

THE LORD'S TEMPTATIONS

Matthew 4:1-11

This lesson should be made very practical for all the children, for they can progress spiritually only as they learn to recognize and fight against their individual temptations as of themselves. All children much of the time feel the desire to do right, but unless the desire is intelligently directed it may be wasted. The efforts of their parents must so often be exercised through correction and restraint when the children are actually in selfish and willful states that parents find it hard to put off the tone of command at other times. But in Sunday school the teacher has the opportunity to treat the children's temptations objectively while they are in good and teachable states. Show them first that temptation comes from the hells and that it is a battle between evil spirits and angels for control of their minds and hearts. And then point out that the deciding factor in this battle is their own free choice.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord was tempted throughout His earthly life on deeper and deeper levels.

We live in the spiritual world as to our thoughts and feelings even while we are on earth, and we are constantly associated with both good and bad spirits.

Notes for Parents

You remember that the Lord's stay in Egypt when He was an infant pictured the fact that in His assumed humanity He began in ignorance just as we do and had to acquire knowledge in His memory by learning it, and that the knowledge He particularly chose to acquire was the letter of the Old Testament Scriptures. Our lesson for today shows how He made use of some of this knowledge.

We all know from experience that when we make a good resolution, we are almost immediately tempted to break it. This is why in the Scripture story the Lord's baptism is immediately followed by His forty days of temptation in the wilderness. Although no doubt the Lord did spend these forty days in the wilderness wrestling with temptation in preparation for His public ministry, the account as it is given us in the Bible is symbolic. The three temptations represent *all* the Lord's temptations—which He had been undergoing from infancy and continued to undergo to the last one on the cross—and all our temptations. For temptation is of three types in its essential character: (1) the temptation to be satisfied with an external appearance of goodness instead of looking constantly to the Lord for guidance; (2) the temptation to think that if we go to church and profess to believe in the Lord, He will somehow get us into heaven no matter what kind of life we live; and (3) the temptation to turn from the Lord altogether and spend our lives trying to get all we can for ourselves. You will find these three types pictured by the three temptations in the story if you think about them.

The devil in the story is also a symbolic figure, picturing the influence of the hells, which are always trying to stir up our inherited selfishness in order to do us harm. There is no one great devil, but all the evil spirits in hell are called devils. It may help us if in temptation we realize that the evil promptings which arise in our hearts and minds are not our own but are from hell, and that we can reject them, if we will, with the Lord's help.

And in our story the Lord teaches us plainly how to get that help. In each case He answered the tempter with the words, "It is written," and quoted Scripture. The Lord's power is in the letter of the Word. The letter of the Word is our connecting link with the Lord and the angels, and they reach us through the passages from the Word which we have in our memories. This is why it is so important for us to read the Word regularly and for our children to hear it read and to memorize verses from it.

Most of us have some particular fault which we say is our "beset-

ting sin.” If we really want to overcome it, there is no better way than to find some verse in the Word which either expressly forbids it or commands its opposite, memorize the verse, and repeat it every time the temptation strikes. We have suggested that even the youngest children learn the Lord’s words from our chapter, “Get thee hence, Satan,” and say them whenever they are tempted to do anything you have forbidden them to do. And none of us is too old or too good to need and use these words often.

Primary

Even very young children can understand the nature and source of temptation. Read them the story from the Word and tell them that the Lord was showing us how to be good. Then talk about some of their own little temptations and how to overcome them. Introduce the idea that when bad thoughts and impulses come into their minds, they are from evil spirits, and that they can refuse to entertain them just as the Lord did. Moreover, the Lord and the angels will help them if they try to be good.

After the Lord was baptized, He went out alone and lived in the wilderness of Judea for forty days, strengthening Himself against temptation. Temptation is wanting to do something you know is wrong. What are some of your own temptations? Perhaps there is something your mother has told you never to touch. When you are alone in the room with it, a little voice inside your mind suddenly says, “Why not touch it now? No one will know.” This little voice is not really your own voice; it is a bad spirit from hell, a devil, trying to persuade you to do wrong. But at the same time your guardian angel is whispering to you, too, saying, “Don’t do it; you know it is wrong.” And you are the one who has to decide whether to do what the devil tells you to do or what the angel says. And you know from experience that if you choose to obey the devil, you will be very likely to get into trouble.

