

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ.

I am Walker Epps, a retired Minister-of-the-Gospel. My wife, Lynn, and I were married in the chapel here at First United Methodist Church of Dothan more than forty-eight years ago, and we have been active members of this congregation since my retirement in 2011. We are members of the Progressors Sunday School class, and they have blessed and honored me by allowing me to be one of their teachers. I appreciate this privilege of sharing today's Sunday School lesson with you in this video format.

Let us pray: Eternal God, we bow before You and worship You with praise and thanksgiving. You alone have given us life, and You alone can sustain us with Your love and goodness. We pray for each other in this worldwide crisis and pandemic that is affecting our lives and the lives of everyone on earth. We look to You for help, for guidance, and for Your grace that will enable us to be strong and courageous, bold and caring, and to persevere with hope and confidence that You will be with us and enable us to go through this time of pain and suffering and come out well and whole. We humbly ask that You continue to give us the gift of faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior and our Lord. Amen.

The lesson for today, March 22, 2020, is titled, "Jesus in the Wilderness." The purpose statement is: "To claim the power of Scripture to combat temptation in our lives." The focal scripture passage is Matthew 4:1-11, and I want you to listen carefully to this reading from the Gospel.

*(Read Matthew 4:1-11)*

"To claim the power of Scripture to combat temptation in our lives." That is the purpose of this lesson. Question: when have you claimed and used the power of Scripture to combat temptation in your life? Think about that for a moment. Jesus' temptation experience is reported in all three synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark's account is very brief with no real details. Luke and Matthew are quite similar, except that the order of the three temptations Satan offered to Jesus is different. This event came immediately after Jesus was baptized by John and called "My beloved Son" by God. Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the

devil. Do you suppose that this was the first time Jesus was tested and tempted? Surely not, but this was a very real and near ultimate test before Jesus began his preaching, teaching, and active ministry. We could say that Jesus' ultimate test was in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. That experience of Jesus was the subject of our lesson two weeks ago.

Temptation is usually, to sin; to do what one ought not to do, or not to do what one ought to do. It is very unlikely that we would ever say, "I was tempted today to be more holy or to act more like Jesus." Furthermore, let us realize that Jesus' temptations were not so exotic or unique that we cannot identify with them, learn from them, and see in Jesus the best way to combat and overcome temptation. As we look at the temptation experience of Jesus let us also note the subtle way in which there could seemingly be a good outcome. Jesus did feed multitudes with bread and fish, but not at the suggestion of any tempter. If I am tempted to buy a big box of cookies or candy or doughnuts so I can share with friends, the temptation is actually to eat what I don't really need, even what may be harmful to me. We need knowledge and wisdom to identify temptation and to distinguish from within the temptation what may appear to the world to be some good intention.

Our lesson book suggests that knowledge is power; that is, Jesus' knowledge of Hebrew scripture enabled him to answer and refute the devil's temptations. Our knowledge and understanding of the Bible is so important. Every Christian should be a good Bible student. It's one reason I love being active in a good Sunday School class. I love to teach, but I enjoy hearing others, too. I enjoy hearing our preachers preach. Every one of our preachers uses the Bible in his or her sermons. As I hear others preach and teach, I am always thinking, "Is that the way I interpret the scripture? Do I agree? Have I thought about that before?" Every sermon, every lesson helps me to know more Bible. That is why I am doing this lesson, and I volunteered for it before being asked, even before I knew for sure that it would be done.

Currently, our Adult Bible Studies lessons are thematically based. This quarter is on LIFE. Next quarter the theme will be COMMUNITY. Within LIFE, we have three units:

wilderness, salvation, and grace, each with four or five lessons based on a particular scriptural passage. Every day there is a suggested scriptural passage to read; each one lends further assistance in understanding the whole theme. I have found this very helpful in doing a daily devotional. The only other time I have been as regular and as disciplined with daily Bible study has been when I was actively involved in a DISCIPLE Bible study. While we are staying home more, fighting the virus by social distancing, let us all use more time for Bible study. There is just so much news and mindless TV that any one of us can stand or needs to stand.

