

Satan isn't terribly creative. In fact, he can't create anything. He can only twist and warp and pervert what God – the Creator – has created. This is seen even in the temptations that the devil brings. He really just has one temptation – “Did God really say...?” – but he finds all kinds of ways to twist and bend this, to dress it up and make it look like he's bringing forth new temptations.

Thankfully, as they all go back to trying to undermine or twist what God said, the answer is always found in God's word. As we look at the temptations Satan tried on Jesus, we'll see how the tempter attacks us in the same way. And as we see Jesus resist those temptations with God's word, we're shown how we're to resist temptations as well.

So, the first temptation. We read, “And the tempter came and said to [Jesus], ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.’” In this temptation is the lure of placing our physical needs or wants above the things of God.

Satan pulls this temptation out of his bag when Jesus would have felt a great need for food. He'd fasted forty days and nights – almost certainly using His divine power to put Himself through a greater fast, greater hunger, than an ordinary human could bear. Imagine not eating from now until Good Friday!

Along comes the devil and says, “You're the Son of God, aren't you? Just make some bread. You can do it!” What's he doing with those words? It isn't that bread itself is sinful – Jesus will make a lot of it later on, enough to feed thousands. And Satan isn't challenging Jesus' power. He knows the Son of God made the universe; bread is not a problem.

No, what Satan is doing here is trying to get Jesus to doubt that His Father will provide for Him, that He will give His Son His daily bread. Remember, it was God the Holy Spirit who led Jesus out into the wilderness where there is no food. God is the One guiding Jesus to fast, to trust that He will be provided for, to wait on the Father's timing and to trust His will. That's what Satan is attacking.

And again, the devil doesn't have anything new. He did this in the Garden. His first words to Eve were, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” That would be ridiculous, as ridiculous as the Son of God not able to turn stones to bread. But what Satan is doing is trying to get Eve to start doubting God's care, His love for her and Adam, His faithfulness in providing everything they need.

Satan's hoping that Eve will look around and go, “No, we get to eat from all the trees... except that one... I wonder why God won't let us eat from that one?” The moment she lets that doubt slip in, Satan's found his opening.

Satan goes after us with the same temptation, just twisted to fit our times. He tries to get us to doubt God's care, to think that maybe God is holding out on us, holding us back from what would really be best for us. It's like Eve and all the trees. “God's given me six days a week to use as I see

best. He just commands me to gather with others on that one day... I wonder why I can't have that day for myself as well?"

When that doubt slips in, Satan is ready with a hundred reasons, a hundred things you could use Sunday morning for, things that would make you more money, or let you have more fun, or let you have more time with friends and family. After all, it's just a couple hours. Just a couple loaves of bread.

Or another temptation concerning God not providing – living together without marriage. “I know the Bible says that the marriage bed is to be undefiled, and there's the Sixth Commandment, but it's expensive to have two homes. And they're probably going to get married eventually, so why not start practicing now?” People are tempted to think that, unless a man and woman put themselves in a horribly tempting situation, and thereby put God to the test, then God won't give them their daily bread.

There are plenty of other temptations like this in our lives, but they all revolve around the idea that, unless we go against God's word – in just a “little” way – God won't give us what we need.

This is not what Christ does. He doesn't make a loaf or two and say, “It's just bread, not the end of the world.” The irony there is that, if He had doubted His Father's will, He would have sinned, which would have eliminated the ability for a perfect sacrifice upon the cross, and thereby mired all people in their sins forever. It would have been the end of the world for us.

But instead, Jesus responds with the word: “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Our Lord quotes from Deuteronomy 8. The verses preceding that one provide an essential bit of context that gives even more punch to Christ's reply. In them, Moses tells the people this: “And you shall remember the whole way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Note that man lives by the word, not bread alone, even and especially when that bread seems in very short supply. The Lord humbled the people and let them hunger in the wilderness. The Father is letting His Son hunger in the wilderness. But the Lord doesn't subject His children to that for no reason. He does it for their good, to grow the people in the wilderness, to cause His Son to endure what man endures so that He might be the perfect high priest. And unlike the people, who grumbled, Jesus remains faithful, trusting that word that His Father will care for Him and provide Him manna at the right time – which He does!

As Christians, then, we strive to follow our Lord's example. We recognize that trying to improve upon God's plan or work around it never brings about blessing, for even if it would seem to improve our situation in the material, short term, it always brings about spiritual, long-term harm. As the Scriptures say, heaven and earth will pass away, but the word will never pass away.

