

John 6:1-15 - Was Jesus Tempted?¹

Before the lesson – Have copies of the handout, “Was Jesus Tempted?”

Fellowship Question: (Use *one* of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is your favorite kind of bread?

Do you like to picnic? If so, where is your favorite spot?

Information

Today, we look at a familiar story. Without conducting extensive research, I guarantee that this story is found in every children’s Bible as it should be. A child plays an important role in the story. The church must have thought that this was a very important story. It is the only miracle story of Jesus’ public ministry that appears in all four gospels.

- Distribute the handout with the passage from Matthew 4 and the passage from John 6.
- Have a class member read John 6:1-16 from the handout.

“In all four Gospels this feeding, like John’s account of water being turned into wine in Cana, is a quiet event without surface drama that happens simply through what Jesus says....[T]he main theological point of the four accounts is a triple one: *the compassionate love of Jesus; the unique relationship of Jesus with God the Creator, who is free to generate this abundance from very little; and the rich symbolism of bread and eating, resonating with the Eucharist and much else.*”²

John’s Gospel is a book of parallels. We will look at two of those in today’s lesson. One parallel is with other New Testament writings and one parallel with an Old Testament writing.

Many interpreters of the Gospel of John believe that the author was familiar with the other three Gospels. John was writing for a new generation. Now that decades had passed since Jesus’ resurrection, new generations were rising that had been nurtured by followers of Jesus in what had become known as “the Church.”

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² David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 143. Author’s italics.

John's Gospel was written as an instructive document to emphasize "life with God." For John, "abiding" with Jesus is the foundation of discipleship. Our abiding in Jesus is a reflection of Jesus' abiding in his Father. Indeed, Jesus is teaching us how to live as if "life with God" matters in every aspect of our lives - not only when we need a miracle or a meal but when we do our daily routines of work, play, and picnic.

In verse 16, the people want to make Jesus king. Do you think this would have been tempting to Jesus? Why or why not?

Let's assume that this was a temptation for Jesus. Temptation itself is not a sin.

- Have a class member read Hebrews 4:15. [For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.]

The story of Jesus facing the devil's temptations in the wilderness is not found in John's Gospel. But there are interesting parallels and variations between this story and the temptation accounts found in Matthew and Luke. Let's refresh our memories with the temptation story found in Matthew's Gospel.

- Have a class member read Matthew 4:1-11 from the handout.

Let's compare these two stories. How does John's story parallel and vary from Matthew's account?

What was the first temptation? (to turn stones into bread)

How does that temptation parallel or contrast to what Jesus has just done?

“One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’ (Dt. 8:3) might be a text for the whole of John 6, with Jesus himself as both the bread and the word of God, and the repeated emphasis on his relationship to his Father corresponding to the devil’s repeated, ‘If you are the Son of God...’ (Mt. 4:3,6).”³

What was the second temptation? (to do something spectacular that would impress the crowds)

How does that temptation parallel or contrast to what Jesus has just done?

³ Ford, 146.

We know that what other Gospels called miracles, John calls “signs.” This is one of seven signs that point people to a true understanding of the identity, character, and purpose of Jesus. The people did not often understand this. They wanted to see miracles because they were, well, miraculous.

- Have a class member read John 6:30.

“When the crowd says to Jesus, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, that we may see it and believe in you’ (6:30)...there is an echo of the temptation to do something impressively dramatic to prove who he is, like throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem.”⁴

What is the third temptation? (to bow to Satan so Jesus could have authority/kingship)

How does that temptation parallel or contrast with what Jesus has just done?

“The explicit temptation in John 6 is to kingship, just as in Matthew and Luke Jesus is offered ‘authority’ over ‘all the kingdoms of the world.’”⁵

How does Jesus respond to each of these temptations? (Jesus quotes Scripture)

The people wanted to force Jesus to become their liberator, to lead a revolt against Rome as Moses led a revolt against Egypt. In facing these temptations, however, Jesus quotes Moses!

This would not be the last time that Jesus would face this temptation. Luke’s Gospel ends the temptation story a little differently than Matthew’s ending.

- Have a class member read Luke 4:13.

Let’s look at another way that John’s Gospel is a book of parallels.

John and the readers of his Gospel were knowledgeable of their Bible, what contemporary Christians call the Old Testament or the Hebrew Bible. The stories of Moses and the Exodus were repeated each year at Passover. Each year, the desire for liberation of the Jewish nation from the Roman Empire was rekindled. The hope for the appearance of a prophet like Moses was constant. John’s Gospel draws parallels and distinctions between Jesus and Moses.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Note these parallels between John 6 and the Exodus story from Numbers 11.⁶

- Have a class member read Numbers 11:4-15, 21-23 from the handout.
- A. Moses asks God “Where am I to get fish [food] to feed all these people?”//Jesus asks Philip, “Where shall ever we buy bread for these people to eat?” (6:5.)
- B. The people grumble as their tummies grumble (Num. 11:1)
 - Have a class member read John 6:41- 43.
- C. Description of the manna (Num. 11:7-9)
 - Have a class member read John 6:30-33.
- D. “Give us flesh that we may eat.” (Num. 11:13)
 - Have a class member read John 6:34, 51.
- E. “Can all the fish (*opsos*) of the sea be gathered (*synagein*) to suffice them?” Num. 11:22
John 6:9 uses the same word for fish (*opsarion*). John 6:12 uses the same word for gather (*synagein*)
 - Have a class member read Deuteronomy 18:18-19. [18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him. 19 I myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name.]

