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Speaker: Pastor Al Perkins
Bible passage or verse: Matthew 4:1-11
Title of sermon: Just Say No to Temptation

Matt. 4:1-11 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command the angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him again, "It is written: 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, "All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written: 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.

Life demands that we say "no" to some things, and "yes" to others. If you have a toddler in your house, you've probably gotten used to this word "no." "No, you can't run out in the street to get your ball." "No, don't touch that wood stove." "No, you can't have peanut butter cup ice cream for breakfast." As children get older, we don't say "no" as much, but we're just as emphatic. We say to our eight-year-old, "You can't ride your bike into town by yourself." "No, you can't baptize the cat." As our kids enter the teenage years, to a 13-year-old we might say, "You can't hang out with your friends at the mall until it closes." And to 16-year-olds, we plead with them, "Please say 'no' to drugs and alcohol and sex." Parents impose these "no's" in the hope that one day they will become mature adults who will be able to say "no" to themselves on their own.

As we come to the text this evening, I'd ask you to turn in your Bibles, if you have them, to Matthew 4:1 through 11, and this is a passage where Jesus is saying "no" to the devil at three different times. And I want to read that text to you. Chapter 4 of Matthew, verses 1 through 11. It says:

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." But he answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command the angels concerning you, and on their hands they will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him again, "It is written: 'You shall not put

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Temptation. Something that we will deal with all of our lives. And in fact, if you read the parallel account in Luke, it says there in Luke that the devil left until another time. He never takes "no" as the final answer. Temptation happens when the devil entices us to do something that is contrary to the will, the Word, or worship of God. Temptation is an attempt by the devil to drive a wedge between us and our heavenly Father. Now, we know temptation is not a sin – Jesus was tempted, we are told, in the Book of Hebrews, just like us, but yet was without sin. Someone has said that temptation is the devil looking through the keyhole into your life, and sin is us opening the door and letting him in. So – let's see how Jesus handled these temptations. And my purpose in looking at this is to say, "Well, is there help for us in terms of handling temptation?" Now, I think the temptations of course are unique to Christ. He has skills and abilities that none of us possess. I don't possess. Devil's not gonna come to me and ask me to turn, you know, a stone into a scone. Because I just can't pull it off. Yet even though they're unique to Christ, I think there are some common things to us. And I want to notice those as we look at how Satan comes to tempt our Savior.

Even though in this story I cannot be tempted to do a miracle to turn rocks into bread, I can be tempted to try and meet my own personal needs in ways that are contrary to the will of God. And this in essence is what Satan is asking Jesus to do. It's not to commit some terrible, gross sin. It's really to do something that's not in line with God's will. We know that Jesus provided a lunch to five thousand – certainly that was a multiple kind of provision of bread and resources. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with creating bread. But the problem here is, Satan wants Him to do it independently -- apart from the will of God. He's asking Jesus to step outside the boundaries of God's will. It's a legitimate need that Satan wants Jesus to fill in defiance of His Father.

Jesus was brought into the wilderness, you remember, because He is preparing himself for public ministry. And part of that preparation for public ministry is to demonstrate His complete surrender to His heavenly Father. Part of that preparation is dependence on His heavenly Father, even to the point of His need for food – to show that He will give everything over to the will of the Father. Satan is always coming alongside us and saying something to us like, "You have the right, you have the authority, you have the ability – you're the master of your own life. Take charge." Satan wants us to do an end run around the will of God. He's the master of the shortcut to satisfaction. Jesus says "no" to the devil by quoting a passage of Scripture to say that man is not just a physical being with physical needs, he's also a spiritual being, and to be totally healthy and happy and satisfied he needs to pay attention to what satisfies his hunger in his soul.