That word shows us example after example of God caring for His people, even when their needs seemed so great and a solution so impossible that it was ridiculous. A whole nation, in the desert? What will God do, rain bread from heaven? Thousands of people in the middle of nowhere, and just one boy's lunch? What will God do, multiply the loaves and fishes to a ridiculous amount? Yes, yes He will.

Man lives by God's word because that word strengthens us to endure the hard times. That word lets us know that, sometimes, God does send us difficulty and hardship, but He does so because He loves us and seeks to grow us in ways that benefit eternally. The word also lets us know that, when God knows is right, He will – not might, will – send us deliverance, just as He rained manna from heaven, just as He sent His angels to minister to His Son.

The word lets us know that, as subtle or as ridiculously extreme as the devil's temptations and objections might be, the Lord will not fail to provide us with our daily bread, and that we need not compromise in order for God to care for us.

After the Lord resists Satan's first temptation with the word, the tempter comes up with a second. We read, "Then the devil took Him to the holy city and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple 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, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'"

Here, the devil takes his usual "Did God really say" and combines it with the actual words of God – in this case from Psalm 91. What's he doing with this temptation? As Christ's reply shows, the devil is putting God to the test. Okay, how so? First off, notice that the devil calls on Jesus to do something that would be sinful – attempting to kill Himself by jumping off the temple, breaking the Fifth Commandment. But then the devil says that, it's okay, because God says in His word that He won't let you fall, Jesus.

The devil is trying to lure Jesus to sin and then justify or excuse the sin by taking a Bible passage out of context and twisting it. See how subtle that is, how tricky? Plus, if Jesus doesn't do it, then it will seem (so the temptation goes) that He must not trust God's word.

This temptation is also a recycling of something seen in the Garden, though with a bit of twisting. The second thing the serpent told Eve was, "You will not surely die!" Now that is a bit more of a direct contradiction of God's word, but the principle behind it is the same. God had told Adam that if they ate of the fruit, they would die. But then Satan says that's false. And he's hoping that, with this challenge, Eve will think of all the evidence around her the God loves her, that God created everything for life, that nothing has died yet and so they probably won't die now.

Satan is, in both cases, trying to twist God's words and actions to get man to doubt God's clear word. In the Garden, all the love and life that God had given against His clear word to not eat of the tree. On the temple, out-of-context Psalm verses against the clear words against self-harm and pride.

This temptation is still used today, very frequently. God's word gives us many clear teachings. The Commandments are clear. Jesus as the only way to salvation is clear. The call of Christians to

repent of sin and live lives in imitation of Christ is clear. But then comes the devil who takes parts of Scripture, rips them out of context, and tries to get Christians to use them to justify going against the clear word of God.

Again, this isn't anything new. St. Paul addresses the very issue in Romans when he asks, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" Or later, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" Satan would say, "Yes, go ahead! Jesus died for your sins, so sin all you want!"

The devil would quote Mark 16, "Doesn't the Bible say that 'He who believes and is baptized shall be saved'? As long as you've been baptized and at some point somewhere in your life said that you believe in Jesus, you'll go to heaven for sure!"

The old evil foe would pull out Matthew 7:1 – "Judge not, that you be not judged", and say that therefore Christians are never to call people to repentance. Just like in the Garden, just like on the pinnacle of the temple, the deceiver tries to use God's word to get Christians to go against God, and in so doing, destroy their faith.

Against this temptation, Jesus speaks the clear word of God. "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" He doesn't play word games with Satan. He states, simply and clearly, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." God sees all, including insincere efforts to try to play part of His word against another. The Almighty will not be caught in efforts of demons or men to try to trap Him in His word, for His word is perfect and true.

Therefore, Christians also must not think they can use parts of Scripture to justify acting against other parts. Rather, we must cling to the pure word and trust it completely. The Bible warns us that Satan will use reasonable arguments and philosophy to tempt us.

Our response must not be to try to fight the devil on his own terms, but to use the weapon God gives us, the sword of the Spirit – the word of God. We must, as the word tells us, take our thoughts captive to obey Christ.

And as we grow in the word, the Spirit lets us see through the lies of Satan. He lets us see, that we don't keep on sinning, because to do so would be to return to death, and the life which we are given by grace is so much better. The Spirit lets us see that the belief, begun in baptism, must be an ongoing reality, something that one strives to remain in and grow in daily. He lets us understand that to speak the words of God – who is The Judge – is not judgmental, but is in fact loving, as it is a seeking to snatch them out of the fire, as Jude writes.