When the Lord Jesus was living on earth, He often heard devils whispering to Him, just as you do, but He always was strong enough to say no to them. And in our lesson He shows us the very best way to answer a devil when he is tempting us to do wrong.

How did the devil tempt Him first?
What did the Lord answer?
Then where did the devil take Him?
What did he tell Him to do?
How did he try to persuade Him?
How did the Lord answer?
Where did they go next?
What was the third temptation?

You notice that every time the devil tempted Him, the Lord answered, "It is written," and then quoted something from the Bible. When we quote the Bible, we are calling on the Lord for help, and He is always there to help us.

Do you think the devil ever tempts us?
What does our lesson teach us is the best way to answer temptation?
When the devil finally left the Lord, who came to Him?
When we do right, the angels are always close to us.

Can you learn four words from our lesson? They are, "Get thee hence, Satan." Now the next time you are tempted to do something you have been told not to do, just think to yourself, "This is a devil whispering to me and I don't want to have anything to do with him," and then say, "Get thee hence, Satan," and turn your back on the thing you are tempted to do and start right in doing something you know is all right for you to do. Then the angels can make you happy, just as they came and ministered to the Lord after His temptation was over.

Junior

We have seen what repentance is and the necessity for it. This lesson should give the children a technique for overcoming their faults. It may even be reduced to a set of rules: (1) Recognize the particular fault. (2) Find and commit to memory a passage of Scripture which forbids this fault or strongly recommends the opposite conduct. (3) When you catch yourself indulging in your fault, say to yourself, "The evil spirits are trying to stir me up to do wrong." (4) Repeat your passage of Scripture to yourself—or even aloud, if that helps—and keep repeating it more and more thoughtfully until the temptation is passed. (5) Thank the Lord for helping you, and remember that the

angels are now near you. (6) Turn immediately to some good and useful activity which will occupy your attention and keep you from slipping back into your former state. As usual, have the children look up all the references suggested in their notes.

Who was John the Baptist?

What was his message?

Why was the Lord baptized by John?

What sign was given from heaven?

What did the voice from heaven say?

When the Lord was on earth, He was tempted to do wrong just as we are. Our lesson today is about His temptations. It is the only story in the Bible which tells directly that He was tempted, but we must understand that it is a parable describing the different kinds of temptations which He was meeting and overcoming all through His life from His infancy to His death on the cross.

The devil is not one “super-evil” person. In the other life all who have chosen to love evil rather than good and therefore are in the hells are called devils. “The devil” means the whole power of evil. “Satan” in the Bible means the whole power of falsity.

After His baptism the Lord went into the wilderness and fasted for forty days and forty nights. Did you ever make up your mind that you would be good—better than you had ever been before—and find it pretty hard, dry work? This is like the Lord’s fasting in the wilderness. And then, just as you are feeling as if you would die if you couldn’t do some of the old naughty things, someone comes along and tries to get you to do one. If you have ever had this experience, you can understand why in the Bible this story of the Lord’s temptations comes just where it does.

What are the three temptations in the story?

Now look at the Lord’s answers to the tempter in verses 4, 7, and 10.

What series of three words occurs in each of them?

Where are all these answers “written”?

Look up Deuteronomy 8:3, 6:16, and 6:13.

The Lord answered the devil with quotations from the Scriptures. This is just what we ought to do when we are tempted, first because thinking what the Bible says helps us to realize how wrong

the thing is, and second because the Lord is in His Word and His power can come into our hearts through it and help us to have courage to do right. If you have a particular fault which you are trying to overcome, the best thing to do is to learn a verse from the Word which either speaks against that fault or commands its opposite, and say this verse to yourself every time you are tempted. Say it over and over again, if necessary, until you no longer feel like doing wrong. The effort to remember it and say it will help to take your mind off of the wrong thing on which it was bent. And when the temptation has been overcome, you will be happy in doing right. Read verse 11. When we have won a victory over temptation, we feel a special kind of satisfaction and happiness. Then we may know that the angels are close to us and that it is their happiness which we are feeling. Whenever you are tempted, try to remember that if you decide to do something wrong, you are choosing the company of devils, but if you decide to do what is right, you are choosing the company of the angels.

