Okay, open up your Bible or your Bible app to Matthew 4. We're going to settle in there in a few minutes - Matthew 4. Last week we started a 4 week series on temptation. That's something every one of us battles every single day. And it's a battle we ... lose, a lot. So we're going to explore how temptation works for a month so we can gain a little traction in our battle, so we will experience a few more victories.

Our window into temptation for this series will be the temptations of Jesus in Matthew 4. Now I doubt any of us will ever face exactly the same temptations Jesus faced. I doubt in your whole life you will ever be seriously tempted to use your miraculous power to turn some stones into bread. I hope you will never be tempted to jump off a building to prove that God can catch you before you look like a bug on a windshield. I doubt Satan will offer you all the kingdoms of the world if you bend your knees and worship him. But ... we're going to discover that in these three temptations Satan uses the same techniques that he uses against us a lot. Jesus is going to be tempted to meet a legitimate need in an illegitimate way. We're tempted to do that too. And Jesus was tempted to leverage God for his own ends, to use God to serve his own purposes. We do that all the time. And Jesus was tempted to take a shortcut, to do the right thing the wrong way. And we are tempted to take shortcuts, to compromise - every single day.

And last week I gave you two big ideas that we'll actually unpack all month. They are on these cards you picked up last week. There are more of them at the worship stations if you didn't get one last week. Big idea #1: There is always more at stake with temptation than we think. And big idea #2: Our ability to withstand temptation has a lot to do with our trust in God. Remember those two?

There is always more at stake in temptation than we think. Last week we followed that trail.

- In the middle of temptation we think it's all about now, when in reality whenever we face temptation our future is at stake. The
choices we make now always have consequences for our future. In every temptation our future is at stake.

- And not just our future, but the future of everyone we love, the future of everyone we influence. It's not just about what my sin will do to me. Every temptation we face, regardless of how big or small, to some degree the people who love you, the people who watch you, the people over whom you have influence, they are at stake ... every single time.
- But it even goes deeper than that. It's not just about your future; it's not just about the people you love. Your faith is at stake; your connection with God is at stake. Every time we sin there is a little break, a little disconnect, a little pushing God away - and what is at stake is our faith in God.

There is always more at stake in temptation than we think. That was the first big idea. The second: Our ability to withstand temptation has a lot to do with our trust in God. Our faith in God, our confidence in God's love for us, our confidence in God's care for us, our confidence in God's presence in our life - those are at stake every time we are tempted. And if we keep choosing sin, eventually we will come to the point where we won't care about God, any more. We will misbehave our way away from God. Do you remember that stuff?

So the stakes are high, in this war - they are incredibly high. And our goal in this little series is to get a better understanding of temptation so we can weaken its power over us. We want to win a few more victories in this war. Temptation will never go away, but we can win a few more battles, we can break its momentum in our life. That would be cool, wouldn't it?

Okay, Matthew 4. Are you ready? Verse 1: "Then the Spirit (the Holy Spirit) led Jesus into the desert to be tempted by the Devil." By the way, C. S. Lewis says that only Jesus ever experienced the fullness of temptation, temptation at its worst. He says, "Only those who resist temptation know how strong it is." We never discover how powerful it is until we try to fight it. And the truth is, he says, "Since Jesus was the only man who never yielded to temptation, he is also the only man who knows to the full how powerful it really is." That's just a side note, but guys - these temptations were real, and they were powerful, and Jesus could have ... fallen.
Now, if you were going to try to tempt Jesus, how would you do it? Where would you look for an opening, a weakness? I'll tell you this; good men are usually not tripped up by obvious sins. Good men are usually tripped up first by subtle sins, by tiny little twistings of truth. Verse 2: "After spending forty days and nights without food, Jesus was hungry." No kidding. And this isn't the superficial hunger you and I feel when we miss lunch. If Jesus doesn't eat soon, he's going to be in serious physical trouble. He's getting weak, physically. He's hungry, he's alone - that can weaken us spiritually, too.

