

Not By Bread Alone
Matthew 4:1-11

Which is easier to get excited about – the sip of juice and the bite of wafer we'll have in just a few minutes, or the delicious lunch that awaits us at the close of worship? Which is more helpful to us? Which will do us more good?

Oh, sure – we know what we're supposed to say. But let's set spiritual concerns aside, just for the sake of argument. From a purely physical perspective, the answer is obvious. No one comes to the communion table to have their physical hunger assuaged. And having a big meal isn't a bad thing – we all know how important it is to eat a well-balanced diet so that we will have the energy we need both to stave off sickness and to engage in all our daily activities.

And physical food is important, even from a spiritual perspective, isn't it? After all, how can we serve God with our bodies if we don't nourish them? How can we feed the hungry and clothe the naked and visit those who are sick or in prison if we don't have the energy to do all those good works? Didn't Jesus tell us to do all those things?

And in our Reformed tradition, we understand that serving God includes much more than just overtly spiritual actions like preaching and praying. That's why we say that everyone has a vocation, which means a calling. We believe that people can be called of God to be not just preachers and monks and nuns, but also auto mechanics and grocers and hardware salesmen, to be policemen and doctors and nurses, to be administrative assistants and carpenters and teachers. And how in the world can any of us carry out any of our responsibilities unless we have something to eat?

No, food is a good thing, and eating is important. But that's what made Satan's first temptation of Jesus so difficult – Jesus wasn't being tempted to do something bad. He was being tempted to do something good – just not at the time of God's choosing.

And how do we know that? Look again at verse 1. Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness. This time of prayer and fasting and temptation was thus something that God had clearly directed Him to do. Yes, food is a good thing, but God had made it clear that Jesus' time in the wilderness wasn't for eating. It was the time for something more important – for preparation for ministry.

And that's why Jesus responded to Satan the way He did, with the words of Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man shall not live by bread..." but He didn't stop there. If He had, that would mean none of us need to eat, and that's obviously ridiculous. No, Jesus recognizes the importance of food when He says we don't live by bread – alone. But that last word – alone – indicates that something else is just as important to us as food, just as critical for us to go on living: every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. And that means that in Jesus' eyes what we are doing right now – meditating on the Word of God – is just as important for our survival, just as important for the preservation of our lives as the lunch we'll have after the service is over.

So much is clear. But do we really believe that? Do we really think the Scriptures are absolutely essential for living? Oh, we say we do, at least in the hymn we'll sing in a few moments, the hymn we always sing before we come to the Lord's table. We'll ask Christ to bless the truth in His Word to us just as He multiplied the 5 loaves and 2 fish to feed 5000 families. We'll confess that it is only God's holy Word that can save us. We'll ask God to teach us to love His truth. We'll ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes so that we can see the truth in God's Word, and so that the Lord Himself will be revealed to us as we read it.

Yes, that's the song we'll sing, just as we've sung it so many times before. But is that really what we believe? Does that hymn really reflect our priorities? For how much time do we really spend in study of the Scriptures every day? And when we do pick up our Bibles, is it with a sense of joy and expectation, or just out of a sense of duty, something to check off of our daily to-do lists?

But if we aren't spending time in God's Word, if we're not hiding God's Word in our hearts, how will we possibly avoid sinning against Him? How will we be able to do His will, instead of giving in to all the temptations that come our way?

For how did Jesus turn away each of Satan's ploys? Not with a command for Satan to leave Him alone. Oh, Jesus could have done that – as the Son of God, He clearly outranked Satan. And as the One Who could calm the storms with a word, He certainly possessed the power to dismiss even the most powerful temptation with the slightest gesture.

But instead, He relied on the Word of God. In response to each of Satan's three temptations, Jesus quoted from the Old Testament Scriptures. In other words, He confronted Satan's lies with the absolute, infallible, inerrant truth we find in God's Word. And if we want to withstand the temptations that come our way in the days to come, we need to know the Scriptures well enough to do the same thing.

But we do have to be careful about how we interpret the Scriptures, don't we? After all, in Jesus' second temptation, we find Satan twisting the Scriptures around, using the very words of Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus. And what was this temptation? To cast Himself down from the top of the Temple, performing a spectacular public miracle that would convince everyone in Jerusalem of His divinity. And why would that be a temptation? It would have allowed Jesus to receive the adoration and devotion of His people without needing to go to the cross for them.

Now, at first glance, this temptation doesn't seem to have anything to do with us. After all, none of us are called to bear the weight of the sins of the world on a cross. Moreover, none of us are capable of such displays of divine power.

But let's think again. After all, as the Son of God Jesus really did deserve His people's adoration and devotion. That means that, just as in the first temptation, Satan was enticing Jesus not with something bad, but with something good. Satan wanted Jesus to get the right thing, not only in the wrong time, but also in the wrong way.

Okay, so are we ever tempted to try to get the right things in the wrong way? We've already seen that food is a good thing, and something that is necessary for life. But there are lots of other things that we desire, things we think we need, things we are sure we deserve. Economic security? Physical comfort? Good friends? Children and grandchildren? The special sort of intimacy that is reserved for marriage? Who can doubt that any of these are good things? How could it be wrong to desire any of them?

But what if we try to get good things like food or economic security by stealing? What if we seek comfort or intimacy by sleeping with someone other than our own husband or wife? If we ever find ourselves trying to get any good thing in a way that is not in accordance with God's will, we have fallen prey to Satan's deception. And if we ever find ourselves thinking that we deserve any of these things, or that God somehow owes us any of these things, we are well on our way to doing exactly the same thing that Jesus warns us against – putting God to the test, making our allegiance to God somehow conditional on what He gives us or what He does for us.

And if we do that, we are really falling prey to Satan's third temptation: setting up that good thing, whatever it is, in the place of God in our lives. If we refuse to love or serve God unless He gives us what we want, we have actually made our wants into an idol.

No, the sad truth is that we don't have to engage in the sort of overt rebellion against God to which Satan tempts Jesus at the end of this passage. We don't have to fall down and worship Satan in order to be separated from a right relationship with God. No, Satan will be quite content with us worshipping anyone or anything else – for any idolatry keeps us from worshipping the Lord our God.

But the good news is that coming to this table today is the polar opposite of such idolatry. For as we take this bread and this wine, we are obviously not attempting to satisfy our physical needs. Moreover, as we come to this table, we are not claiming to understand everything that happens here,

how Christ can somehow be spiritually present in these elements of bread and the fruit of the vine. And as we come, we are not making any demands on God. We do not come here to bargain with God. In fact, there's no price we are asked to pay.

And yet we come – according to His gracious word, in meek humility we come to receive His grace. And as we come, as we take the bread and the wine that are signs and seals of the spiritual presence of Christ into ourselves, we are affirming what the Scriptures teach, no matter what reason or common sense or physical desire may say to the contrary. As we come, we are confessing that we need Jesus more than any other good thing, more than food, even more than life itself.

Do you need Jesus today? Do you need Jesus' Word to reveal your sins? Do you need His Word to bring you comfort in the face of the pressures and strains of life? Do you need His Word to reassure you that you belong to Him, no matter what you've said or done? Do you need His blood to wash you and make you clean? If you are hungry and thirsty for Jesus, then come. According to His gracious word, come and be filled.