Intermediate

Take up first the meaning of the three temptations. Then follow the same pattern as for the Juniors and continue by calling attention to verse 6, and note the fact that the Scripture is given us to use in correcting our faults, not in excusing them. When we misuse it, it is like the devil quoting it.

Baptism, we have said, is the sign of the desire to make one's life clean according to the Lord's truth. When we try to put this determination into practice, we are likely to go through a period of difficulty when virtue seems a dry business and selfish indulgence looks more pleasant than ever before. This is why in the story of the Lord's life His baptism is followed by the account of His fasting in the wilderness and His temptations.

The story of the Lord's temptations by the devil is a parable. There is no one great devil, although all in the hells who are ruled by the love of evil are called devils. "The devil" is the personification of all the power of evil, and "Satan" is the personification of all the power of falsity. Likewise, the three temptations recorded

in the story are symbolic of all the temptations through which the Lord was constantly passing throughout His life on earth.

The first—to turn stones into bread—is the temptation to make truth on the natural plane satisfy our minds, the idea that we can be good by doing external good works without caring about knowledge of God and spiritual things.

The second—to cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple, trusting in God’s promise to take care of Him—is the temptation to do things which we know are wrong and dangerous to our souls and expect the Lord to save us in spite of our folly, to imagine, for example, that if we go to church and say we believe in the Lord, we can do about as we please the rest of the week.

The third—to fall down and worship the devil—is the temptation to give up the effort to learn and do the Lord’s will and to seek only self-interest and self-satisfaction.

These three temptations sum up and cover all our temptations on the three planes of conduct, thought, and will. The Lord doubtless did spend forty days in the wilderness after His baptism wrestling with the inherent tendencies to evil in His finite human nature in preparation for His public ministry, but this was not His only period of temptation. He did not go through all His temptations in one great battle, as we might imagine from the literal story. He had been meeting them, as we do, day by day from infancy onward, and He would continue to meet them in ever deeper forms until the final great temptation on the cross. They are merely summed up for us in this chapter. The wilderness, we remember, pictures a barren state, and the number forty is one of the symbols of temptation.

Now notice how the Lord met the tempter. Recall that His stay in Egypt when He was an infant pictured the fact that in His childhood He had to learn just as we do, and what He especially chose to learn was the letter of the Old Testament Scriptures. So now in each temptation He was able to answer, “It is written” and quote the passage of Scripture which most clearly forbade the evil suggested. This is our example. The Lord is in His Word. When we learn

passages of Scripture and repeat them in times of temptation, the Lord's power can flow through them into our hearts and give us strength to do right. If we wish to fight a particular fault, there is no better way than to find a verse in the Word which condemns this fault or commands its opposite good, learn the verse, and repeat it whenever we are tempted. And if a temptation comes for which we have no special verse, the Lord's words in verse 10, "Get thee hence, Satan," will always help us. For when we are tempted, we may know that "the devil and satan" are at our elbow stirring up our natural selfishness. And if we resist bravely and overcome the temptation, we are rejecting the devil and choosing instead the company of the angels who are always at hand desiring to help us.

Read verse 11. From the teachings of the New Church, we know that we are living in two worlds all the time. Our physical bodies and our natural senses focus our consciousness on the material world about us, but our desires and thoughts are not material. Our souls are in the spiritual world now—Swedenborg tells us that we are even sometimes seen by the angels as shadows in their midst—and we are choosing from moment to moment to live in heaven or in hell.

Basic Correspondences

stone = truth, especially truth on
the outward or natural plane

bread = the good of love

Senior

The whole lesson is particularly interesting at the Senior level, as they are beginning to recognize some of the deeper temptations. Stress the need of daily study and use of the Word.

