

Three Temptations of Today's Church

by Vance Havner

The church must prioritize feeding souls over feeding bodies and avoid becoming too focused on physical needs.

Duration: 34:13

Scripture: Matthew 4:4-5, John 6:41-66, Acts 4:13-31

Topics: "Temptation"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that the world cannot be Christianized, but it should be evangelized through the message of Jesus Christ. The early church faced trouble for preaching this message, but they prayed for more boldness to continue spreading the gospel. The speaker criticizes the modern approach of using extravagant events and celebrities to attract people to church, instead advocating for a low-key, daily living out of the teachings of Christ. The final temptation faced by Jesus was a political one, where the devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship. The speaker reminds the audience that although God owns the world, the devil temporarily possesses it, and our main mission should be to bring lost souls back to God.

Transcript

From the fourth chapter of Matthew, I want to read the account of the temptation of our Lord. Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward and hungry.

And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down, for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee, and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against the stone.

Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. Again the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, and saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.

Then the devil leaveth him, and behold, angels came and ministered unto him. I do not think we do any violence to the application of this incident, to see in it three temptations that the church faces today that parallel these temptations of our Lord. The church is his body, and faces essentially the same problems.

He was tempted in all points like as we, and we are tempted in many, many points like as he was. The first temptation concerned the satisfaction of a natural appetite. It was physical.

Command these stones that they be made bread. Now, our Lord did on occasion minister to that. He fed a motor tube with loaves and fishes, and on the shore of Tiberias he prepared food for the disciples, fish and bread.

But in this temptation, the devil wanted him to go into the bread business. The church is tempted to go into the bread business today. And I mean become so occupied with hunger programs and poverty projects that we forget that man shall not live by bread alone.

Now, there is a ministry of bread, and no institution on earth has fed more hungry people than the church. I was hungry, and you fed me, can be said of the church through the centuries. And in Acts 6, the table serving, that's the word really for ministry there, became so great that the apostles appointed seven to attend to it so they could give themselves to the table serving of the word and of prayer.

And today we face the same danger, so occupied with feeding bodies, that we neglect our main business of feeding souls. Living Bible puts it that the apostles said in Acts 6 we should spend our time preaching, not administering a feeding program. I remember a great preacher of a generation past who started out with a mighty ministry, but his church became in time a sort of a bread line, and something departed and glory went out and a good deal of ichabod seemed to descend on the plates.

We're familiar with what they call it sometimes, the institutional church. I don't believe that God ever meant for the church to take care under its roof of all the needs of its members. Food and sports and entertainment and social life.

I think it was God's intention to produce Christians who could choose these things wherever they were on Christian principles. Some of these organizations started out with soup, soap and salvation, but generally there was more and more soup and soap and sports and shows and socializing and less and less salvation. If somebody had given the prodigal son a bowl of soup in the bed, he might never have gone home.

We're not called to set up bread lines in the far country. We're out to get lost sons back to the father's house. That's our main business.

You remember the parable of our Lord in Luke 11. I call it the parable of the three friends, the man who had company at midnight. You never know when company is going to show up.

And nothing to eat, and found his way to a friend's house where the need was supplied. I call it there was first a friend to feed. Here was the company, and they had nothing to eat.

And then there was a friend in need, the host, with no bread. But thank God there was a friend in need, and he could go to him. Now some of you fellows get out and preach that.

A friend to feed, and a friend in need, and a friend in need. Well, we're in the bread business, for Jesus Christ is the bread of life, and all too often when men want bread, we give them a stone. And in this respect, we do need to turn stones into bread.

And then you remember that occasion in John 6, when they had a crowd and nothing to eat. No bread again. And our Lord said in what a text this is for missions, and I've never heard it used in that connection, they need not depart.

Give ye them these. Nobody ever needs to leave Jesus Christ for anything. And this hungry world today doesn't have to go to communism.

It doesn't have to turn into anything. They need not depart. We've got what they need, if we can get the food out.

And they had a bread problem to begin with, and if alliteration will help you, there was a bread problem. Then there was a budget proposed, because Philip spoke up just like some of our folks today in a budget meeting at the church. You know how these fellows have got it all figured out, and old Philip had it figured out.

He had studied it over and said 200 penny worth. However, he said that wouldn't do it. And there was not only a bread problem and a budget proposed, but there was a boy presented.

God wasn't looking for a budget, he was looking for a boy. And he's still doing that. Boys are more important than budgets in this program of our Lord.

And finally, there was a bounty provided, because as always, God's not stingy and they had more than he wanted to do with it. There was a surplus. So we have that same situation today.

And then in John 6, this same John 6, our Lord lost his crowd. And he preached so that there was a progressive falling away of his congregation. So a preacher doesn't need just to get frantic if the crowd thins out on his preaching.

It did with my Lord. And in verse 41, 52, 60, and 66, there was a gradual diminution of the crowd. And even the disciples said, I can't understand what he's talking about, eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

And he said, the words that I speak unto you, that's the bread. And so it is. And so today, if you want to thin out a church crowd, you just face that comfortable congregation on Sunday morning, you know, well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, and tell them that except they eat his flesh and drink his blood, they have no life.

Now, you better wave some of that crowd goodbye. Because they'll go out and say, I don't like this kind of preaching. I'm going over to the memorial church and hear Dr. Sound and Brass give book reviews.

You see, too many church members today are willing to take Christ as Savior, but not as sustenance. And when that Passover lamb was slain, not only was the blood put on the lentils, but they ate the lamb. Don't forget that.

We've got a lot of people under the blood who never seem to have caught on that there's also food provided. My Lord is my meat and my drink. And they're not living by the daily appropriation of the living Christ by faith for every need.

No wonder we've got that sickly breed of babies in the church. I don't mean the ones in the nursery. I mean the 150 and 200 pound crowd that keep the preacher busy running around with a milk bottle when they ought to have been on beefsteak a long time ago.

Fussy, always fussing. New preacher comes and they say, I don't like him. He changed my formula.

Babies. Jesus said in this John 6, Verily I say unto you, ye seek me not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled. Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth and everlasting life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you.

For him hath God the Father sealed. We are not here, beloved, as a church to cater to a generation of freeloaders. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

And our business is to get out that word. The second temptation had to do not with the physical, but with the spectacular. Jump off the temple and the angels will take care of him.

You'll just float down and my, my, that'll get all over town. The angels will bear you up. He could quote scripture.

The devil knows how to do that. A lot of church members don't. But the devil does.

And he can use it to his purpose. Suppose they'd have got out posters and said, Jesus of Nazareth will jump off the temple at 10 a.m. this morning. It had a big crowd, a lot of converts.

Why, of course. A flock of new disciples, why, a big crowd would take off after anybody could do that. And they would justify it the same way that I hear some shenanigans justified today.

They say, well, the end justifies the means. Because we had some converts. And they forget that the means determines the end.

And if you have an unworthy means, you have spoiled the objective before you can get to it. So in the second place, the devil not only tried to get my Lord in the bread business, but in the show business. But the church is not running a showboat, it's running a lifeboat.

And the gospel was never meant for entertainment, and we are never supposed to use bait to attract the world to hear the gospel. It's a sad day when the church gets into the circus business and furnishes the monkeys. And we have a considerable store in reserve, it seems to me.

And the devil said, angels will take care of you, but my friend, the angels are not flunkies to assist us in projects that are not in the will of God. They ministered to my Lord on occasion, not at Calvary, as I've said here before, but three days later they got the stone away from the sepulcher. And the angel helped Peter to get out of jail, but I heard a wonderful sermon in Columbia one time, I think in the First Presbyterian Church, about the departing angel.

Now, when the supernatural job was done, the angel left and Peter was on his own. And there come times in our lives when we need the angel, and then there come times when God leaves us to other resources because angels are not demanded under the circumstances. But I'm sure that all of you have had some experience with the fact there was somebody by your side that you saw not.

I'm glad Billy Graham wrote a book on angels. I'll tell you, I've been reading so many books about the devil, I'm going to look under the beds at night. I'm glad he got around to angels.

Old Elisha did. You know, he caused so much trouble. He was a one-man CIA.

Every time that old Syrian king tried to do something, old Elisha had a hotline to heaven and heard about it first. And he said, we've got to get that preacher. So they sent the militia after him.

We need more preachers. They send the militia after him. And the servant came out on the back porch to wash his hands and looked, and there were soldiers to the right of him and soldiers to the left of him, here a soldier, there a soldier, everywhere a soldier.

Ran back in and said, they've got us this time. And old Elisha walked out and didn't even bother looking down. He looked up, and there were angels to the right of him and angels to the left of him, there an angel, here an angel, everywhere an angel, for the angel of the Lord was encamping round about him that feared him to the limit.

And all old Elisha could say was, Lord, open his eyes so that he can see. Now, if you're going to start looking around, God help you. But you need to raise your sights.

Maybe somebody right here tonight, you've been looking down with all the problems. Get your sights lifted. The angels are there.

I was in a little town some time ago that had a little shop down the street run by a fellow by the name of Angel. And it had a sign in the window, Angel Service. And I said, well, I've had that all Elisha.

Now, the mass media today can make a nobody into a celebrity overnight. Some of these assassination attempts were a shortcut to the front page. Good way to get in a magazine somewhere.

And some new converts embarrass us today. You know, we pull them before they're ripe, and they're novices, and they are an embarrassing proposition sometimes. And we canonize them, and we try to make instant saints out of them.

Well, you do become a saint instantly when you're born again. That is in position and in standing, but not in condition or in state. We've got everything today, instant, oatmeal, coffee, and everything else under the face of the earth.

And we're trying to get some instant, mature saints, but they don't mature that fast. They are saints in position. But you just don't become a mature saint by leaps and bounds.

If Junior would gain six inches and 25 pounds in one night, you'd take him to the doctor. That would be a disaster. The saints don't grow that fast.

They grow by food, rest, and exercise. Feed on the Word, rest in the Lord, and exercise yourself in the Godliness. There is no sort of operation that I know of that will suddenly make you into a mature saint.

I heard of a fellow some time ago who tore a ligament in his arm, and the doctor fixed it up, and he had to carry it around in a sling for some days. And then the doctor said, Well, I think you can take it out now. And he said, You mean it's all right? I said, Yes.

Just like the other arm? Do anything I want to? Yes. Swim? Yes. I said, Play a piano? Yes.

But he said, Good. I've always wanted to play a piano. Well, you don't learn to play a piano that way.

You don't just suddenly have an operation and become Padresque. It just doesn't work that way. And we have some dear folks, and I love them, and I think they're born again going to heaven, but they've had some kind of an experience that has set them up overnight in the business, and they go around saying, You're just rookies.

I'm the star. I have achieved stardom in spiritual experience. My Lord didn't go at it in a dramatic way.

Things are going that way today. There never was more drama in the Church than now. And the further the Church gets from reality, the more she goes in for drama.

I didn't expect any amens on that. That's why I'm asking. The very word hypocrite means a play actor.

Our Lord walked on the water and raised the dead and fed the multitude, but not for show, and certainly not at the suggestion of the devil. Now the Church has done some spectacular and sensational things in her time by the Holy Spirit, but not for show. Pentecost was its own publicity.

They didn't need an advance agent. Everything was there. And today we stage extravaganzas and call in celebrities from the world to put them over, and Church ads in newspapers look like movie publicity, and we vie with each other who can put on the latest stunt.

Old Clover's Chapel. Many of you know that great Methodist preacher who went to a church where they had a young preacher who was trying to work up some enthusiasm before the preacher preached. He had him shaking hands with everybody.

And there were five folks to the right and five folks to the left. You know how they do it. Old Clover sat there and listened.

He endeared it the best way he could. When he got up and tried to stir up that crowd, he said, You might as well try to boil water over the picture of a glow worm. Just don't do it that way.

You say there are converts. Yes. Scripture can be twisted out of context.

Jesus Christ Superstar is an example of the extremism to which this show business can go. Our Lord rejected the merely spectacular, and we'd better follow his example. There's nothing Hollywood about New Testament Christianity.

The more I study my Bible, the more I am charmed with the fact that Jesus Christ was the despair of all the news reporters. When he healed the sick, don't publicize it. When the demoniac who was healed wanted to join the Lord's evangelistic party, Jesus said, Go home and tell.

When he fed the multitude in John 6, he thinned out his crowd, as we've seen. John said to his brother, Why don't you go up to Jerusalem? You need some publicity. Get out of these backwoods and up on the boulevards.

Jesus said, You talk just like the world talks, because that's all you know. But the world hates me because I point out, I expose its evil. And in Luke 14, the three canots that we talked about the other night, and

down the Mount of Transfiguration, don't tell it until after the resurrection.

I can't get over the fact that he came to this world and only had 33 years to spend here, and had a whole world to save, and he spent 30 of them at a woodworker's bench, practically. Why didn't they handle that publicity better? When he was 12, he was a boy preacher, and my, if they'd have got out a bunch of placards and sent him around to Rome and Alexandria and Athens, think of what could have happened. And he went back to be a woodworker until he was 30.

Now, what was God up to? That isn't the way we'd do it today. And when he rose from the dead, he had only 40 days, and wouldn't you have thought he'd have gone before Herod and Pilate and said, Here I am! You couldn't do it! The only people who ever saw him were the disciples. My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts your thoughts.

God knows how to run his program. And after Pentecost, they didn't try to live at that pitch. You can't.

You couldn't live at the pitch of the Welsh Revival all the time. They'd kill you, staying up all night and missing meals and everything else. They didn't do that.

I read that after Pentecost, they continued steadfastly. Now, a lot of folks never have learned how to do that. New Testament Christianity had its high moments and great days, but they weren't glamorous and they weren't flamboyant.

And on the average, they were low-key, the daily outliving of the in-living Christ, traveling that old S and N, the straight and narrow, pilgrims and strangers on the old T and O, trust and debate. And that's just about it. The final temptation had to do with the political.

In some way beyond our comprehension, by some strange demonic power we cannot imagine, the devil made the past before the eyes of my Lord in a moment of time. He gave him all the kingdoms of history, past, present and future. He said, I'll give you all this if you'll worship me.

Well, you say, he didn't have it to give. Oh, wait a minute. Now, I know God owns the world, the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

He's got the whole world in his hands. But the devil temporarily possesses it. If somebody steals my overcoat, I still own it, but they possess it.

Satan is the prince of this world. Its kingdoms are under his sway. He is the seizure of the cosmos.

And he offered the whole business to Jesus. But Jesus said, No, I'll not take any shortcut. I'll get it by the way of the cross.

You see, God promised it to his son a long time before in the second song. You know that one. The devil may try to defeat God's plan to regain what the great usurper stole in the Garden of Eden.

But remember that Mr. Khrushchev, when he was over here, quoted that old adage about he who laughs last, laughs best. Well, he had read his Bible in times past, but he had evidently forgotten that God said, The last laughs mine. Then he that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh.

There's a place for laughing in the Christian life. I've got a sermon on it, The Last Laugh, and you know it's going to be God's laugh. So I want to get all tuned for that, because when everything else goes where it

belongs, the Lord is going to have the last laugh.

And I want to be in good laughing shape for that. The kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and they shall reign forever and ever. Thank God I can sing, This is my Father's world, O let me never forget, that though the wrong may seem off so strong, God is the ruler.

Yet this is my Father's world, a battle's not done. Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one. Now, New Testament Christianity ought to get into politics.

The church ought to get into everything, so far as its testimony and its inference is concerned. But politics ought not to get into the church. Robert Louis Stevenson said, Politics is probably the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary.

I think you'll agree with that. But it ought to get into everything, because the Christian's the soul to the earth, and it doesn't mean the world's going to be converted. I know it isn't.

I know that. But I believe we could make a bigger impression on it than we're making today. And I don't think we ought to sit around and hold tight until Jesus comes to rescue us, when we ought to be out there having some influence as American citizens, and letting our light shine and being the soul to the earth.

My good friend Ron Dunn said out at Jack Taylor's church sometime ago in the conference where we were, he set me thinking when he was talking about these impressive, or maybe not impressive, church statistics. And he said, Now, if there's this much soul today, why is the world so corrupt? If you've got this many Christians, real Christians, and if there's this much light, why is everything in the dark? That makes sense. We ought to make some impression on this present day.

You don't have to be a social gospeler to believe that. We ought to count for Jesus Christ. My friend Dr. E. V. Hill of Los Angeles, we've been in conferences, and he went up to New York for an FBI conference about crime and so on.

He said great blocks of that great city at that time were terrorized by the Black Panthers. People were afraid to go out at night, kept everything locked. And he said, I asked the FBI, Well, now, how many Black Panthers do you have? And they said, The best count we have is 81.

And he said, If 81 Black Panthers can paralyze section after section of a great city, and yet churches all over the place and thousands of church members, wouldn't you think they ought to have some weight that would offset it, at least on the other side? I don't think we're getting through today to the need of the hour. And I probably told here before about when I was over in Knoxville, where they've got a hothouse hotel there that looks like a power dam. It slopes in front, Aztec style, right down there close to the river.

They said a drunk came along there some time ago and sold that queer-looking building. He said, I knew TVA would do it sometime. Built the dam and missed the river.

We've built the biggest dam. We've built the biggest setup and establishment you've ever heard about in this country, and we've missed the river. We're not connecting.

We're not cutting the mustard. Now, certainly a man can be a Christian and be in politics. I know of one President of the United States, of whom his doctor who attended him after his assassination said, Up until now, I had always said that a man couldn't be a Christian and a politician.

But as he watched William McKinley die, he said, I had to change my mind. I believe William McKinley knew the Lord. When I say that the Church has got no business in politics, I only mean no business in the context of the devil according to his program, but by the outliving of the in-living Christ and the proclamation of the gospel and the winning of the lost and godly living.

There will always be wars, I know that, and crime and poverty and all the rest of it, but I think that we ought to try to have as few wars as possible and as little crime and poverty as possible and as much peace, law, and order as we can. And maybe if we took a better stand for some things, things might be temporarily better. A Christian ought to always stand for righteousness.

Well, then, if it's not going to end by improving the environment, and we have quite a crowd today, so that's all you need to do, just improve the surroundings. But when you're up to your ears in crocodiles, it's no time to discuss how to drain the swamp. We've got a lot of experts out to drain the swamp today, and we've got crocodiles on our hands.

In Revelation 5, John saw a vision of God on the throne, and in God's right hand was that scroll of seven seals. And in it was the secret of destiny and the meaning of history, and the question is, who's got the key to it? And the voice came to John and said, Cheer up, you don't need to weep, because the lion of the tribe of Judah has got it. He said, I turned around to see the lion, saw a lamb instead.

Because the question was solved not by a lion, not then, not a living lamb who came to be an example, but a dying lamb who came to be an expiation. Not a paragon, but a propitiation. Thou art worthy, for thou was slain, and hast redeemed us by thy blood.

He didn't come to redeem the world by the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule, not because he lived and taught, but because he died. And then he rose. And the Church is not going to win the world by playing politics with the powers that be, not by socialistic experiments under religious auspices.

The world is not going to be Christianized, but it ought to be evangelized by the message of the crucified, risen, and coming Lord. That was the message of the early Church, and it got them into plenty of trouble. They had a prayer meeting and reminded God of this very same 2 Psalm.

They said, Lord, you know what you said, and they prayed for more boldness. That word boldness shows up three times in that chapter. When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, verse 13, Lord, grant more boldness, verse 29, and the Holy Spirit supplied the boldness, verse 31.

It's strange that they got in trouble by being so bold, and they prayed for more. The very thing got them in trouble the first time. They didn't say, Lord, if you will excuse us, we'll try to be a little more diplomatic next time.

They asked for more of the same thing. And the place was shaken, we read. I don't get into many churches that are shaken that way.

Some are shaken by dissension. Some are shaky with fear. Some are shaking with rock and roll.

The Quakers got their name from the fact that they shook over what they believed. They make good folks. I married one.

But I don't get in many that are shaken by what they believe. I get in some that are shaky about what they believe. And so the way out is not by getting into the bread business and the show business and the politics, but by getting back to the program of our blessed Lord.

And when the age of redemption is over, then my Lord comes in power. These things won't be done politically now. They'll be done apocalyptically then.

Our redemption draweth nigh. Our Lord did not change the power structure of his day. He died at the hands of it.

Pentecost did not convert Jerusalem. It went on to judgment. Another of my black preacher friends is little Manuel Scott.

Many of you have heard him. And he says in his own inimitable way that our business is to evangelize and ethicalize and to scatelize. I never heard anybody else ever say that.

But that's just about our program. The Church faces the greatest emergence in history, the heathen do rage, and the people imagine vain things, and the kings of the earth stand up and the rulers are gathered against the Lord and his Christ, and the professing Church is slipping and sliding all over the place, holding seminars where we pool our ignorance, and symposiums, past resolutions, stage rock festivals, playing footsie with the powers that be. Like old Jehoshaphat teaming up with Ahab to go up against Ramoth Gideon.

And we need a prophet to appear like one did then and say, what do you mean helping the ungodly and loving them that hate the Lord? Everything and everybody except what we're meant to be, what the world needs to see more than anything else now, is what a church is like when it's a church. We've been just about everything else. We've been an accompanist.

God never made his church to accompany anything. The church is a soloist. We've got our own song to sing, and we can't sing it in a strange land.

God promised this world to his son, the meat shall inherit the earth. We're not going to get it by the physical, we're not going to get it by the spectacular, we're not going to get it by the political, and we ought to meet the devil the way the Lord met him, by the word of God. It is written.

No devil on the first two pages here, no devil on the last two pages. Devil's out to make a deal today. Detente, you know, peaceful coexistence.

The main issue now is not communism, that's only part of the program. We are up against a sinister, and as Phillips puts it in Ephesians 6, the last half of it, that power that controls this dark world and spiritual agents from the very headquarters of evil. And our weapon's the word of God.

We're not here to turn stones into bread, not here to put on a show, not here to play politics. But our answer to the threefold temptation is, it is written, it is written, it is written. And if our Lord could defeat the devil with three verses out of Deuteronomy, we ought to be able to defeat him with the whole Bible, it seems to me.

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