

The Spirit and the Word – Matthew 4:1-4

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I. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

How far does your trust in God go? What limits have you placed on where he can lead you? To what point are you willing to follow him into risky or costly situations in order to accomplish his will? How committed are you to abiding by the principles of God's Word no matter difficulties it may bring?

Well today and next week, as we return to our study of the gospels, we're going to see Jesus in action and discover his answer to each of these questions. And in the process, I hope we'll each take away some truths that will help us answer them just like Jesus did. Today we'll be studying the temptation of Christ and our primary passage will be Matthew chapter 4, verses 1 through 11. Turn there in your Bibles, if you would. We'll be tackling this passage in two sermons, this week and next. But before we begin we need to remember the context and where we are in Jesus' life and ministry. If you'll remember, Jesus has just been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and as he came up out of the water the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and a voice spoke out of heaven saying, "***This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.***"

After 30 years of living a quiet life of obedience to his heavenly Father and his parents, and discovering his true identity through study of Scripture, prayer, teaching from priests, and probably some input from his parents, Jesus now knew that he was the Son of God with the most difficult of missions to carry out. And at just the right time, he was led by the Holy Spirit to the Jordan River, to be baptized by John and begin his public ministry. And don't you think it's significant that just before that ministry began and before he faced his first intense challenge of spending 40 days being tempted by the devil himself, Jesus was visibly filled with the Holy Spirit and reassured of his true identity as the Son of God?

I think we need to grapple with the reality here that Jesus was living life on earth as an ordinary human being like you and I. He was not using his powers as the

Son of God as he lived his life on earth. He had to learn Scripture like you and I. He had to work hard. He had to deal with pain, sickness and suffering. He had to sleep just like we do. He had to face all the same temptations we do and more. He had to actively reject Satan's lies and replace them with truths from God's Word, just like us. And just like us, he needed the power and direction of the Holy Spirit to guide him into the Father's will and empower him to carry it out. Really the only difference between Jesus and us from a human perspective is that he did not have a sin nature...he was not spiritually dead and enslaved to sin like we are before we come to new life in Christ.

I've really become convinced through study of Scripture that Jesus' ability to discern the Father's will, to know what people were thinking, and to perform the astounding miracles he did, came not because he was using his powers as the Son of God, but because he was walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. In other words, Jesus showed us the most perfect picture of what life can look like when spiritually alive human beings walk fully surrendered to the Father and filled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. And this is confirmed by the fact that just prior to the beginning of his public ministry and the intense temptation he was about to face, the Father filled Jesus up with the Spirit and reassured him of his true identity as the Son of God. Luke's account of the same event describes Jesus as full of the Holy Spirit as he prepared to face the devil's temptation.

Well, let's read Matthew's full account of the temptation of Christ beginning in verse 1 of Matthew chapter 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.*

May the Lord bless the reading of his Word and cause it to do his work within each of us today.

II. FOLLOWING THE SPIRIT WHEREVER HE LEADS (Vs. 1-2)

I want to start by focusing on verses 1 and 2. In your sermon notes I've labeled this section: *Following the Spirit Wherever He Leads*. The first thing to notice here is that this was the Father's plan for Jesus. We're told that the Spirit led Jesus (Mark's version says, "impelled Him") to go into the wilderness for the express purpose of being tempted by the devil. Jesus was following the Spirit's leading and the Spirit was leading him to a place of great difficulty and great temptation, and asking him to give up food while he was there alone in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. Jesus might have tried to argue that he needed food to keep his strength up for this intense battle with Satan's lies, but he didn't. He trusted that the Father had a plan and would provide. Clearly this was anything but an easy path, yet we see Jesus willing to follow wherever the Spirit led and do whatever the Father asked him to do...full surrender and trust.

Well, you might be wondering: Is it really humanly possible for a person to survive 40 days without food? Surprisingly it is. I've always assumed this had to be a miracle of God for Jesus to have survived that long without food, and certainly that wouldn't have been a problem for God. However, I was interested to find that there are well documented cases of people surviving 40 or more days without food. An article on *ScientificAmerican.com* says this:

In a 1997 article in the British Medical Journal, Michael Peel, senior medical examiner at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, cites well-documented studies reporting survivals of ... hunger strikers for 28, 36, 38 and 40 days...Reports of the 1981 hunger strike by political prisoners

against the British presence in Northeast Ireland indicate that 10 individuals died after periods of between 46 and 73 days without food.