The account of the Lord's baptism is immediately followed by the story of His temptations in the wilderness. Thinking of baptism as the dedication of oneself to a life according to divine truth, one sees that it is inevitable that temptations will immediately be felt.

The Lord was tempted throughout His life on earth. Indeed He took on a finite humanity for the very purpose of meeting the temptations inherent in it. We are not often reminded in the Gospels of His struggles with His assumed nature, but they are summed up in the story of these three temptations in the wilderness. In the *Arcana* we have, in the celestial sense of Genesis and Exodus and the related passages, a study of the Lord's continuous struggle, and we realize that the hardest part of it for Him came from His desire to save everyone. In reference to the Lord's life—that is, in its inmost sense—the wilderness pictures the state of the church as the Lord saw it in His day, and His temptations were temptations to find some means of saving the people even against their will. But in our own lives the wilderness pictures rather the state of uncertainty and discouragement which frequently comes over anyone who turns from a life of self-seeking to attempt the spiritual life. Forty, we remember, symbolizes temptation. No doubt it is a fact that Jesus went into the wilderness after His baptism and fasted there for forty days and forty nights and wrestled with temptation, but the record of this in the Word is a parable for our instruction.

The assumed humanity of the Lord, being from the human race, was also a “wilderness,” full of temptations. It even yearned at first for the satisfactions of the flesh and so understood the same yearning in the people. So we may think of the first of the three temptations as picturing in its lowest sense these physical yearnings, and in a little higher sense the willingness to be satisfied with external and natural ideas of goodness, the thought that if we do things to make our neighbor comfortable physically, no deep thought of the Lord and spiritual things is necessary for us. The second temptation is an intellectual one, the tendency to think it is enough if we know the truth from the Word and professedly accept it, without humbly obeying it. The pinnacle of the temple pictures intellectual arrogance, and the temptation is to use the Scriptures as an excuse for our evils—this is the devil quoting Scripture. The third and deepest temptation is the temptation to make others serve us, to impose our opinions and our will on those

around us so far as we have power to do so. We can see that with the Lord, whose power was infinite and who knew that His will was right, this temptation was directed against His inmost love of saving the whole human race. The same temptation is expressed in His prayer at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39) and in His words on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

The Lord answered each temptation by quoting the Word. He was carrying out the promise of His baptism, judging His finite humanity and forcing it to obey the truth, and so bringing it into the order of the Word that the divine nature within might act through it. We should note the difference between the Lord's use of Scripture to resist evil and the devil's use of Scripture to justify it. And we should remember this story as a warning to us to be careful not to imitate the devil instead of the Lord. It is easier than we may think to misuse Scripture passages in this way. For example, the familiar passage, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" is often used to excuse neglect of the Word and of the church and to teach that after all external good works are the essential of goodness.

It was only after the successful conclusion of these temptations that the divine soul became so manifest in the finite body of the Lord that He could say simply, "Follow me," and good men would turn from their natural employments and devote themselves to His service. And only then could He begin to teach and preach and perform miracles.

Adult

Point out first that the Lord met temptations constantly throughout His earthly life, and read to the class the quotation at the end of the lesson. Take up the meaning of the three temptations and discuss temptation in general, its source, why it is permitted to come to us, and how we should meet it.

What do we mean by temptation? Perhaps the simplest answer is "the desire to do something we know is wrong." Where does this desire come from? We feel it as coming from ourselves; yet the

