

Matthew 4:1–11 (NRSV)

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 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,

‘One does 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 placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’
and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do 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 splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him.’ ”

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

Can We Tell God and Satan Apart?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

I can prove that Jesus saves. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” John 3:16 I can prove that God prohibits lying. “Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor,” Exodus 20:16 and Deuteronomy 5:20. It’s called proof-texting, quoting the Bible to prove a point.

Sometimes proof-texting is used to debate. One person might turn to First Corinthians and quote Paul, “Women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says,” 1 Corinthians 14:34. This might be quoted to prove that women should not be ministers. But another person might counter with, “Yes, but Paul says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” Galatians 3:28, and that proves that Paul really means that women and men are fully equal in Christ, and that women ought to be allowed do whatever men do.

Proof-texting. It’s quoting passages from scripture to prove that God’s authority is on your side.

Well, this morning we are in the big leagues, the heavyweight championship of proof-texting debate, as it were. “This morning, here in the left corner, fighting for the Kingdom of God, in the white robe, we have Jesus, also known as Jabbing Jesus, and sometimes Clean Your Clock Christ. And here in the right corner, fighting to take your soul, in the red trunks and the three-timed fork, we have the devil, also known as Sockin’ Satan, and sometimes as Boxing Beelzebub. Gentlemen, we expect a clean fight. You may use holy scripture and nothing else. No hitting below the belt with verses from the Gospel of Mary, or the Dead Sea Scrolls. No quotes from the Apocrypha. And no making up new stuff and pretending it’s in the Bible. Good luck gentlemen.”

With that the fight begins. The devil begins with a jab. It’s not a direct quote from the Bible, but it uses Bible knowledge, so it’s allowed. “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” The crowd watches intently, maybe anxiously. But Jesus jabs back with a fine rebuttal, an exact quote from scripture, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Deuteronomy 8:3.

The devil takes the punch. The crowd nods with admiration at Jesus’ blow. But then the devil recovers and jabs again. He takes Jesus to the high pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and says, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

‘He will command his angels concerning you,’

and ‘On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ Psalm 91, verses 11 and 12.”

The devil smiles at his own brilliance. The crowd gasps. But the blow hardly lands when Jesus jabs back, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ Deuteronomy 6:16”

Satan staggers. He gets up. He decides it's time to land his most potent punch. He takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he says to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Satan is quoting the very promise that God made to Abraham: this can be yours. This could be the knockout. But Jesus calmly absorbs the thunderous punch and strikes back with a right hook of his own, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.' Deuteronomy 6:13, and also 10:20."

The crowd cheers. The devil slinks away in defeat. And the angels come and tend the victorious fighter, Jesus the Christ, heavyweight champion of heaven and hell. Whoa! What a fight! What a contest! That proof-texting stuff can get pretty rough, but in the end good overcame evil!

It's a great story. And, it's got the ending we would hope for. Jesus claims his victory over Satan. He has a parade through Boston on a duck boat. Bill Belichick hires him as his new defensive coordinator.

It's a great story. But it does raise at least two interesting problems. First, the devil can quote scripture. That means that scripture isn't quite as simple an authority as it might seem. Scripture is not as transparent as we might like to believe. We have in scripture itself a case where the devil quotes scripture, and the whole point of the story is that the devil is using scripture to tempt Jesus to do the wrong thing. One thing we cannot help but take away from this story is that quoting scripture is no guarantee of speaking the truth. Even the devil can do it.

In the story that isn't too worrisome, I suppose, because we know the characters. We know that Jesus is supposed to be right and that the devil is supposed to be wrong. But what about here and now? When proof-texting battles occur today, how are we to decide who is right and who is wrong? How are we to decide who is on the side of Jesus and who is on the side of the devil? For Christians today these are important questions because we claim that scripture has some form of authority, even though we may not all agree about the details of that authority. We believe that the Bible contains truth. And yet there are many important debates today in which the Bible is quoted by both sides. So, it's important to know, if we can, how to understand the authority of the Bible and how to tell when a person quotes the Bible whether that person is closer to Jesus or to the devil.

The second interesting worry is perhaps related to the first. If one were to take Jesus' quotation of Deuteronomy about bread—One does not live by bread alone—as the last word on his feelings about bread, one would judge that Jesus has a rather low opinion of it, or at least that bread is not all that important. That would prepare us poorly for the ways in which bread appears in the rest of the Gospel.

Let's stay with Matthew's Gospel, since that's the one from which we read the temptation story this morning. In chapter 4 Jesus says that one does not live by bread alone and refuses the devil's challenge to change stones into bread.

Yet, in Matthew 6:11, Jesus teaches his disciples the prayer we say together every Sunday. He says we should pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." And then in Matthew 7:9, in a verse that echoes this morning's story, Jesus says to his listeners, "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone?" This seems almost a contradiction to his refusal to turn stones into bread. In Matthew 14 and then a second time Matthew 15 we have the story of feeding five thousand and then four thousand who have come to hear him teach. When the hour became late, and crowds became hungry, Jesus did not say to them, "Tighten your belt, friends. No one lives by bread alone." Nor did he send them away to get their own bread. In one

of the most important stories in the Gospels Jesus demonstrates God's promise of abundance. He multiplies five loaves and a few fish in order to feed the crowd.