While just the thought of going without food for 40 days while being alone in the wilderness with the devil sounds plenty difficult to me, Luke's version of Jesus' temptation expands the intensity of this temptation period even more. He indicates that Jesus was being actively tempted by the devil for the entire 40 days, not just at the end with the three temptations we know about. Those were just Satan's final three, last-ditch efforts! This was a marathon session filled all kinds of temptations. Luke says in verse 13: ***"When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed..."*** This is temptation on steroids carried out by the tempter himself, not one of his minions. And it helps us better understand the significance of Hebrews chapter 4, verses 14 to 15:

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

How was Jesus able to endure and survive this intense temptation marathon?...*by the power of the Holy Spirit.* Not only was Jesus being tempted for the entire 40 days, we're also told in Luke that he was being led around by the Holy Spirit for the entire 40 days. The Father didn't leave him to fight this battle alone and Jesus didn't try to fight it on his own. He fought it under the guidance of and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you know what the next verse is in that Hebrews passage I just read you about Jesus being tempted in all things? It's one you know:

16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

That's how Jesus endured such an intense period of temptation and difficulty, and it's also how we're instructed to endure the temptations and difficulties we face in our own lives: Draw near with confidence to the throne of grace and stay there...walking always in submission to and filled with the power of God's Holy

Spirit. Know your true identity as God's beloved child and learn to pray continually.

III. TRUSTING THE WORD AND REJECTING THE LIES (Vs. 3-4)

So now that we have a good picture of what Jesus faced during those 40 days in the wilderness and how he endured it, let's zoom in on the first of Satan's final three...his last-ditch efforts to tempt Jesus and lead him off the path of the Father's will. This first temptation is recorded for us in verses 3 and 4 of Matthew chapter 4, which I've labeled in your notes: *Trusting the Word and Rejecting the Lies*. The first temptation and Jesus' response is found in verses 3 and 4:

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.'"

Verse 2 told us that Jesus was hungry. And at that moment of intense hunger for food, of course the tempter was there, stepping right up to offer some fresh-baked bread. Don't you think if Jesus had turned a stone into bread he would have made it warm and included a little butter to go with it?! We see here also that Satan was well aware of the power of God's spoken word, and he knew the Son of God could perform miracles with a simple command.

This is quite an interesting temptation, because at first glance you might wonder: Why it would have been a sin for Jesus to make himself some bread after going 40 days without food. What's so wrong about getting some food after an extended fast to satisfy your desperate hunger? But as I thought about what the temptations were for Jesus here, a couple things initially came to mind. First of all, being concerned with proving to the devil that he really is the Son of God would demonstrate concern with getting the devil's approval or recognition, something that's of no value to the Father. Secondly, using his power as the Son of God to perform this miracle would have compromised his mission of living a life of full obedience to the Father as an ordinary human being and would have indicated a lack of trust that the Father would provide what he needed to stay alive and accomplish his mission. It would have been like taking matters into his own hands rather than trusting the Spirit to lead and the Father to provide.

And this leads us to what I believe is the most significant reason why it would have been a sin for Jesus to turn a stone into bread either by his own power as the Son of God or by calling on the power of the Spirit. That reason is that Jesus was to do nothing on his own initiative, but rather, in everything, follow the lead of the Spirit who was communicating the will of the Father. Listen to Jesus' own words in John chapter 5, verse 30:

30 "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

Had the Spirit directed Jesus to turn a stone into bread so he could have food to eat, it wouldn't have been a sin for Jesus to do so. But to let the devil call the shots instead of the Spirit, and then to use his own power as the Son of God, rather than the Spirit's power, would have been a sin. This would have compromised his mission of functioning as an ordinary human being like us and enduring everything we go through as humans, and it would have involved obeying the devil rather than obeying the Father's will as communicated through the Spirit.

Well, Jesus, under the direction of the Spirit and filled with wisdom from God's Word, recognized that as much as he would have loved to enjoy some warm bread to satisfy his hunger, he shouldn't take matters into his own hands and get ahead of the Spirit. Bread was not his true source of life, but rather his life would be found by obeying God's Word and trusting the Father to provide everything he needed to accomplish his will. And as he had likely been doing for the entire 40 days of temptation by the devil, Jesus used God's Word to see through the fog of Satan's lies and tricks. Quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, he said: ***"It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"***

This is really a profound statement from Scripture that I believe has much deeper meaning than we often give it. We often think of it only as a reference to the life and blessings that come from obeying God's Word in the Bible. And certainly that's a central part of the meaning, and Jesus was truly living this out in how he was handling this very temptation. More important to Jesus than satisfying his hunger and getting what he needed to keep his physical body alive or fulfilling his

human desire for affirmation and recognition, was following the direction of the Father given through the Spirit and fully obeying God's Word. That was the true source of his spiritual life, far more important than keeping his physical body alive. And the same is so true for us.