desire to resist the temptation seems to be in us too. We speak of our higher and our lower self and wonder sometimes which is our real self. The fact is that in each one of us are countless things both good and bad of which most of the time we are unconscious. The impulses which stir them up and bring them to our consciousness are not from ourselves at all but from the heavens and the hells, and the Lord's providence keeps us perfectly balanced between the two so that we are free to choose which impulse we shall follow. The Lord protects us so that we shall never be tempted beyond our power to resist if we look to Him for help (see I Corinthians 10:13). We sometimes say, "The temptation was too strong for me; I could not help doing what I did," but this is not being really honest. As we look back over our lives, we know that there is nothing we have ever done which we could not have done differently. We are free to choose between good and bad companions, companions who help us to do right and those who lead us into doing wrong. And it is useful for us to realize that we have other companions than those whom we see in the world around us. We have to choose between good and bad spiritual companions. We feel their influence; sometimes we almost hear their voices. We are not responsible for the bad thoughts and feelings which come up in all of us unexpectedly, but we are responsible if we let them stay. Anger, hatred, jealousy, spite, covetousness, pride are stirred up in us by evil spirits who delight to lead us into harm, just as bad companions in the world do; indeed they are evil spirits just because when they were in the world, they chose to take delight in evil. But these bad impulses and thoughts are not ours unless we yield to them. We can say, "No," to the suggestion of an evil spirit just as we can to the suggestion of a bad earthly companion.

Why does the Lord permit us to be tempted? Because if we did not freely choose what is good, we could not make good our own to keep forever, and if we saw nothing but good, we should have no choice. Choice necessarily implies an alternative. If we did not see the evils in ourselves, we could not reject them. So, as we progress, the Lord permits evil spirits to stir up deeper and deeper

evils in our hereditary nature so that we may, if we will, choose higher and higher goods. This is the way in which our character is developed and strengthened, just as our muscles are developed by performing ever harder and harder tasks. We should not court temptation, for we do not know our own weakness; only the Lord can judge how far we are prepared to meet evil. Our own desire should be always to live among good spiritual companions. So we are rightly taught to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." But when, in the Lord's providence, temptation comes, we should meet it boldly and use all the means the Lord has provided to help us resist it. This is what our lesson today teaches.

The account of the Lord's temptations in the wilderness is symbolic of all the temptations which He underwent daily from the beginning of His life on earth to the end. Although His forty days' fast in the wilderness is historically true, all the details of the story are correspondential and some of them are obviously parable rather than actual fact. We have learned from the story of John that the wilderness of Judea pictures the state of the church at that time. The Lord's baptism, picturing the determination to cleanse the assumed human, immediately brought His divine nature into conflict with the church as summed up in His heredity from Mary. So the temptations in the wilderness follow directly upon the baptism. We know that with us, too, a good resolution always seems to be followed by an immediate temptation to break it. The number forty is a symbol of temptation. In our story the tempter is called "the devil" and is addressed as "satan." These are not individuals. All the power of evil in the hells is summed up under the term "devil," and all the power of falsity under the name "satan." In His humanity the Lord met the attacks of all the powers of the hells.

The three temptations picture temptation on the three planes of life. Stones represent truths on the natural plane, and to make them into bread to satisfy hunger is to find our satisfactions in natural external good works and taking credit to ourselves for them, without looking to the Lord for guidance and power. The Lord's answer to the tempter points to the fact that we are primarily

spiritual beings and are not living truly human lives if we take no interest in spiritual things. The second temptation is on the intellectual plane, the temptation to think that “faith alone” is sufficient for salvation, that if we know about the Lord and say we believe in Him, He will somehow save us no matter what we do. The pinnacle of the temple pictures satisfaction in knowledge about the Lord, the temple being the symbol of the doctrine of the church. And to cast oneself down from this pinnacle is to go from a high to a low state of life by not trying to live according to the truth one knows. When we feel that we are better than other people because we belong to the church and go to church on Sunday—and that because we do, the Lord will admit us to heaven no matter how selfish we really are—we are feeling this temptation. And the Lord tells us, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” If we look up this quotation in Deuteronomy 6:16, we find that instead of tempting God we are diligently to “keep the commandments of the Lord,” and to “do that which is right and good in the sight of the Lord” if we wish to attain the promised land. In this life we never reach a point where we are “good enough.” If we think we are, we are standing on the pinnacle of the temple and are in imminent danger of falling off. And we must not rely on the Lord’s mercy to save us, when He has told us plainly never to cease the battle against evils in our hearts. The third temptation of the Lord is the inmost, the temptation to let selfishness take possession of our hearts. To put self first in everything is to “fall down and worship” the devil and Satan; for in our natural selfhood are all the evils and falsities which the evil spirits love to excite, and when we set up self as the most important thing in life, we open the door to evil and come under the rule of the hells. When this temptation comes to us—as it does every day of our lives—we must remember that no matter what the appearance may be, our only salvation is to deny self, to look to the Lord for guidance and strength, and to obey Him: “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.”