And then, finally, in Matthew 26:26, at the last supper, when he is giving his disciples final instructions, he leaves them with the symbol second in importance only to the cross. The passage says, "While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.'" I can almost see Peter speaking up, "Yo, Rabbi, I'm not going to eat that; as you yourself said we do not live by bread alone."

Seriously, it would be hard to imagine Jesus leaving a catalog of more positive references to bread. Nonetheless, in this morning's passage Jesus, quoting scripture, spurns the devil when the devil challenges him to turn stones into bread.

So, we are back looking square into the face of our questions. How are we to read the meaning and authority of scripture? And, how are we to know whether it is Jesus or the devil we are listening to when someone quotes scripture to us, or when we quote it, too?

I wish I had easy answers to these questions for you. But like so many things in life, there are no easy answers, or saying it another way, easy answers are bound to be wrong answers. Indeed, the seemingly inborn human desire for simple answers often plagues our getting to the truth. From politics to relationships to religion too often we steer away from the complex and prefer the simple answer, even if the simple ultimately serves us poorly.

One appeal of Biblical literalism is its supposed stark simplicity. If every word of the Bible is dictated by God and true in the fullest and most certain sense, then all you have to do is read it and see what it says. But it's more complicated. As we have seen, one can find all kinds of things to quote in the Bible. Even Biblical literalists choose some passages and disregard explain away others.

Reading and finding authority in the Bible is complicated. And it's hard to use the Bible, at least in any superficial way, to tell the difference between the devil and Jesus. It is undeniable that passages quoted from Bible cannot in every case reliably and obviously declare God's will. Our passage this morning proves that without a doubt. Personally, I am grateful that not all things in the Bible are absolutely followed. Deuteronomy 21:21 declares that the men of the town should stone a rebellious son to death. I'm pretty sure that there others here who are as grateful as I am that this Biblical demand to stone rebellious sons is not applied very much these days.

On the other hand, I absolutely hold that within the Bible we may discern God's true word for us. By that I mean more than that I can find things in the Bible that I agree with. Too often, among all persuasions of Christians, that's the standard by which a particular passage is judged. Do I agree with it? If the Bible doesn't challenge our beliefs at least some of the time, then we are not looking at the Bible, we are looking at a mirror. Most proof-texting that I have seen falls into this category. The Bible becomes simply a mirror when we find a passage that says what we already believe, and then quote it. But it becomes a dangerous mirror, for we elevate what we want to believe; we claim that what we want to believe is not our idea, but God's. Suddenly our opinion gains the weight of God's word. I imagine God shivers whenever we engage in such chicanery.

So, how do we get around all this uncertainty? One good principle for discerning truth in the Bible is to take the Bible as a whole. Taken as a whole we can discern certain over-arching themes: God loves humankind, even if we wear God's patience thin. God wishes us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. God wishes us to do the things that build up creation, communities, and relationships, not the things that tear them down. God is in favor liberation

from inequality, oppression, and other things that injure one another and alienate us from God's hopes for us. God's wishes often run counter to the desires of societies, cultures and individuals. God prefers forgiveness to retribution, love to hatred, and compassion to apathy. Can we not, by taking the Bible as a whole, say that these are fundamental perspectives of God, which no interpretation of the Bible ought to contradict? They provide a starting point.

Let's see if we can apply these principles to our championship proof-texting bout between Jesus and the devil. Can careful interpretation and the use of our basic principles help us understand what's going on?

The temptation passage occurs right after Jesus' baptism, before he begins his ministry. We can expect it to illuminate some of the basic themes of his upcoming ministry. If we look at it as a whole, it would appear that the devil is offering Jesus the power and wealth of the world. Temptation is probably a bad translation of what's going on here. A better one is testing; the devil is testing Jesus. But in a sense, it's even more basic than that. The devil may well have been offering Jesus the things he assumes anyone would want—snapping our fingers when you are hungry and bread appears from the stones, the avoidance of earthly death, and power and wealth. But Jesus claims the basic ground of his ministry. Ingesting only the bread you eat and forgetting about the nourishing word that comes from God will leave you starving. Requiring God to prove immortality in a physical way turns a matter of faith into a science experiment, and disregards the greater promises of God. And the pursuit of power and wealth of the world, rather than the power and wealth of God will leave you poor at the end of the day, poor, indeed. These represent themes of Jesus' ministry. He is putting us on notice that he will come back to them time and again.

When we look at the title bout between the devil and Jesus in these terms, we realize that Jesus is not denigrating bread, but is simply saying that physical bread without spiritual bread will not satisfy real hunger. In our passage this morning the devil was the devil because he wanted to seduce Jesus into believing that the beguiling wares of our broken world are God's hope for us. But Jesus was Jesus because he unmasked those nearly irresistible delights for what they are—roadblocks to the realm of God. He made it clear that if you hear someone representing worldly gain and power as the word of God, you can bet it's the devil who is quoting you scripture. Amen.