

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*March 9, 2025*

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## **What are we worshipping?**

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sermon title question this morning is an important one. What are we worshipping? I know, you're probably thinking that the question should be who are we worshipping, but in my lived experience, that's not how humans generally operate. So instead I ask, what are we worshipping?

Power. That's what humanity tends to worship when left to our own devices. It's no wonder then, that power is at the heart of the temptations that Satan is placing before Jesus. If Jesus truly is fully human, then he will find it nigh impossible to resist these temptations.

First, use your power to satisfy yourself. That's the deeper temptation of the first test. Mere hunger is just the surface level. Jesus is full of divine power and purpose, he could easily turn stones to bread, or mutton, or whatever else he might be in the mood for. Sure, at this point you could justify that it's for a basic necessity, food. But that doesn't concern Jesus. He knows that if he starts to use his power for such self-serving things he could lead him away from God. "One does not live by bread alone" shows us the commitment Jesus has to trusting in God's providence and to not using his power in ways that exert his independence from God.

This is a tough one for humanity. When we have power and influence, we tend to like to use it! And if we can use it to impress others, or to serve our own needs, all the better! We don't have to look far to see plenty of examples of people in power choosing to use that power for their own, self-serving ends. Elon Musk certainly springs quickly to mind, using the power he has

been granted to end investigations into his own companies is the epitome of this temptation!

On to the next temptation of power. The devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and promises to give them all to him. This one's pretty blatant, isn't it? Jesus gets to be in control of all the nations of the world. Wow! I'd have a tough time resisting this one! I'm a social one on the enneagram, I am all about social systems and how they could better work for everyone. I would LOVE the chance to be in charge of the world's systems! But I'm also honest enough to admit that I would definitely mess it up.

Jesus wouldn't mess it up though, would he? And the thing is, Jesus knows that the devil's power and dominion over the world is temporary. God is ultimately in control of the cosmos, and God has promised to place all things under Christ's feet. The power the devil is offering Jesus is paltry here, but it's still a temptation!

In many ways this is the greatest expression of the temptation of power... empire. When a person or group pursues this sort of power, it negatively impacts the whole human race. World wars have been fought over this temptation of power. The current economic systems that exploit and devastate the global south are a direct result of the pursuit of this sort of power.

Then the last temptation of power, more subtle than the second one. Use your power to test God's power. Throw yourself from this pinnacle and trust that God will catch you! It can almost be twisted into some sort of good thing, right? Sure you're testing God, but you're also proving your trust in God. You see the logic the devil is using here?

But Jesus understands that this is now how God chooses to exert power in the world. And to test God's willingness to use divine intervention over you is, ultimately, another selfish use of power. God prove your love and devotion to me! Which is entirely backwards. God's love and devotion is on display all around us. Our love and devotion to God is...a little less obvious.

Again and again and again Jesus refuses to use or take on power. And, if we're willing to move forward in Luke's Gospel we will discover that Jesus has a lot to say about power and its use. In Luke 9 Jesus commissions the disciples and gives them power to do what? Heal and cast out demons. That is how Jesus wants power to be used. At the Last Supper in Luke 22 Jesus teaches his disciples that any who wish to be great in the kingdom of God must be a servant. Jesus also uses numerous parables in Luke that point towards power used in service to others and in service to the Gospel.

Jesus is showing us how to resist the temptation of power. The greatest, and often one of the most subtle, temptations we face. He stood in the face of the devils' temptations and repeatedly centered God's will and God's power. This is our call today too. To center God's will and God's power.

This means that many of us gathered here this morning are actually called to give up some of our power. To make space at the tables we have places at for those who do not have places there. To find ways to live that lessen the impact of power used on the vulnerable. We can shop ethically, we can make our voices heard on behalf of the vulnerable and the oppressed.

Jesus is showing us that to resist power and the temptations of power, we focus on God, the source of all power. When we focus on God we focus on the one who made us and all that exists. When we focus on God we find our attention being drawn out from ourselves and towards the world around us. When we focus on God we hear the teachings of Christ to center self-sacrificial love, mercy and justice, acceptance and abundance.

This focus on God will mean we lose power, but at the same time we find ourselves drawn closer to God's divine power...love. Love is an act of resistance to power. Relationship and community are integral to God's kingdom and anathema to the empires of the world. What are we worshiping? Power? God? Love? What? I know what I am trying to worship. How about you? Amen.