In each temptation the Lord’s answer was a quotation from

Scripture. This shows us the right way to meet temptation. Quoting Scripture does two things for us: it reminds us that however trivial the particular temptation may seem, it is really important, for it is a choice between the Lord and the devil; and it opens a way in our minds for the Lord to come in and help us. Recall that the Word is really like Jacob's ladder, with angels ascending and descending upon it—that is, our thoughts going up to the Lord at the top and the Lord's thoughts coming down to us at the foot, where the ladder connects with the ground, or the letter of the Word in our minds. When we quote Scripture in answer to temptation, we are setting up this “ladder,” meeting temptation in the Lord's strength in this way, we feel the peace and satisfaction which come only from the Lord and the angels: “Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 1690: “That the Lord's life, from His earliest childhood even to the last hour of His life in the world, was continual temptation and continual victory, is evident from many things in the Word of the Old Testament; and that it did not cease with the temptation in the wilderness is evident from what is said in Luke: ‘And when the devil had completed every temptation, he departed from Him for a season’ (4:13); as also from the fact that He was tempted even to the death on the cross, and thus to the last hour of His life in the world . . . The last was when He prayed on the cross for His enemies, and thus for all in the whole world. In the Word of the Lord's life, in the Gospels, none but the last is mentioned, except His temptation in the wilderness. More was not disclosed to the disciples. The things that were disclosed appear in the sense of the letter so slight as to be scarcely anything . . . when yet His temptation was more grievous than can ever be comprehended and believed by any human mind . . . The temptation that is related in Matthew . . . contains all temptations in a summary; namely, that from love toward the whole human race, the Lord fought against the loves of self and the world, with which the hells were filled. All temptation is an assault upon the love in which the man is, and the temptation is in the same degree as is the love. If the love is not assaulted, there is no temptation. To destroy anyone's love is to destroy his very life; for the love is the life. The Lord's life was love toward the whole human race, and was indeed so great, and of such

a quality, as to be nothing but pure love . . . The love which was the Lord's veriest life is signified by His 'hungering' . . . That He fought against the love of the world, or all things that are of the love of the world, is signified by: 'The devil took him into a high mountain (etc.)' . . . That He fought against the love of self, and all things that are of the love of self, is signified by this: 'The devil took him into the holy city (etc.)' . . . Continual victory is signified by its being said that after the temptations, 'angels came and ministered unto him.' "

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Who came before the Lord to prepare His way? *John the Baptist*
J. Where did John the Baptist live? *wilderness of Judea*
P. What can you tell about his clothing and food? *camel hair; locusts, wild honey*
J. What was his message? *Repent!*
J. What did he say when the Lord came to him to be baptized? *I need to be baptized by you*
J. What did the Lord answer? *it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*
P. What came down from heaven when the Lord was baptized? *a dove*
J. What did the voice from heaven say? *This is my beloved Son*
J. Where did the Lord go after He was baptized? *wilderness*
P. How long was He in the wilderness? *forty days*
P. Who tempted Him there? *"the devil"*
P. What was the first temptation? *stones to bread*
J. What was the second temptation? *throw self down*
J. What was the third temptation? *worship devil*
P. How did the Lord answer each time? *"It is written . . ."*
P. What four words can we say whenever we are tempted to do wrong? *"Get thee hence, Satan"*
P. Who came and ministered to the Lord when His temptations were over? *angels*
I. What do the three temptations mean? *(1) to be satisfied with natural idea of good, (2) to expect the Lord to save us in spite of our folly, (3) to give up the effort to learn and do the Lord's will*
S. Why was the Lord tempted? *to glorify His humanity*