And so, a man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Early in my pastoral experience, I had a contrarian trustee. His name was George. And George for some reason seemed to feel that he was called to oppose anything that I wanted to do – at least, I felt that way. At one meeting, I said, “You know, we need to do something about the sound system at the church. It’s out of date and it keeps kicking up the Spanish radio station in the midst of my preaching. And once in a while, it picks up some CB conversation by truckers who don’t speak the language of Canaan.” George interrupted me. He spoke up and said, “As long as I’m running the sound system here, we’re not spending any more money on that system.” George was pretty emphatic, and his body language and tone of voice indicated that we were not gonna go much farther with this conversation. There were going to be no negotiations on the matter. Have you ever had that debate in your mind between those little characters, the devil and the angel, or the Spirit of God? At that moment, that debate was going on in my life. The Spirit was prompting me to say, “Be patient with George. We can work this out. Let the Lord work.” And the other side was saying, you know – “You can get this done. You can oppose him. The other people on the board will support you. Let’s move ahead.” I decided to let the Holy Spirit win – sort of. I said, “Okay. Patience will be the word of the day.” And I said to George, “Okay, George, if that’s the way you feel, we’ll let the purchase of a new sound system go.” Inside, though, the other side was talking heavily to me and I thought to myself, “You old turkey! You are 78 years old and I can outlive you!” Not exactly the best place to be.

So, I started praying about George. You notice I said “about George” not “for George.” And – a couple of months went by, and George showed up at the meeting, and he said, “I’ve had a sudden hearing loss. And the doctor tells me that it’s not correctible. So, I’ll not be able to run the sound system anymore.” And I was filled with really competing emotions. You know, I was glad that the opportunity was now going to be there to get a new sound system, but I was also feeling pangs of guilt that maybe I’d prayed George deaf. And, of course, I was thankful that I hadn’t stepped outside God’s will – even though there’s a strong pull for me to do so – because I didn’t ruin a relationship with George. In fact – a story I cannot tell now, but – later, George and I became the best of friends. And that’s another story for a different time, but – had I jumped in with both feet at that time, when I knew the Lord was prompting me not to, I don’t know if that friendship would have ever occurred. Satan is always whispering in our ear to get it done now. Get it done on your terms, do it your way. Someone has said, “Too many believers in Christ live by the credo, ‘My way is Yahweh.’” Say “no” to the devil when he tempts you to step outside, challenge you to be that independent, self-sufficient individual when you know it’s really not God’s will for your life.

The second temptation is for Jesus to jump off a high point from the temple. Now, the scholars tell us that it’s about 450 feet from the high point of the temple to the bottom of the Kidron Valley. That’s a long ways down. And of course, it’s not just the jump, but

Satan quotes the Scriptures and says, "Well, God'll take care of you. You can jump off that temple mount and he will provide angels to give you a soft landing." Uh – now, I'm never gonna do that. And I know there are people who live to sky dive, and people who like to jump off cliffs into pools of water, and so forth. Some people like to bungee jump. But at my age, I'm not jumpin' off anything taller than my shoelaces. So, I'm not gonna be tempted the way Jesus was, in terms of doing something that spectacular and believing God is going to intervene and attempt to keep me from experiencing the consequences of my actions. Now, Jesus gives us some clarification about what this temptation really is. He quotes from Deuteronomy 6 – He says, "You will not put the Lord your God to the test." Now, what does He mean by that, the test? I think He understands that it's really not our position to force God to prove His promises to us. That we are not to be the kind of people who are always demanding that God will perform according to the promises that we have picked out for ourselves. It's not the jump, it's the assumption that God won't let anything happen to us or that we won't experience the consequences of our actions. It's to presuppose on the promises of God. To hold our faith in a self-centered manner.