“Jesus is identifying himself with that prophet and the refusal to believe him means that ‘your accuser is Moses’ [5:45-46]”⁷

“Moses was also seen popularly as a leader who combined being a prophet and a king, and he led his people to liberation in the exodus, The crowd makes the connection, and this leads into a surprise not found in the other gospels: the people ‘were about to come and take him by force to make him king.’... For the crowd to ‘make him king’ would be for Jesus to defy Rome and lead an insurrection, seeking the sort of liberation that Moses the prophet had achieved.”⁸

It may have been tempting, but Jesus would not go there.

Transformational Exercise

The Gospel of John emphasizes the “more abundant life” that Jesus offers those who will follow him (John 10:10). Listen to these verses from a newer translation of the New Testament:

⁶ Parallels are noted in Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel of John*. The Anchor Bible, Volume 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 233.

⁷ Ford, 137.

⁸ Ford, 144.

“As they were filled up, he says to his Apprentices, ‘Assemble the abounding broken pieces so there may not be any destroyed.’ Therefore, they assembled and filled twelve baskets of broken pieces from the five barley breads that were abounding for those who had eaten.”⁹

Although we as Christians have confessed our failures in facing temptations and have claimed salvation through Jesus, we sometimes do what these people did. We want to see miracles that we think will prove that our trust in Jesus is not futile. We wonder if God is strong enough, or if God cares enough, to provide for our needs. We fall to temptations and we rationalize following the desires of our sinful wills.

“The narrator has just told us the reason so many Galileans had gathered around Jesus: They were attracted to the signs he performed (Jn 4:45)... These people were following Jesus for the free food and sideshow... Even though Jesus performed signs to reveal his identity so they would believe *in him*, the miracles ended up frustrating his purpose. The Galileans were more interested in the signs than in the one to whom the signs pointed.”¹⁰

Miracles are amazing. But what is needed is faith in the God who makes miracles happen. And, we need faith when the miracle does not happen.

There is only one place in this narrative where John uses the word for tempt or test (v.6 *peirazein*). In that use, it is not Jesus who is tempted, but Jesus who tests Philip. How does Philip respond to this test?

It was not easy to follow Jesus, even when he did such amazing signs.

- Have a class member read John 6:66-69.

Re: Jesus’ question - “Lahan thinks Peter’s confession [‘Where else would we go, Lord? You have words of eternal life.’ (6:68)] is the ‘right answer’ to the question asked by Jesus [of Philip] at the beginning of this entire episode.”¹¹

In the next few moments of silent prayer, reflect on how you respond to Jesus and his call to follow him. Are you more like Philip or more like Peter? More like those who walked away or more like those who decided to stay, to abide? Based on that reflection, what prayer can you lift to God?

⁹ Scot McKnight, *The Second Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023)

¹⁰ Rodney Reeves, *Spirituality According to John: Abiding in Christ in the Johannine Writings* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 63.

¹¹ Reeves, 18n

After a few moments of silence, close in a prayer something like this: *God, we trust that you give us the bread of life through Jesus Christ. We pray that you will nourish our spirits. Use us to nourish others around us. When we are tempted, deliver us from evil. Amen.*

Was Jesus Tempted?

Matthew 4 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. **2** He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was famished. **3** The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” **4** But he answered, “It is written,

‘One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’ ”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, **6** 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.’ ”

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’ ”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, **9** and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” **10** Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

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

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

John 6 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. **2** A large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. **3** Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. **4** Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. **5** When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” **6** He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. **7** Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” **8** One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, **9** “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” **10** Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. **11** Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. **12** When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” **13** So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. **14** When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

Numbers 11:4 The camp followers with them had a strong craving, and the Israelites also wept again and said, “If only we had meat to eat! **5** We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, **6** but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

7 Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of gum resin. **8** The people went around and gathered it, ground it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boiled it in pots and made cakes of it, and the taste of it was like the taste of cakes baked with oil. **9** When the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna would fall with it.

10 Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. **11** So Moses said to the LORD, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? **12** Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a wet nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors’? **13** Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me, saying, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ **14** I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. **15** If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

21 But Moses said, “The people I am with number six hundred thousand on foot, and you say, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month’! **22** Are there enough flocks and herds to slaughter for them? Are there enough fish in the sea to catch for them?” **23** The LORD said to Moses, “Is the LORD’s power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.”

- All passages are from the New Revised Standard Version (updated edition)