

SERMON FOR THE 3rd MID-WEEK LENTEN SERVICE, 2020

Skirmishes
Hebrews 4:15

Grace and peace to you all from our risen Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The text for our sermon tonight is Hebrews 4:15: **For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses. However, we have One who has been tempted in every way like us. Yet He was without sin.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Have any of you heard of the term *captology*? It's a technology that is designed "*to change people's beliefs and behaviour.*" Social media has used it to get people to upload their pictures and divulge their personal information so that others can know where you go on a holiday, what diet you are on, how funny your cat is, or even just how frustrated you may be with your life. The technology is used to get people to click on links, buy stuff, or watch the next YouTube video and the next and the next so that you get to watch all accompanying commercial ads, of course. The designers of this technology understand human nature and have a well-laid-out plan to manipulate our behaviour.

This is nothing new. Changing people's beliefs has been going on for centuries. Someone has been at work on that since Adam and Eve, and we know who it is. It is our number one enemy, the devil himself, Satan, and he hates us. He has enough of an understanding of our sinful nature that he knows how to use it well in his war plan to hurt us and turn us against our gracious God. He was successful against Adam and Eve in Eden, and you know how he has won battles against all of us too. But he also had another target, a bigger target than just us. His target was that of our hero, Jesus Christ. The devil targeted his attacks on our Champion when our Champion lived on earth.

Without a doubt, the devil made many attacks on Jesus, but he never won a single one of them. Jesus always overcame his attacks. The writer to the Hebrews says it clearly: **"For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses. However, we have One who has been tempted in every way like us. Yet He was without sin."**

When Jesus entered His public ministry, the devil stepped up his attacks on Jesus because he was desperate to destroy the world's Saviour. In his Gospel, Matthew gives us an account of a skirmish between the devil and Jesus when the Holy Spirit led our Saviour out into the wilderness to be tempted.¹ Jesus did not hide from this battle. In fact, the reason Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit was to show the devil that Jesus was the perfect Substitute and would win where Adam and Eve had failed.

When Satan appeared on the battlefield, Jesus had been fasting for 40 days. He had to have been physically weak - thin and tired. Satan is a confident, powerful evil angel, who we can picture smiling, friendly, and acting as if he cared. After all, he is able to masquerade even as an angel of light.²

Satan's first attack was an attempt to exploit his advantage. Jesus had been without food, so Satan comes with a temptation for Jesus to listen to him and *put food before the Word* of His heavenly Father and the purpose His Father had sent Him to accomplish. He says in effect, "You are obviously starving. You need to eat, otherwise you will never get to the cross. Here, turn these stones into bread before you die." Jesus holds firm, resists the words of Satan, and depends on God's Word, not Satan's: "*Scripture has said: 'A person does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that comes out through the mouth of God'*" (Matthew 4:4).

Satan's second attack distorts the Word of God to tempt Jesus to do what His heavenly Father never told anyone to do: "You trust your Father. Show that You believe Him and that He will take care of You. Just jump off this point of the temple to the Kidron Valley below. God will send His angels to preserve You. What an amazing and impressive

¹ Matthew 4:1-11

² 2 Corinthians 11:14

demonstration of God's power." Jesus turned away the temptation by again trusting in His heavenly Father's words and not Satan's: "*Again, Scripture has said, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test!'*" (Matthew 4:7).

Satan was not finished. He chose once more to manipulate Jesus and turn Him from His goal of saving humanity. So many people place the world's wealth before God, and Satan had been successful with so many using this approach. He thought Jesus would stumble here too. He said, "This is such a dusty, poor part of the world. You are better than this. You are worth so much more. Think of all the good you could do if you had wealth and power. Worship me and let me give it all to You!" Jesus responded, "*You shall worship the Lord, your God, and you shall serve Him alone!*" (Matthew 4:10).

Jesus maintains His priority: God first. With the Scriptures, He answered all the temptations of Satan. Though weak, Jesus told Satan to jump back into his lake of fire. Satan stopped smiling, the dark anger boiling inside him, and, defeated, he gave up that day - but he would be back.

Jesus stayed strong, calm, determined, and loving through all this! He would remain obedient to His heavenly Father and follow through on the plan of saving humanity, of winning the final great battle. For now the skirmish ended in victory.

But there is one more lesson in this skirmish: Jesus is a mighty warrior who understands our every temptation because He faced them all. "**For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses. However, we have One who has been tempted in every way like us. Yet He was without sin.**"

Satan would not be alone in his attacks. Satan's battle plan shifted away from Jesus to include the high priest and eventually us. He enlisted into his army both the retired high priest Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas in the plot to kill Jesus. Annas and Caiaphas betrayed their God and their purpose as high priests! They wanted to rid the world of Jesus just as Satan wanted to do.