Verse 3: "Then when Jesus should be physically and spiritually weak, "Then the Devil came to him and said, 'if you really are God's Son, order these stones to turn into bread.'" Do you know what I might have been tempted to do, if I was Jesus? I think I would have turned the Devil into bread. That would have been cool. But if you think about it (here's the deal), it doesn't really sound like much of a sin. Jesus is hungry - he's seriously hungry. He's got all this power from God. Why not use a little of it to turn a few of these stones into some dinner rolls? If I had been Jesus, I think I might have done it about 39 I days earlier. If you had done it, I don't think I'd fault you for it, at all. What does Jesus see that we miss? What's at stake here that we miss? Because with temptation, there is always more at stake than we think.

I'm going to be perfectly honest with you. This story has always been a bit of a puzzle to me. I've studied it pretty hard, I've taught it for a lot of years, I've preached on it. But to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure I know exactly what was going on when Satan challenges Jesus to turn some stones into bread. I'm not sure exactly why it would have been a sin. I've got a few ideas, but I'm not sure which one, if any of them gets it right on.

Some people think it would have been a sin simply because it was Satan's idea. Maybe it's wrong simply because Satan tells him to. I mean, just turning stones into bread isn't a sin, is it? In a few weeks, according to the Bible, Jesus is going to turn some water into wine. There was nothing wrong with that. Sometime later he would take 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish and turn them into a banquet for thousands. There was nothing wrong with that. It's no sin for Jesus to use his power to transmogrify something, is it?
It's not a sin just to make a rock edible, is it? So maybe the problem is that it was Satan's idea. Maybe the deal is that it's not smart to follow Satan's lead, even when he seems to suggest something innocent. He is the adversary; he is the enemy of God, and of you. Maybe the deal is that if he can get you to follow him in something that seems innocent, you'll be more prone to follow him when it's not so innocent... Maybe. Some pretty smart people think this is what was going on. But ... I don't think so. I think it has to go deeper than this.

Some guys, in fact quite a few pretty good teachers, think that Satan is tempting Jesus to become a different kind of messiah than the one God sent him to be. God sent Jesus ... to die. Now that's a pretty tough way to save the world. God was sending Jesus to a cross. And Satan says - there is an easier way, there is a better way. Maybe you should go around turning stones into bread. I guarantee you that if you feed the hungry every day, they'll follow you. And while you're at it, why not jump off the wall of the temple. I guarantee you that when they see God's angels catch you, they'll follow you. Give them food, give them a show they'll make you their messiah. You don't need dying stuff. In fact ... I'll tell you what. Right now, and right now only, if you will bend your knees to me, they're all yours. If you bend your knees to me, I'll give them to you, without a fight. You can have all these pathetic creatures right now, without a fight, if you bend your knees to me. I'll give you what you came for.

You see, some folks think Jesus was tempted to meet a legitimate need (we need a messiah) in an illegitimate way. There is a legitimate need - people are lost, people are being nudged by Satan towards hell. That's what temptation does. And Satan says you can meet this need, a whole lot easier my way, than God's way. Guys, with God it's not just the end, it's the means. It's not just getting the job done; it's getting the job done God's way. This is pretty big. It's not just about doing God's work, it's about doing God's work God's way. If God points you towards a path towards a goal, no other path to that same goal will do. Do you buy that?

That one's not bad. I like it better than the first one. Remember the first one? It's wrong simply because it's Satan's idea. This second one: It's wrong because it was meeting a legitimate need in an illegitimate way. Jesus wasn't sent to win people with bread and circuses, he was sent to
win us with a cross. But ... I'm not really content with this one either. You see, I think there's a link between verse 2 and verse 3. Verse two says Jesus fasted forty days and he was all kinds of hungry; in verse 3 Satan tempts Jesus to turn stones into bread. If you are really, seriously hungry, that would be tempting, if you could.

