

“The Temptation of ‘If Only’” based on Luke 4:1-13, Psalm 91

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on March 9, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

I have a recurring daydream about what I would do if I won the Mega Millions jackpot. Now some of you might have almost missed that because you were wondering, “What is a recurring daydream? Isn’t that just wasting time?” Sure, it might be, but I find that this daydream starts usually when I’m tired. It comes when I’m sleepwalking – anxious about the state of the world and of our community.

These are times I just want a magical solution to fix everything. Of course, I suppose you have to play the lottery to win it. So, this really is mostly a daydream from which I occasionally waste \$20 when the jackpot is over, say, \$500 million, \$600 million, or more. Go big or go home, right?

In this daydream, I’d start a zero-interest financing nonprofit for our low-income neighbors. It would be something like Habitat for Humanity, except involving rehabbing existing housing. But even better, there would be opportunities to have debts forgiven as well.

I’d have a similar nonprofit for local businesses, buying all the vacant storefronts in our community and revitalizing them so that small businesses could start rent free for several years, and then they’d have an option to buy if they succeed. Maybe we’d even duplicate what Duncan did at the mall, when he won rent free space for three months, buying that building on Marion and Lafayette, so that farmer’s market vendors could sell all week, not just on Saturdays, even having refrigerators and freezers produce and meats.

I just think it would be so much fun to do this – to have no limits, and make things happen. Imagine what we could do as a church? Perhaps a gymnasium and offices next door, with a façade to match the church, usable as a worship space to simulcast the sermon into a contemporary service. We could food ministry and the emergency assistance program with offices and storage space.

As my wife has suggested, we could purchase the Marion Elementary School and have second-floor apartments for young professionals. The first floor could be like Optimist Hall with a bunch of restaurants. We could buy buses and start public transportation. There are apartment complexes in terrible shape that we could rebuild and have actually affordable housing. Ahh. If only.

If only I had hundreds of millions of dollars, then I could do something amazing. Now, before you’re inclined to think this kind of daydream makes me a good person, what this really amounts to is my dream to be a modern benevolent feudal lord. It’s true. I want the resources to meet the needs that I see as most pressing. I want the power to implement my vision for this community that I love. I want to do something so spectacular, people will take notice, and perhaps even imitate by using their resources like this as well, so they too can find a faith in Jesus. But deep down, this would be fun, and all I’d need to do it, is a little bit of magic.

In our reading today, Jesus is tempted with such a magic – offered to him by the devil. Not a one of us here today could truly imagine being tested by going 40 days in the desert without food and then dealing with the offers that were presented to Jesus today. This was the test – Would Jesus do what humanity has always done? The story of Adam and Eve is the first of a long line of these moments as they want the knowledge of good and evil right away – with a shortcut.

From the beginning, we always sought magical shortcuts and our own desire to implement our vision to decide what is right and wrong. But would Jesus persevere, trusting in God’s bigger plan? You might yourself be tempted in this moment to dismiss it because Jesus is divine, fully one with the Father and the Spirit so that “bigger plan” is his plan as well. But how many of us have had

plans, mapping out the work we wanted to do to make it happen. But then we took a shortcut along the way. We are all tempted by magic. That's what magic is. It's a shortcut.

This is the amazing thing about the Son of God becoming fully human in Jesus – He is subject to the same feelings of need, of want, and temptation, within all the limits of our human bodies. It's more than just Jesus resisting the temptation of the devil. He is enduring the test that is our human existence and our limits. He doesn't just endure what the devil offers in this story – Throughout his life, he entirely rejects the idea of changing to make it easier. Certainly, the cross is not the easy way. Unlike the stories of all the other gods, he doesn't use his power and status to exploit and overpower the world.

What would have been the big deal if he made bread out of the stones? Later in his ministry, Jesus would take four loaves and two fish and feed thousands upon thousands of people. Isn't that just the same kind of shortcut? No, because Jesus waited for an offering. In that story, he waits for the disciples, or a young boy, to join the effort.