Abiding in the word sets us free from the snares of the devil, and so we Christians seek to store up that word in our heart, that we might resist the snares of the devil and also help free others who are caught in his wicked traps.

Having failed twice, Satan now tempts Christ a third time. And here, he really swings for the fences. "Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." In a nutshell: "You can have it all, just worship me as your god, the one who would give you all this glory, rather than the God who has sent you suffering."

Note that the devil takes Jesus to a mountain – mountains are frequently the place in Scripture where God comes to meet man. So Satan is trying to appear in the place of God. And he also is offering great gifts, things that seem much, much better than what Jesus is enduring at the time. Remember, God the Holy Spirit led Jesus out into the wilderness to hunger, to suffer. Now, Satan is there, presenting himself as the much better, more appealing, more loving alternative to God. “You don’t have to suffer, Jesus. You don’t have to keep fasting. You don’t have to go to the cross. I’ll give you all these wonderful things, all this power, all this glory, all these riches.”

The only string attached? “Fall down and worship me,” Satan says. Confess that it is the devil, or the worldly things of which he is the prince, that give what is truly good. Leave the God who sends suffering, and come to the one who promises only good things.

Again, here we have a repeat of the Garden. What’s Satan’s offer to Eve, and Adam who is with her? “Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” First, he questioned God’s care, then he accused God of not being truthful, and now he offers equality with God. “You don’t need to serve God, a God who’s probably hiding something from you, who isn’t letting you reach your full potential. You can be just like Him.”

As with Christ’s temptation, Satan is portraying himself as the one who will give what is truly good, who actually cares for humanity. Just trust in him, worship him by following his words and not the Lord’s, and you will have enlightenment.

This is still offered by Satan today. God and His word are backward, constricting, a burden to the full potential of humanity. Why follow a God who humbles us, when we could exalt ourselves? Why trust God to set right and wrong when we could clearly do a better job ourselves? Our nation and culture have clearly gone down this path, as we have shoved Christianity out, throwing off its “restraints,” and pursued other things that will supposedly bring greater good to our nation. Pursuit of wealth, of entertainment, of freedom, all to increase our glory, to make us happier, while sacrificing God-given institutions, like marriage and family.

And lest we think that we’d never be literally bowing down to worship Satan, we now have after-school Satan clubs in our country’s schools, and statues of Satan being erected in state legislatures. We really need to stop and ask, is the good of “freedom” as we usually understand it really so good if it requires giving nativity scenes and statues of goat demons equal standing? How much worldly glory are we willing to sell our souls for?

Against such temptations Christ stood firm, rebuking the devil with the word. “Then Jesus said to him, “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.’” Jesus rejects Satan’s offers, remaining obedient to His Father’s will, even as that will was to lead Him to the cross.

He did this, because He knew that His Father’s will was perfect, that it alone would bring about the salvation of humanity. Jesus trusted His Father, knowing that He would do what was eternally best. He knew that worldly glory is fleeting, that this world will pass away. And so He shunned the idols of

Satan and his offers and clung to the word, not just for Himself, but for us and for our salvation, as we confess in the Creed.

We must stand as our Lord stood. In the midst of hardship and trials, the offers of Satan will seem wonderful. To our reason and emotions, following his path will seem better, seem like it will give us more joy and peace and even glory, or at least let us not have to fight anymore. Yet his offers are all cheap imitations, crumbling into nothing at the end, and dragging down those who pursue them.

We must reject them and confess that the true God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is the only God. We must worship Him alone, even as the world around us falls before the idols of our age. We must serve Him alone, obeying Him even when others would offer easier paths. We do this, not out of terror at God, but out of trust in His love.

Satan offers glory that passes away. Jesus set aside the glory of heaven to become one of us, that we might be brought into His glory. Satan may offer easy paths, but he makes those paths to lead to destruction. Jesus took the hard path, the path to the cross, to lead us home to heaven. Satan speaks lies that delight our ears, but which destroy our souls. Jesus speaks the word that may be hard for us to hear at times, but which brings everlasting life.

The deceiver brought us death through that tree in the Garden, but our Savior brings us life through the tree of Golgotha. And just as the Father sent His angels to minister to His Son after His time of temptation, the Father will send His angels to us when our time of temptation in this life is over, bringing us to His side forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.