So here's what some other guys think. Some guys think it would have been sin for Jesus to turn the stones into bread because Jesus would have been using God's power for himself, selfishly. If you dig around the gospel stories, I think you'll find that Jesus used God's power for others a lot, and he used God's power to advance God's work a lot, but he never used God's power selfishly. It's curious, isn't it, that it never says that Jesus healed himself. I suspect Jesus got colds, and the flu. I suspect he skinned his knees and cut his hands occasionally. He healed others, but there is no record that he ever healed himself.

And maybe it's because of this. Jesus was never dissatisfied with where God was taking him. We never find Jesus complaining that he was too poor. He could have turned the stones into gold, if he wanted. We never find him complaining that it was too hot, or too cold. Except for that one time when he stilled a storm because his disciples were panicked, he never fixed the weather for his golf game. We never find him Jesus whining, or complaining, or grumbling. We never find him irritable, or touchy, or peevish, or petulant.

Truth is, when I fast, guys, I get a little grumpy. And after forty days, I could probably make a pretty good case against God. "God, Satan's right. A man has to eat sometime. I'm not going to be much good for you if I don't eat. And you gave me all this power. What's wrong with using a little of it for myself. A man's got to take care of himself first, doesn't he? What could it hurt? And actually, God, if you really loved me, why would you leave me out here like this anyway? If you really loved me, why wouldn't you have provided some trail mix or something? If you really loved me, why would you allow Satan to work on me like this? If you really cared, God ... If you really loved me, God ... If you really knew what I was going through, God ... Why did you, why would you, why wouldn't you?" ... When we are tempted to sin, we are masters of rationalization and justification, aren't we?
But this part is big, it's huge. This wasn't about an empty stomach, this wasn't about food, this was about something infinitely bigger. The real issue was whether Jesus would continue to stay under the authority of his Father; the real issue was whether he would continue to trust God. And if God led him up there to fast, then he would keep trusting God to meet his needs even if he starved to death doing so. Because he wasn't in it to serve himself; he was in it to serve God. Because obedience to God is more important than food for himself. Do you believe that? That obeying God is more important than food?

Listen to what Jesus says - this is amazing. Verse 4. He answers Satan by quoting Scripture - which by the way is something we need to do a whole lot more. If you are battling some big temptation, find a scripture that deals with it, and memorize it, and pull it out whenever you're tempted. Scripture is a powerful weapon in this war. Jesus quotes scripture, the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. Satan says, "If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread. Verse 4: But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, `People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Do you know what Jesus is saying? He says, "Obedience to God is more important than food." He says, "I'll keep trusting God, I'll keep doing it God's way, even if it kills me." Jesus was absolutely committed to staying in God's will in the moment, even if it killed him - and it actually was.

I think we could change the words around to speak to the temptations we face. "No, Satan! Man does not live by sex alone. I'll honor God's way even if everything inside me wants to cheat on my wife." "No, Satan! Man does not live by money alone. I'll act with integrity even if I could make a boatload of money by dishonoring him." "No, Satan! Man does not live by power alone, man does not live by position alone, man does not live by the acceptance of his friends alone, man does not live by things alone." What do you struggle with? With what can you fill in the blank? What are you tempted to put before God, and God's way?

Now that one's not bad. I kind of like it. Jesus was tempted to use God to serve his own purposes. Jesus was tempted to put what he wanted ahead of what God wanted. But maybe there's still one more possibility. (Move to station 4.) Here's the deal: I wonder if God had given Jesus some
instructions we don't know about. I wonder if God had told Jesus not to eat, until God provided. I wonder if Jesus was told to wait on God. It kind of sounds like it, to me. It's not there, in the text, but it sure would explain why Jesus said what he said, and did what he did. And it would explain why he did eat, after the temptations were over, and God sent his angels to take care of Jesus. Maybe the temptation is to wait, on God - when he knows God wants him to wait. Maybe the temptation is to stay faithful in gap.

Here's what happens, a lot. There is always a gap between what we want to see done, and what is actually happening. I want food, and God isn't providing much. I want a little more money, and God isn't exactly cooperating. I want a happier marriage, but God isn't making her into the woman I want her to be. I want the bullies at school or at work to leave me alone, but they keep coming after me. I want a raise, I want a promotion, I want a better grade, I want nicer car, I want a nicer house, I want a cuter boyfriend, I want a little acknowledgement, a little praise. Is that too much to ask? And there is this gap between what we want, and what is actually happening.