Imagine how amazing it would have been if Jesus just stood up, and said, "Take and eat," and suddenly from the ground and stones in the field became not just bread, but a five-star meal for every person. He could have done that. Everyone would have known he did it, by his power, but Jesus leaves room for doubt. Indeed, he chooses to take a humble offering in faith and multiplies it.

As the disciples hand it out, knowing the miracle he has done, I can imagine that many doubt this is what really happened, or they didn't even realize a miracle happened. They want to make him king, so maybe they think he has a supply of food at hand.

Imagine what we could do in the food ministry if we had that magical ability. What if we could turn stones into bread and meat, and turn dirt into grains? We could feed the hungry not only in Shelby, but throughout the world. But instead, we're left to wait for offerings and distribute them, praying God will move more hearts to give.

This brings us to the second temptation: Why didn't Jesus just enthrone himself here right then and there as king of the world? We could focus on the request of the devil to worship him in this part of the story, yet I think that this was the easiest to resist for Jesus. God would not worship the devil and certainly not do it in order to take back what rightfully belongs to God.

Yet, even after this temptation, Jesus could have called in the angels to overthrow Rome, and take the seat of Caesar to make Rome his kingdom then and there without having to worship the devil. He could have overtaken the seven continents. Jesus, the Son of God in our flesh was all-powerful but instead, lived in our limits. He died for us, hanged on that Roman cross by an empire. He was betrayed by the religious leaders and his friend.

This cross was the most shameful of deaths. It is slow, and agonizing, as he was hanging naked on a tree for everyone to watch him suffer, bleed, and suffocate. This was his throne.

Imagine what we could do if we took over the power of an empire, of this nation. What if we could just dictate and mandate things in the political sphere that we deem most Christian? We could accomplish so much good, if only we had power to do things like Jesus. Ah, but we do. Because instead of saying "go take power," Jesus said, "Come follow me." He chose not to take over the political sphere.

Lastly in the third temptation, why not reveal the angels at his side by jumping off the temple? Surely, if Jesus jumped off the pinnacle of the temple and floated down unharmed, carried by the angels of God, then it would have proven who he was to all the skeptics. The Sanhedrin with the

Sadducees and Pharisees would surely have seen this and said, “He is the Son of God.” In fact, that was what they taunted him with when he hanged on the cross – “If you are the Son of God, save yourself.” When the whole power structure was watching, he could have come down from the cross. Instead, on the third day he rose again, appearing first to Mary Magdalene, trusting her to proclaim that he is risen.

Imagine what we could do if we could do some great work to make everyone believe. What if we had the perfect argument, the undeniable proof, or sign for all to see and realize that we haven’t been crazy all along for believing this stuff? We would have huge churches, if all these people were suddenly drawn to faith in Jesus. But instead, Jesus sends us as harvesters, and we are too few. Yet he calls us to draw in masses around us who do not fully understand how much God loves them.

The center of the gospel is that Jesus is the Christ – the anointed King of Israel – and he has come to not just rule one nation, like his ancestors David and Solomon, but to rule the whole world in an everlasting dominion. We miss this when we use Christ as though it is just Jesus’s last name. Likewise, we miss it when we think of Jesus as the human, and Christ as his divine identity. This is something I’ve even heard fellow pastor’s claim, as if it’s a title for God. It’s not. It’s a title for king.

The Christ in Greek or Messiah in Hebrew means anointed, specifically, it is an anointed king. The gospel is the royal proclamation that what was surrendered to the devil by sin, has now been reclaimed by God in and through this anointed King – Jesus of Nazareth. All people – regardless of ethnicity, status or gender – are one in the King. Every person is an equal citizen in the Kingdom of God. You are loved – each and every single one of you – simply because of who you are.

In recognizing this love, you have the opportunity to become subjects to the King, giving allegiance by doing the King’s will. Allegiance to the King means being empowered by his Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, which pours love in our hearts, so that we can follow the King who calls us to love as he has loved us. In this, the king’s allegiance calls us come together, even by loving our enemies.