My father used to refer to people who seemed to lack common sense this way. He would say, "They're a half a bubble off." And of course, it's a reference to building, and you have levels that have those little bubbles and you can tell when things are perpendicular or horizontal. And so, he would often say that. Maybe you've heard that expression. That they're "just a half a bubble off." We can in our faith be a half a bubble off. And that is that we're not rejecting God. We're not denying His work in our life. We just have an imbalance that keeps us a little bit off-center. And that happens to lots of brothers and sisters in Christ when they use the promises of God in a self-serving way. This particular passage that Satan quotes here – "He will command his angels concerning you and their hands will bear you up lest you strike your foot against a rock" – well, it's from the Psalms. If we go back and look at the Psalm, we discover that the promise is made to a certain group of people, and this group of people are those who have anchored their life in the Lord. It's not really applicable to the idea that you can jump off tall buildings and not experience the consequences of that action.

You know, I never came to Christ until I was a junior in college, and I never went to Sunday School, never went to church. I was virgin territory when it came to the gospel. And before I knew Christ, at one time I remember making an attempt to read the New Testament, and I was reading in the Gospel of John, and Jesus kept talking about sheep. And I said to myself, "What's the big deal about sheep? Why do people say He's a great teacher? He talks about sheep! I guess it's okay if you're a farmer." Well, after I made a commitment to the Lord, it was instantaneously clear to me! I'm a sheep! I was reading it from an entirely new and different perspective. During the first six months of my believing life, I had great answers to prayer. For instance, at the end of the school year I was almost broke and I had just enough money to fill up my gas tank and travel back home, where I would immediately go to work. And so, to finish off my rent bill, I owed \$24.48. And so, I asked the Lord to give me that money – specifically,

\$24.48. A couple of days later, in my mailbox, there was a white blank envelope. I opened the envelope up, and there is \$24.48. Now, I don't remember telling anybody that that's what I needed. I have no idea how that money showed up. But I know what I thought — I thought, "Man, this prayer stuff really works!" And then, when I went to work — I worked for the US Forest Service — and when I got there, the crew that we worked on was short one man. We were on a five-man pumper crew. And so, I said, "Well, Lord, it would be really great if you provided a believer for me to fellowship with through the summer." And sure enough, the guy they hired was a believer in Christ, and we enjoyed fellowship all that summer. And I thought — "I've got this prayer thing down! This really works! It's sort of like Amazon! I pick what I want from the Bible, place my order, and in a day or two it shows up on the doorstep! This is great!"

As soon as I started thinking that way, I quit getting answers to my prayers! I told the Lord that I thought I needed a raise to put my way through college, but nothing happened. I wanted a few days off but the fire danger was high — they weren't letting anybody off, and I didn't hear anything from the Lord, and so, I didn't get those days off. Throughout the summer, I began to question this thing. What happened? What went wrong? Why isn't God answering my prayers? I'm a Prime customer! Somehow — and I don't remember exactly, through reading the Scriptures and interacting with my brother in Christ — a realization hit me. My Father loves me, but He will not spoil me. He's not going to honor my false expectations of faith. See, I was just a half a bubble off. My faith kind of slipped over and became invested in God's performance rather than His person. I was attached to the gifts rather than the Giver. Man, I am so glad I learned that lesson early on! I have seen so many of my brothers and sisters who haven't gotten ahold of that idea yet.

I knew a pastor who planted a church in the Northwest — and he had great success. At one time that church was the fastest growing church in the denomination in which I was serving. People came from all over to attend his church growth conferences which I attended. During the conference, there was a series of workshops, and there was one workshop entitled "Finances for the Growing Church." And so I thought, "Well, I'm kinda interested in that. I guess I'll take it." Now, not too many people were interested — there were only three or four people in that workshop. And when the workshop was presented, I learned that the church spent every single dollar that came in through its tithes and offerings every month. And they claimed that they were doing that because they were living by faith. And so, I was really, you know, uncomfortable with that. And these were people that I knew personally. The staff and the senior pastor. And after the workshop was over, I sought out the senior pastor and I said, "You know, this doesn't make sense to me." I said, "I think that's kind of presumptuous to think that you're just gonna be able to spend every dollar that comes in every month, zero out at the end of the month, and that God is gonna bless you because you've been faithful. I think that's poor stewardship." And the pastor said, "No, that's not the problem. The problem is your lack of faith." And so, I said, "Okay."