And sometimes, in that gap, we'll try it God's way for a while, but eventually we'll be tempted to take matters into our own hands. God's not doing anything! If I don't ... it won't. If I don't ... he won't. If I don't ... she won't. If God won't provide what I want, if God won't provide what I think I need, then I guess I'll have to take matters into my own hands. I guess I'll have to turn these stones into bread. I guess I'll have to do it my way - even if it takes bending the rules, or taking a shortcut; even if it takes a little compromise. Sometimes when we are in that gap - the gap between what we want and what we're getting, we just push God away and try to get it done our way. You see, in every temptation our trust in God, our confidence in God is at stake. What we're really saying is this: God, I don't believe you'll come through for me; God, I'm not sure you really care for me. I think I might be in this mess for the rest of my life if I don't make something happen, my way. I don't think he'll change; I don't think she'll change. So I'm going to have to bend your rules, God; because if I keep trying to do it your way, I'm never going to get what I want. Guys, every time we give in to temptation we're telling God this: I don't trust you. It is in the gap that God is honored, or dishonored. It's in the gap that our faith is stretched, and strengthened - if we hang on.
This is important, guys. I touched on it last week; I'm going to unpack it just a little more today. When we quit trusting, we quit obeying; and when we quit obeying, eventually we quit believing. We don't believe ourselves away from God, we behave ourselves away from God. Do you remember that stuff? Our drift away from God doesn't start with intellectual doubts. Our drift away from God starts with disobedience. We quit trusting him. Then we quit obeying him. And then we find excuses to disbelieve in him. Guys, most disbelief is a sham, it's a lie, it's an excuse not to obey God, not to trust God. At least that's how it our disbelief started...

So which is it?

• Is it that we never, ever follow Satan's lead? Think of it like this. Sometimes we know what God wants, and it makes no sense. Sometimes God's way seems flat out-weird. Why not test her out before marriage? Why not shade the truth just a little? Why not lash back - he deserves it? Why not divorce her - no one's happy? Sometimes we just can't figure out God's way - and we feel this nudge. Guys, never, ever follow Satan's lead even if God's way makes no sense at all to your muddled little mind. Someday you'll discover that God is a whole lot smarter than we are.

• Or is it that sometimes we are tempted to meet a legitimate need in an illegitimate way. You see, it's not just about the ends, it's about the means. It's not just about being successful, it's about pursuing success God's way. It's not just about being accepted, it's not just about being happy, it's not just about being prosperous - it's doing it God's way. Some people think they are good with God because they are spiritual. It's about pursuing God God's way - in Jesus. It’s not just about where you end up, it's about how you get there.

• Or maybe this story is about trying to get God to serve me, rather than getting me to serve God. Maybe it's about keeping obedience to him a higher priority than chasing what I want. My desire for success means less than my desire to obey God. My desire for money, for things, means less than my desire to obey God. My desire for intimacy, or for sex, means less than my desire to obey God. Because man does not live by success, or money, or sex alone. God is first - always.
• Or maybe it's about trusting God in the gap. There is always this gap between what I want, and what I see God doing. And sometimes, in that gap, we're tempted to take matters into our own hands. If God won't, I will. If God won't get it done for me, then I'll have to do it my way. But guys, being a Christian means: No compromise. Even if God never ... I will never take a shortcut, I will never bend the rules, I will never compromise. I will trust him, in the gap.

Do any of these speak to you? You struggle with any of this stuff? Listen, guys: There is always more at stake than you think. In every temptation your future is at stake. In every temptation your family, your friends, those you influence - they are at stake. And in every temptation your life with God, your confidence in God, your faith is at stake. Do you believe that?

Some of you guys have been pushing God away. Here's why most of you push him away: you have to choose between following him, and some sin that has a grip on you. Guys: no sin is worth pushing God away.