What I find amazing is that for contrast, we should compare the king to the meaning of the words ‘devil’ and ‘satan.’ The word devil in Greek means divider – ‘*diabolos*,’ from *dia-* for ‘through’ and ‘*balow*’ for ‘throw.’ To ‘throw through’ is to cut in half. In Hebrew the word Satan means accuser, or adversary. The devil or satan is the force that seeks to divide and conquer the people, making accusations to pit us against each other, and against God through idolatry – in the worship of popularity, in the worship of power, and the worship of comfort. This is sin and its wages are death.

When we use the powers of division and accusation as a means to build the Kingdom of God, it fails. When we use the powers of love, of truth, and of grace, the Kingdom is made visible. The world was surrendered to the devil by the sin of humanity. God in Jesus has reclaimed God’s central role as King of all Kings, choosing to do so through the self-giving love of the cross – dying for us, rising for us, and ascending for us, so that we might share in his ministry of reconciliation. By this, we receive the life of the Holy Spirit, the abundant and eternal life of grace so that even in our suffering, brought on by sin in this world, we can know God is with us.

Psalm 91 is a three part Psalm. First, the “one who dwells in the shelter of the Lord” speaks. Then the Psalmist comments. Then God speaks at the end. This Psalm calls us to dwell in the shelter of the Lord, but as theologian Matt Skinner said on a podcast for pastors, “this is poetry, not a contract.” The devil misuses this scripture to present it to Jesus as a contract for him to call in, saying, “Go ahead and jump.” But Jesus fulfills it by remaining in the refuge of God, resisting the temptation and passing his test by not testing the Father.

This Psalm is a comfort to us. It calls us to rest in Christ. It helps us know that no matter what we go through – if we take the step to turn from sin and do what’s right even when it’s not the magical and easy thing – God is with us no matter what happens to us. We can trust God and do the right thing.

Beloved, God is not our magician upon whom we call with the right words. In Christ, God is our King and Savior, and in the Spirit, God is our advocate who is with us always. The Father, Son, and Spirit are all the Lord – the one to whom we owe everything. The Lord is our only God and savior.

I may desire the magical solution of a billion dollars to enact my vision, but I’m not sure I’d pass the test if I got it. Jesus resisted the temptation of shortcuts, not just when he was tested in the desert by the devil, but throughout his ministry – because he came to serve and not be served, to give his life as a ransom for the many.

As much as I would like all things to be completed today – Lord Jesus come! – God’s way is the long way. Every day, God gives you and me opportunities, having prepared good works for us. Every day, we can respond like Christ with humility and patience, gentleness, and we can bear with others in love, seeking unity in the bond of peace in the Holy Spirit. We can meet pressing needs without unlimited resources.

We do not need the power of this world to be God’s Kingdom, because we serve under the rule of Christ our King, through the Spirit. We do not need to convince the people with signs and wonders to show them we’re not crazy for believing what we do. Rather, instead, we can love the people and emulate Jesus. Yes, he did miracles, but we can join in his work which pushed back sin and death through love.

Beloved, none of us would pass the test that Jesus passed, both in the desert, and throughout his life, death, resurrection and ascension. But take heart, he is the grace of God, for he has passed the test in our place. In the words of ‘Amazing Grace,’ the hymn, “it was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.”

So, let us open our hearts again today. Let the Spirit of God reveal the sin that is within us and transform us in love. Let us lay aside the popularity, power and especially comfort, that deep down we value more than God. I think of comfort because so often people point to an absence of God because of the presence of suffering, but this is because what we want is not a God who is with us in every challenge, but the comfort of this world.

Let us lay aside the desire for shortcuts, the desire for God to be our magician. Let us seek unity in the bond of peace, rather than division and accusation. We do not need daydreams or billions of dollars to build for the Kingdom. “If only” is a temptation that keeps us from loving and doing right now. The Kingdom of God is here it is among us by the Holy Spirit in and among us, and even though I don’t know how long it will be, in God’s timing, the kingdom will come in full and we will rejoice as we are raised on the last day. Amen.