple, because it is written that God’s angels will take care of you.’ What was going on there? Jesus was no longer in the wilderness, but back at Jerusalem, at the temple, where he had been taken as a baby, where he had visited the teachers as a boy, and where with disciples he would soon be again. Was the temptation to make a spectacle of himself? Was the temptation to try to manipulate mass conversions? Or was the temptation to try take control, to try to force God’s hand? That is, Shall you serve God, or shall you try to make him serve you? Jesus—Jesus the Son of God!—realized that he was the one being tested, not the one who was to be conducting the tests, especially not to be conducting tests on God! Again, he responded with a word from the scriptures. So the devil departed for a while. We will not hear the devil’s voice again in Luke until this last temptation is echoed in the words of the rulers and the soldiers at the crucifixion, urging Jesus to come down from the cross and so to save himself.

Again, Jesus resisted and so defeated temptation for us once for all both in the wilderness and again on the cross. He also did it so that we might follow him in this way every day of our lives. So, Christ’s responses to his temptations provide us with models for the living of our lives and for resisting the temptations we face. As the church, we are yet today engaged in a struggle for the hearts, souls, minds, and strengths of all the people of the world. And we are not the only player on the field. There are powerful forces of evil at work, tempting people to go other directions. So God’s grace does not give us reason to be lazy or anything less than diligent, even for a moment. Instead, God’s grace provides the only possible foundation and reason for the effort of discipleship and the life of obedience.

Think with me about the history of humanity and of our individual lives. First, we human beings were created able to sin. We did not have to sin, but, given the ability and freedom to do so, we sinned. Second, once we sinned, we were not able not to sin. Everything we do has become infected by our sin. Having turned away from God, we are not capable of turning back to God. Having become self-centered,

even an effort to end that is self-centered and doomed to fail. This is why Jesus Christ had to come and to die in order to defeat sin and evil and to reclaim us as his own. Third, when God does forgive and convert someone, that person becomes able not to sin, at least on a good day, in small and broken ways, and for brief moments. Every once in a while, I am capable of an unselfish action. Of course, as soon as I realize it, I become so proud of myself that my self-centeredness reaches levels higher than ever before, so my ability not to sin does not last for long! But the ability of the redeemed not to sin is real, even if severely limited. The fourth part of this history is that human beings will not be able to sin. What a wonderful freedom that will be, when sin is no longer an option! This we understand to happen only in heaven.

Today, we are interested in the third stage of human history, the state of being redeemed, of being made able not to sin, at least in small ways. Jesus resisted temptation not only to win the victory for us, but also to work out the victory in us. The gospel brings about not only forgiveness but also renewal. The point is for us not only to be saved but for us also to be sanctified, for us to be made holy, for us to follow our Lord, Jesus Christ, in resisting temptation and serving God.

So, Christ's responses to his temptations do provide us with models for the living of our lives and for resisting the lesser temptations we face. On every occasion Jesus was able to respond appropriately and successfully with the word of God. This encourages us in diligence as students of the word. On every occasion Jesus chose to trust God rather than to take matters into his own hands. This encourages us in faith, confidence, and patience. In particular, while we are not tempted to turn stone into bread, partly because we have plenty of food and even more so because that is not within our power, nevertheless we do have to ask, What false ways for providing for ourselves are within our power? Cheating, fraud, dishonesty come to mind. So, Christ's successful resistance of temptation calls us to work hard and honestly at the tasks to which God has called us.

Are we tempted by the glory and authority of the kingdoms of the world? That has not been offered to me! Again, we are led to ask, For what lesser glories have we been willing to sell our souls? Or, What besides God have we been willing to worship? Whom shall you serve? The pressures for success are very real in our society and even in church. Jesus, our Lord, our model, was an apparent failure. His disciples deserted him. He was arrested, convicted, and executed. But he kept the faith. Do we risk losing the faith when we pursue worldly standards of success at any cost? The lust after wealth is very real. Jesus died a poor man. Why is money so all consuming to our world? Whom shall you serve?

Are we tempted to put God to the test? I have not been carried to the pinnacle of the temple. However, are we not in grave danger of the same temptation when we

complain about God's apparent failure to take better care of us? Are we not in danger when we ask God, Why did you let me get sick? Why did you let this happen to me? These questions may not be sinful in and of themselves, but we need to be aware that with them we are skating on thin ice, far too close to the edge.

Despite all the problems of the world and all the problems of our lives, God has the means to overcome sin, death, and evil, and he has provided both for our salvation and also for the renewal of our lives by Christ's victory over temptation. Whom shall you serve? God or the devil? Whom shall you serve? God or yourself? Whom shall you serve? God or your country? God or your race? God or your favorite cause? God or anyone or anything else? Whom shall you serve? Jesus said, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." Let us hear this, receive this, remember this, rely on this, and live our lives accordingly.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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