Jesus is a far different kind of high priest. Instead of having others prepare the sacrifice, He did it all Himself. Instead of the privacy of the Holy Place where sacrifices were offered, the altar on which Jesus put His sacrifice was out in public view on the cross. Finally, our Great High Priest became the Lamb, the sacrifice! He did all this because His heart is so big. He has room in it for every one of us because He loves us!

He knows our weaknesses. He experienced every kind of temptation possible and saw how a vulnerable person could lose those battles. Our evil enemy has an armoury full of weapons as he tries to pry us away from our trust in our Lord Jesus.

So, what is your worst battleground? What temptations are you struggling with? Where has Satan found you at your most vulnerable spot? Maybe it's constant worry, or a lack of self-control (eating too much, too much time on social media, overspending), or lust (including viewing pornography), or even lying/cheating. There are bound to be many more things that we are tempted by. We have all felt Satan's temptations drawing us away. If there were a brain scanning tool that could be focused on our thought life and could broadcast our personal thoughts onto a video screen, what would be connected to our names? Would it show us deeply entranced in the worship of our Lord, or would it show that we have wandered away during the words of the readings or the well-thought-out words of the hymns we sing?

Would there be invasive thoughts - they just popped up - about paying bills, about what could be the matter with so many in our congregation because so few are here in worship tonight, or other darker things that we could not even put on the screen because of shame? Satan is happy with whatever gets your mind away from Jesus. He wants you damned, and he uses temptation as a sort of cyber virus into our minds.

Think of all the daily skirmishes Jesus had with the devil and the world. Think about all the skirmishes you have had with him over so many different issues. Then remember Jesus. "**For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses. However, we have One who has been tempted in every way like us. Yet He was without sin.**"

Jesus has won every skirmish for us. Every minute during His life here on earth - in thought, word, and deed - Jesus kept the Ten Commandments perfectly, as well as everything else the Father wanted Him to do. Don't forget that He

was a real human being (100 percent God, 100 percent man). True, He did not have a sinful nature like us. He was pure inside like the original Adam, but Jesus succeeded where Adam and Eve failed. Jesus remained pure throughout His entire life!

“*My food,*” said Jesus, “*is to do the will of Him who has sent Me and to finish His work*” (John 4:34). He loved to do His heavenly Father’s will! He was God’s Son and loved to talk to His Father. There is a perfect intimacy between them. As you read the pages of the Bible, it’s clear that Jesus was in constant contact with His Father in heaven.

The good news is that He didn’t come to this earth just to see if He could keep His own commandments as God *and* man. It wasn’t simply an *exercise*. Rather, He faced those daily battles and the final battle with Satan because none of us could handle the job. There would be no hope for this human race if someone who was pretty good - let’s say, St. Paul, St. John, or St. Peter, or someone like that - were to represent the whole human race at God’s court. They wouldn’t even be able to stand before God because of all the sin in their lives. What chance would you or I have?

Humanity needed a perfect someone who would be our hero, our substitute, our stand-in who could qualify to take our place at the justice bar of God. Jesus is that one. He did this for us, loving us completely. He has given us His obedience to His heavenly Father. We are covered, clothed, and hidden under the garment of our great Warrior’s perfect life. His victory is ours so that we may stand forgiven and holy before God.

Yet we use the word *struggle* to define our efforts to be faithful. That is an accurate word. It’s really a war, and all of us have lost many conflicts. So when we realise that Jesus was perfectly faithful every moment of His life, we begin to understand how massive the battle with temptation and sin really was! What a great Warrior!

Our great Hero has not left us alone to face the temptations and trials of our enemy. He promises to protect us and rule over all things - Satan included - for our good. When we face temptation, He has our back. The Apostle Paul writes, “*No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to all human beings. However, God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tested beyond what you can bear. Rather, when you are tested, He will also make the way of escape, so that you may be able to bear it*” (1 Corinthians 10:13). Jesus is that way of escape. In addition, He asks us to pray for His help in our struggles.

When we are hurting, Jesus knows what we feel like. When we have problems, we know He experienced all kinds of them. He was despised by His enemies. He was rejected by His own people. People told evil lies about Him. When we talk to Him, we are not talking to some far-off God. He hears the words of our hearts and can certainly relate. He is one of us, and He cares! Over and over again, His words and His life all reinforce how great His love is for us. But most importantly, we take comfort in the fact that Jesus has taken away the guilt of every one of our sins. By offering the sacrifice of His perfect life on our behalf, God has forgiven all our sins, including every single time we have ever failed in temptation. That’s why we can sing these words from “What a Friend We Have in Jesus”:

Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged,
take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our *every* weakness,
take it to the Lord in prayer. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.