But I want us to think for a moment a little deeper about the meaning of these words. Not only do we find our true life in knowing and living God's Word, but our physical lives as well are fully dependent on the word of God's power. Think about it: *All life itself was created by God's spoken word.* He spoke and life was created out of nothing. And not only was life created by his spoken Word, it's also sustained and held together by the word of his power. Scripture tells us so (Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17). Every living human being, whether they're in relationship with God or not, is alive today because God himself created them and is continually giving them breath and life and holding them together by the word of his power.

Interestingly, the context of that verse Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3 emphasizes both of these aspects of the life-giving power of God's spoken word. Deuteronomy chapter 8 focuses on both the life and blessing that come from obeying God's spoken and written words and the physical life-sustaining power of God displayed during the 40-year wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness; as he provided manna for them to eat and kept their sandals from wearing out and their feet from swelling. The message is that every word that comes out of God's mouth – whether it's his written word, or the guidance he gives us through his Spirit, or the continuing word of his power that sustains our physical lives – every word that comes out of God's mouth is our source of life, both physical and spiritual.

Everyone is dependent on God, and when we finally become fully conscious of that dependence and realize that every part of our continued existence is in his hands, we're finally starting to get somewhere. We begin to find a peace and freedom knowing that God's in control and will keep us alive as long as he needs to, and we're encouraged to learn to live in dependence on his Spirit and allow him to guide and direct us into his purpose for our lives.

Jesus understood all this completely. He knew that the Father was the real source of his physical life and could keep him alive even without food if need be. He

trusted the Father completely even when things were hard and uncomfortable and when his body was crying out for relief. And with this knowledge and trust he found no need to step out of the Father's will and take matters into his own hands. He trusted the Father to provide and his most important priority was not to satisfy his physical needs and wants, but to follow the Spirit's lead and live out the truths of God's Word. If that led him into suffering and discomfort, so be it. The Father would give him what he needed to endure and accomplish his will. May God lead us all into this kind of deep trust in God's provision and commitment to living out his Word by the power of his Spirit.

IV. APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

Well, as we wrap up today I'd like to share a few thoughts about how all these things apply to us today. I hope you've seen some ways already. As I think about what Jesus teaches us in the verses, I see three primary applications to you and I. First of all, God has given his children the incredible and precious gift of the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, we can be led around into the Father's purposes as we follow the Spirit's lead, and we can find everything we need to accomplish his will. I don't know about you, but I don't want to miss out on this amazing gift given to us in Christ. I want to learn better how to follow the Spirit's lead and be filled up with his wisdom and power. And God wants the same thing for us. He wants to teach us how to walk through life by the Spirit like Jesus did.

The truth is, we're not meant to set our own agenda and priorities and follow our nose wherever it goes. We're not meant to walk through life relying on our own wisdom and flawed perception of reality. That's a recipe for mistakes and pain and lots of wasted time. God's good intention for us instead is that we learn to walk in the power of His Spirit and follow his guidance in every aspect our lives, just as Jesus did. Listen to one of the ways Jesus later described the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives, from John 16, verse 13 to 15:

13 "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. 14 "He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. 15 "All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you.

The Spirit is our personal guide and the One who's meant to direct every step we take. He knows the Father's will and purposes for us and will disclose them to us when we're willing to ask and listen and follow. The question is: Are we seeking the Spirit's input and guidance as we go through each day? If so, how? Could we truthfully say right now that the Spirit is leading us around each day to accomplish God's will or are we usually leading the way and asking him to fill us up with God's power to do our will?

Spend some time thinking and praying about that this week, and what it would look like to be led by the Spirit in everything you do in your life. But as you seek to grow in walking by the Spirit, never do it without simultaneously *growing your understanding of God's Word*. This is our second application today. We need the Spirit AND the Word and they should never be separated. Lots of people have gotten themselves into trouble and drifted out of God's purposes by just trying to follow the voice of the Spirit without knowing and understanding what God has revealed to us in his Word. Satan's really good at trying to imitate the Spirit and lead us into doing things that contradict God's Word. Without knowing God's Word and keeping the big picture of God's purposes and priorities ever before our eyes, he will trick us and lead us astray.