Less than three years later, money stopped coming in. Bills weren't getting paid. Staff was behind on their salaries. Within six to eight months, the church took out bankruptcy, and that church no longer exists today. Presumption. See, for all the promises of God, there's some responsibility that hangs around those promises! God promises to bless us financially, but He also expects us to assume the responsibility of being good managers and stewards of those funds. He expects us to give to the Lord's work and to pay close attention, and to recognize that there are ups and downs in life. But this is the way Satan gets ahold of us, to sort of just push us a half a bubble off. And it's costly. These men that were serving in that church were good Christian men. They were passionate for the Lord. They were serious in their faith. But they were half a bubble off. Satan does that to us. He just pushes us a little off-center, and suddenly we begin to believe that something's wrong with the Christian faith. So – I'm here just to give you a piece of advice from my experience. Be careful about being presumptuous in the Lord's work.

Let me tell you a positive example about a promise of God that really worked for me. When I came to Christ, I was a junior in college. I was living in a fraternity house, and it was a place where – you know, the sins of the flesh were readily available. After receiving Christ, I discovered that I had a conscience, and I just didn't have a freedom to participate in things that I had participated in before. But I was still living in that spiritually toxic environment. On campus there was a mentor that I met with, and I told him of my story about, "You know, I'm living at a fraternity house, and this isn't the best place for a new Christian to be." And he said, "Well, Al – this is a great opportunity to share your faith with those guys." He says, "Here's what I suggest you do." He says, "I want you to memorize 1 Corinthians 10:13. "No temptation has taken you except what is common to man. But God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able to bear, but with the temptation he will provide a way of escape so that you may...live with it." I had that verse down cold. Because he said, "You know, Al, your mind really only focuses on one thing at a time, so whenever you're tempted, you just keep saying that verse to yourself until the temptation goes away." Now, that may seem overly simplistic to some of you, but I can tell you from my experience, it worked. And I said that verse A LOT. I would leave campus, and it was about six or eight blocks to the fraternity house, and every block I was saying that, because I was gonna walk through the doors of that fraternity house. And it was a different world. And it was not Christian at all.

Now, Jesus resists the devil because He knows God's Word. He's able to overcome those temptations because He knows what God has said in a balanced way. Have you realized when you read the Bible that there are a lot of verses that would seem to contradict one another? There's a lot of verses that don't exactly say the same thing. Sometimes you read Proverbs, there are places where they kind of say the opposite thing! And I think one of the challenges for us is to hold God's Word in balance, to not get carried away. And we need to know God's Word. Because there are lots of pressures on us to misunderstand it. There are teachers and preachers who will tell you that God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, and happy. And the obvious truth as we

just celebrated the Lord's table is that we are to be followers of Christ. And Christ's life was not a wealthy life. At least not in material things. He knew almost nothing of the material pleasures that we think will make us happy. I don't think that Gethsemane was a very happy experience. I don't think the cross was good for His health. If we're followers of Christ, how can we listen to this stuff that says you can be healthy and wealthy and happy and this is God's plan for your life? God's plan for your life is to be here like Jesus! So – be on your toes. Satan is subtle. He is cunning. And he trips us up in little ways.

The third temptation is that of offering to Jesus instantaneous power and influence without the cross. It's an offer of significance without sacrifice. A shortcut to success without suffering. Of course, it has a huge condition – you just have to worship the devil, you just have to live by the devil's value system. And Jesus says “no” to the devil, because He's already said “yes” to God. And because He's said that “yes” He's not gonna forget who He is, and so He says “no” to the devil. He says, “You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.” I find it interesting in this verse that worship and service are connected together here. I think when the devil approaches us, he approaches us and tells us that we can have a significant Christian life apart from sacrifice. That we can have a Christian life without suffering. Now, I don't mean to imply that you should be miserable as a Christian, nor to imply that there aren't great and fantastic promises for the people of God found in God's Word. There are plenty of those. But I do feel compelled to say, don't miss the fact that in this life there is suffering to be had for Christ.