One of the ideas I remember using in sermons I have preached on the temptation experience of Jesus in the wilderness is that his temptations were not totally different from ours. Parenthetically, I preached on this text and/or this event often, for it is always the Gospel Lesson in the lectionary for the first Sunday in Lent. First of all, Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread. The Bible clearly says Jesus was famished, starving; he fasted forty days and forty nights! Lord, have mercy! How I have failed with this temptation. All my life I have faced the temptation to pay more attention to my physical gluttony than to my spiritual needs. By the grace of God, I have made it to seventy years of age with a fairly sharp mind and a body not so disabled that I can't drive, walk with a walker, and go where I need and want to go. I am trying to eat more properly in the face of this virus—less sugar, more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, fiber, and getting regular exercise. For me, that is my stationary exercise bicycle, which I am riding twenty minutes per day.

We are tempted to think that we don't face anything like Jesus' second temptation to jump off the Temple. However, I see the temptation to test God over and over. We think we are among the elect and that God favors us. We know we are blessed, so surely God won't let anything very bad happen to us. Don't we all face the temptation right now to think we are overreacting to this virus? Maybe we don't know anyone who has tested positive. Are there any reported cases in Dothan? We may feel fine; we are healthy. It's not going to get us. Dear God, I hope not, but it is a silent, deadly killer. Better to overreact than to underreact. Take all the precautions you can.

The third temptation was for Jesus to take power and control. The devil offered all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus, if Jesus would fall down and worship him. I have always heard that the devil is a liar and a thief. The devil lied when he said that all the kingdoms of the world were his to give, and if he did have any, he stole them. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him,” that’s what Jesus said. “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him.” What a good response Jesus made to this last temptation.

I have a lot of church experience. That experience is mostly at the local church level, but there is plenty at the district and conference levels, too. The conflicts I have seen in Church with a capital C and in local congregations are always about power and control. It may seem to be about who chooses the color of the new carpet for the sanctuary, or it may be about whether or not we support a mission project in Dothan or in Africa, but it always boils down to who has the power and who controls the decision.

When the vast majority in a congregation say, “We all have to worship God first and serve God, not ourselves,” there will be minimal conflict, and it will get worked out gently and smoothly. The temptation we face is to think, “My way is the only way, and your way is wrong.”

This third temptation is to rule by force and not through self-sacrificial love. When you think of Jesus and examine all we know of him and of how he lived his life, according to the Gospels, Jesus forced no one to follow him. He did not use force to avoid the Cross—something he did not deserve. Yet, he gave his life for you and me on the Cross, so we could have grace, love, forgiveness, and salvation. That is the purest definition of self-sacrificial love. I have faced a few persons who gave in to the temptation to use force in order to control what they wanted to control. Such is not a pretty sight. It is a horrible situation. God deliver us all from this temptation and from any who give in to it.

Yes, Jesus knew the scriptures well. He could quote them, but, moreover, Jesus knew the Father’s will, and, thereby, he saw right through the devil’s temptations. If we will look to Jesus for inspiration, we, too, will know what overcomes temptation. Like Jesus, we should love God first and foremost, then love our neighbors as ourselves. Like Jesus,

we should have humble respect for God's will upon our lives, knowing the Bible, which teaches us of God's grace for the whole world forever. And, like Jesus, we should have faith in God's power and provision.

If we are to be disciples, followers of Jesus, we seek to become more and more like him. "More Like the Master" is the title of an old gospel song. Seeking to be more like Jesus, trusting in God, depending upon the power of the Holy Spirit enables us to live as holy, loving, and hopeful children of God. May God empower us to be free of the burden of temptation.

Let us pray: Dear God, our firm foundation and our ultimate hope, enable all of us this day to find our solid ground in You. Give us the desire to know Your Word more completely, so that we can call on Your Truth when temptation comes. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

May the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit bless you now and be with you forever. Amen.