Jesus was full of the Spirit and being led around by him, but his ability to distinguish the voice of the Spirit from the voice of the tempter came from his deep understanding of God's Word. Did you notice that to defeat Satan's lies, he had only one approach and it worked every time: *he replaced Satan's lies with truths from God's Word*. Clearly Jesus had absorbed and internalized God's Word and it informed everything he did and said. Knowing God's Word and living it out, in fact, was more important to Jesus than even physical life itself. May God work within each of us until the same is true in our lives.

God's Word is such a precious gift. Like the gift of the Spirit, it's been given to us because of God's good intentions toward us and because he wants us to know him and stay out the devil's traps. And the fact is, we can't uncover Satan's lies and replace them with God's truth, if we don't have a handle on God's Word and what it says. And if that's the case in our lives...if studying the Bible is a passing thought, a low priority, or just something the pastor helps us do on Sundays, we will be oh so easily taken captive by the devil to do his will instead of God's. God

open our eyes and change our hearts so that we love your Word and want to live it out more than we love life itself!

The third and final application I want to share from this passage of Scripture is the invitation to live in God's peace by *trusting his provision no matter what*. I'd say that Jesus, after 40 days of intense battle with devil with no food, had plenty of reasons to question the Father's motives and take matters into his own hands just to survive. And yet, he chose to trust and wait for God's timing and God's provision. It was so much more important to Jesus to follow the Spirit's lead and obey God's Word, that he was even willing to die of starvation rather than compromise the mission the Father had given him by stepping outside God's will.

For us today, this has such an important application to our lives. So often we're willing to obey God's Word and trust him to a point. When he's blessing us and meeting our physical needs and keeping us warm and comfortable, all is good. We can even deal with a few inconveniences and challenges, and we know some pain and suffering is part of living in a broken world. But where will we be when everything comes crashing down? Where will we be when doing the right thing costs us our job? What if being obedient and following the lead of the Spirit someday puts our very lives at great risk? Where will we be when God's not providing for our physical needs? Did you know many faithful Christians have starved to death? Huge numbers of Christians throughout history and even today have been martyred for their faith. Where will we be if that's us some day? To what point are we willing to keep trusting and obeying God's Word?

Well, Jesus, not only here in the wilderness but throughout his life on earth, shows us the peace that comes from trusting the Father to provide whatever we need to accomplish his will. Notice I didn't say God guarantees to provide us with everything we need to live forever in these decaying, physical bodies. That would be a bummer! Instead, God has committed to providing us with everything we'll need to accomplish his purposes in our lives. But what if his purpose for our lives is to be faithful under persecution or great suffering that ends in our physical death? Well, if that's what he calls us to do, we can know with certainty that he'll provide us with everything we need to endure it and remain faithful to the end as we call on him, and that our time of suffering on earth will seem brief and easy when we arrive in heaven to spend eternity with him.

Jesus, in his 40 days in the wilderness, reminds us that God is the source of both our physical life and our spiritual life, and that our call is to trust him completely with both as we follow the Spirit's, always keeping our eyes fixed on the bigger picture of eternity and accomplishing God's eternal purposes. We may lose our physical life someday. In fact, we all will unless we're raptured. But though physical death comes to us all, God is completely in control of when that happens and he will sustain us and provide us with what we need until that day comes. Let's surrender and trust him like Jesus did, rather than taking matters into our own hands when things get too hard, and stepping off the path of obedience to try to fix things without him or try to get what we want.

SERMON APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Read Matthew 4:1-11, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you as you read. Look at the surrounding verses, take your time and talk to God as you read and meditate on it. Think through the following, writing notes and looking up related Scriptures as needed:

Write down from the passage or from what was shared in the sermon: 1) a truth that stands out to you; 2) anything you believe God is showing you or telling you personally through it; 3) any related Scripture that comes to mind; 4) any questions you have.

During your life have you consciously tried to place any limits on where God could lead you and what he could ask you to do? Describe. What are some of the reasons for any limits you've tried to place?

Read Psalm 139:13-16, Hebrews 1:2-3 and Colossians 1:13-17. What are some truths from these verses about God's role in creating and sustaining life? How do these truths help you to trust God more with your life?

How often and in what ways are you currently seeking the Spirit's input and guidance as you go through each day? What do you think it would look like in your life to be led by the Spirit in everything you do? Can you find any Scriptures that provide guidance in this area?

How would you rate your current understanding of God's Word as a whole? How about your ability to call it to mind and use it to uncover Satan's lies? What are some practical ways you can improve your understanding of God's Word? How are you doing with any previous plans you've made for studying God's Word more regularly?

Write down any other thoughts, notes or applications below: