

# THE FREE GIFT

---

**MATTHEW 4:1-11; ROMANS 5:12-19**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

**BY: RYAN DUECK**

**MARCH 5, 2017/1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY OF LENT**

As human beings, we are bargain hunters.

I am not referring to that strange subsection of humanity that inexplicably enjoys spending time in shopping malls or digging around in second-hand stores.

We are bargainers with how we *live*. Whether we are Christians or not. We make bargains with God, with reality or the cosmos or karma or whatever.

We are convinced someone or something out there is keeping score, and that the things we *do* are somehow a reliable indicator of the things we will *get*.

We do this in countless ways.

We cut back on the sugar and the carbs and eat leafy things that taste gross, we try to exercise and in return we hope to be rewarded with a long healthy life.

We go to church and pray and give our money to worthy causes and go on service projects and in return we expect God to bless the work of our hands, or at the very least spare us some suffering.

We do our best to love our kids and give them every opportunity to thrive, and in return we look forward to them becoming well-groomed, upstanding citizens with good jobs and decent morals. Or, at the very least, we hope they won't hurt us with the choices they make.

We honour our marriage vows and try to be faithful spouses, and in return we expect to receive a long and happy life with someone who more or less resembles the person that we started the journey with. Or, at the very least, to have a life of comfortable, predictable companionship.

We work hard to cultivate the gifts we've been given, and in return we anticipate meaningful, fulfilling employment that provides us with financial security.

We try to generally be decent human beings because what goes around comes around. Right?

Goodness is the coin we put into the slot of the vending machine of life, and we expect to receive goodness in return.

And sometimes, this works. Sometimes.

But if we're awake and paying attention to our lives and the lives of our neighbours and the world around us, we know that our bargaining doesn't always lead to the results we seek or expect.

Healthy lives oozing wholesome vitality meet tragic ends while inattentive and slothful lives go on.

Lives of upright piety crash on the shores of inexplicable tragedy, while lives of cynicism and contempt for the holy march cheerily on.

The kid who came from the good home descends into the abyss of addiction and crime, while the one whose parents barely gave her a second thought winds up a super-achiever.

All of our hard work and education lands us in a job that lacks fulfillment, where our gifts go unfulfilled while our neighbour seems to just fall into exciting and lucrative opportunities.

Two people who ventured out into marriages with the best of intentions and all kinds of commitment and desire, drift apart. Or there is an illness, a diagnosis, a premature death.

Yet for all this we persist in our bargaining. We imagine that life is like an if/then proposition. *If* I do this, *then* I will get that.

We imagine that this is how God works. Or at least how God *ought* to work.

---

So what on earth does any of this have to do with our gospel text this morning?

Well, the story of the temptation of Christ has many layers.

First and foremost, this passage is about Jesus and his identity.

Let's set the scene of Matthew 4. Jesus has just been baptized by John in the Jordan River. He has been publicly identified as God's beloved son, and has identified himself with human beings.

Jesus is led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. There, for forty days, he eats nothing and is tempted by the devil. At the end of these forty days, the devil arrives on the scene to tempt Jesus.

Jesus resists temptation and returns, filled with the power of the Spirit, to Galilee to begin his public ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the kingdom of God.

That's the short version of the story. The longer version would have echoes of the entire biblical narrative.

The first hearers/readers of this story would have remembered the serpent saying to Adam and Eve, in Genesis 3... "Go on, choose your own way... It's OK... God can't be trusted... He doesn't want your eyes to be opened so that you will see good and evil as he does..."

They would have remembered the Israelites' exodus from Egypt.

They would have instantly made the connection between Jesus' forty *days* in the wilderness and Israel's forty *years* in the wilderness, Moses' forty days on the mountain, the forty days and forty nights that Noah spent on the water, etc.

They would have remembered that in each instance, deliverance from evil came after forty days.

They would have noticed that in resisting each of the devil's three temptations, Jesus quotes from the book of Deuteronomy—**the book of the OT where Israel was tested by God in the desert.**

The two-fold point would have been clear enough.

**Jesus was faithful where Adam was not**, resisting the temptations of the devil where the first humans had given in.

**Jesus was faithful where Israel was not**, persevering through the harshness, the loneliness, and the struggle of the wilderness without giving into grumbling and idolatry.

As the new Adam, the new Israel, the truest expression of what humanity was meant to *be* and to *do*, Jesus is redeeming and reclaiming the entire human story and launching it into a new way forward.

Our second text this morning comes from Romans 5, where Paul says in verse 19:

For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Jesus is the new human, the new Israel, the one who will not deviate from the purposes of God.

---

So, that's the big picture. But I think that Scripture often has multiple levels of interpretation, different layers of truth.

These layers aren't in competition with one another but they fill in the story, they open up new ways for us to identify with it.

I wonder if Jesus' experience in the wilderness is also meant to show us that God is not a bargainer.

This in a sense what the devil is trying to convince Jesus of, is it not?

The first two temptations take the form of “if/then” statements...

*If you are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread... You are hungry, are you not? And God does not want you to suffer. You're the Son of God, after all, so go ahead and use this to your advantage! We all know that the world could use more bread!*

The first temptation is an appeal to self-interest. If you're the Son of God, then use God to get what you want, what you *need*.

*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down... God will save you will he not? Is it not written that he will command his angels concerning you? And what could be better for your claims to be God's Messiah than a miraculous deliverance in the holy city itself? Your followers would stand with open mouths at the spectacle! And they would adore you and follow you to the ends of the earth. Who doesn't love a show?!*

The second temptation is a bargain made with God about the watching world. If you are the Son of God, then use God to impress the masses and gain a following. It's what God would want isn't it?

In the third temptation, the devil doesn't even bother attempting to hide what he's up to. There's no, “If you're the Son of God...” here. He's getting desperate so he offers nothing but a naked appeal to power. It's the last card he has to play.

*All this I will give you... all the kingdoms of the world... Just bow down and worship me. It's a good bargain. Think of what you'll get out of the deal! Power. Control. Wealth. Influence.*

*Who better to have these things than you, Jesus?! It's a small price to pay.*

The third temptation is a bargain offered by the devil himself.

Taken together, we see that Jesus is being tempted with a very transactional understanding of God and the devil, with himself and with his mission.

*Use your power, play a few tricks, give the people what they want, use your influence. And, at the end, bow down to me.*

*Manipulate reality to get what you want. You have powers, use them. You have status, take advantage of it. I'm offering you good things—things God would want you to have, things God would want you to do, things the world is desperate for! It's a good deal.*

*I have what you need, just give me what I want.*

And in each case, Jesus responds by steadfastly keeping his eyes on God, on eternity, on the big picture of what he has been called to be and to do in God's story.

*People do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God...* The deepest hunger we have can only be filled by God.

*Do not put the Lord your God to the test...* God is not a genie in a bottle to be summoned according to our desires.

*Worship the Lord your God and serve him only...* There is only one who is worthy of human worship.

Jesus refuses to deviate from the task the Father has for him. Jesus also refuses to treat God as an object to be manipulated.

He knows that this is not how the world works, not how God works, not how God's plan is to unfold.

He knows that his road will be marked by suffering.

Perhaps most importantly, Jesus knows that the deepest thing that human beings hunger for are not material blessings, but for love, forgiveness, salvation, and life with God.

Our lives are not meant to be spent bargaining with God to secure material blessings or comfort or blessing or health or any of the other things we want and need (or think we do).

There are many Christians who think about God in precisely these terms. There are many (often very wealthy) preachers who sell this message.

But if we approach God in this way, we will almost certainly be disappointed. That's not how life works. That's not how God works.

What Jesus shows us in the wilderness is how to hunger for better things, more lasting things. He lifts our gaze from the smaller things we hunger for—bread, spectacle, power—and turns them Godward.

---

Yesterday when I was writing this sermon, a song by the Avett Brothers came on in my headphones. The song was called "Satan Pulls the Strings" (how could such a song title not catch my attention on a week I was preaching on this text?!) and it had an intriguing line in it:

*God is in the song and the devil's in my feet.*

That's the kind of line that you could base a whole sermon on. *God is in the song.*

The devil seeks always to keep our eyes on our feet, on our present circumstances, on getting what we think we want, on looking out for number one.

But God would have us pay attention to the song. And what is the song?

If we follow Jesus into and out of the wilderness, we find that he offers us a different view of God. He shows us that God is not a bargainer but a lover.

The song is a love song.

Jesus is always going on about love. Love God, love your neighbour, this is how they will know that you are mine if you love one another, greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for his friends...

For God so loved the world...

Maybe at least part of the reason that so many Jesus-y roads end up at love is simply because love is not the sort of thing you bargain with.

Love, if it is genuine, is not something you can give while holding back and waiting to see what happens.

Love is wild and it is wholehearted. It is no insurance policy against pain, no guarantee of happy outcomes.

Love can be and often is a source of pure delight. But sometimes, love also opens you up to a world of hurt. It can leave you vulnerable and exposed. It can wring you out and make you sick with longing.

Love is not the sort of thing that is carefully measured out in proportion to its just rewards. That's not how things work.

And that's not how God works.

---

God is love. And love is a gift—a gift that is freely offered.

It's not something we earn or bargain for. It's not something we have to prove that we're worthy of. It's not something that is measured out to us gradually over time.

As Paul says in Romans 5, it is the free gift of God.

It comes along with words like “grace,” “justification,” and “life.”

Our response is simple: to accept the free gift of God, and to spend our lives not as bargainers but as lovers.

And now that I have spent the last fifteen minutes arguing that life is not a bargain, I shall now, right at the end contradict myself.

In Hebrews 12:1-2, we read these words:

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So, there is a sense in which our lives, like Jesus' was, *do* represent a kind of bargain.

Jesus walked the path he did for the joy set before him—the joy of bringing many sons and daughters to glory, the joy of reconciling all things to God, the joy of redeeming a fallen world and a broken humanity.

And we, too, run for the joy set before us. We follow the path of Jesus in this world where the smaller bargains we hunger for are consistently refused for the larger bargain that this is the kind of life that will be blessed and rewarded with eternal life.

But if we have run well, we get to the end of our days and look forward not to collecting on a bargain made with a transactional God, but on being welcomed home by a Father who loves us dearly.

May God help us to run well.

Amen.