As we celebrated communion, we are all thankful for the sacrifice of Christ, for the shedding of His blood in His body. But – we're not just to appreciate what Christ has done for us, we are to do for others what Christ has done for us. We can never make the sacrifice that Christ made – we can never provide salvation for the world. But we can sacrifice some of our time and energy and efforts to share Christ with others. One of the ironies of the Christian faith is this – suffering relieves the suffering of others. Think about that. God calls us to sacrifice, not just to honor Christ but to be a little Christ to others. That's the gospel-centered life that we said “yes” to. It's what we signed up for. Real Christianity embraces difficulty and sacrifice for others, not for ourselves. So, be careful when you hear people say, “God wants you healthy, wealthy, and happy.”

A few years back, the church gave me a sabbatical. My wife and I took four months off, and we spent one month in Vancouver, British Columbia. And there, I audited a class at Regent University, and I took a class from J. I. Packer on the prison epistles. And there one day -- and this was worth the whole class – Professor Packer says, “In the kingdom of God, if there is success anywhere, there has been sacrifice and suffering somewhere.” That's quite a statement. And I've been rolling that statement around in my head for years and find that it is true. That we as God's people are called to know difficulty. It's not easy to be a Christian and to live out the gospel for others. I remind you of a couple passages of the Apostle Paul – Philippians 3:10, “That I may know Him” –

speaking of Christ – “and the power of His resurrection” – boy, that’s some power, “and may share in His sufferings, fellowship in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.” Now, Paul’s in jail when he writes that. And Paul says, “Here’s the goal of my life. I want to be with that group of people who understand that through suffering the gospel advances.” Every missionary knows that. Every pastor knows that. God’s people ought to know that. It’s hard work, but it is worth it.

When I was in seminary, one of the most impactful moments was when the Prof. – Loren Fischer was his name – was teaching at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, where I went to school – one of the students asked Professor Fisher, “In all your years of ministry” – and at that time, he was in his late fifties and spent many years in pastoral ministry. He said, “How many people do you feel that you’ve really made a difference? How many folks have you really impacted and changed their life?” And to this day, I still remember Loren’s response. He stopped. Got kind of silent for a moment. And his face got kind of flushed. And he said, “Not many.” And then the tears began to come down his eyes. You don’t imagine tears showing up in a seminary very often. And the tears began to flow, and he said, “But I will tell you, it was worth it for every one I touched, and I would do it again if only those people would be impacted by my ministry.” It’s not easy to live the Christian life. It involves difficulty. Colossians 1:14 – “Now, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. I’m happy to do this,” he says, “and in the flesh I am filling up in my flesh.” He says, “I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s affliction.” Lacking in Christ’s affliction. “For the sake of the body that is the church.” Isn’t that something? Think about that verse. Paul says there is a work of sacrifice and suffering that needs to happen in order that the church would be all that it can be.

Ministry is a good work. And so – I’ll wrap it up here. You can have victory over temptation. You can say “no” to the devil. You can say “no” to the temptation if you’ve said “yes!” to the will of God. We can say “no” to temptation when we’re filled with the Word of God! And we can say “no” to temptation when we’re sold out and committed one hundred percent to the sacrificial worship of God. Scriptures say, “Resist the devil. Resist his temptation to independence, presumption, and that wrinkle through your life that some would offer you, and he will flee.” It’s great, isn’t it? We’re given victory over those temptations.

As we close, I’d ask you to think for a moment, as I close in prayer, about saying “yes” to the Lord. Do you know Him as your personal Savior? Have you said, “Yes, I want to take Him into my life”? I don’t know what temptations you might be facing today. Can you say “no” to that because you’ve said “yes” to Jesus? To God’s will for you? Take a moment to think that over and I’ll close you in prayer.