

February 22, 2026
Matthew 4:1-11

Lent 1
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Identity Test”

“Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

Are you a human?

Until recently, I have never been asked this question. It always was assumed that I was a human being when I wrote to someone, or called someone on the phone, or made a purchase online. But recently, questions about my identity very humanity have become a regular part of my interactions on the internet. The rise of non-human entities online – so-called “bots” who can make numerous contacts a second – has made it necessary to verify one’s humanity before a purchase or interaction can begin. This can also be experienced with “two-step verification,” in which a message is sent to one’s phone to verify that a purchase or other online transaction is being placed by the person who claims to be the buyer online. While it can be annoying, for anyone who has been a victim of identity theft these extra steps can prevent experiences of online fraud that can have devastating consequences for one’s financial status and even a person’s very identity.

The importance of verifying one’s identity has been important long before the internet became a regular part of our lives. Many businesses have required employees to present proper identification to gain access to their place of work (I worked for a few summers as a security guard at Lockheed Electronics, where a major part of my work was checking the identification of people coming into the plant and especially to more restricted areas). People who have made hotel reservations are often asked to present photo identification to certify that they are the person who booked this room. A person cannot get behind the wheel of a car without having their driver’s license with them, which may be required to be presented at any time by a law enforcement officer. Proper identification certifies that you are the person you claim to be and have the rights and privileges associated with your identification and status in various communities and organizations.

The identification of Jesus plays a central role in the Gospel of Matthew as the Evangelist is presenting the story of the person who we worship as our Lord and Saviour. It begins with his account of the birth of Jesus in the story in which the

angel reassures Joseph to *“not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit,”* and that the child he will name Jesus will be the fulfillment the promise of Isaiah that *“the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God is with us.”* (1:20-23). Matthew’s birth narrative continues when the wise men from the east appear in Jerusalem asking, *“where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”* (2:2). When he appears on the banks of the Jordan River, John the Baptist speaks of *“one who is more powerful than I [who] is coming after me ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”* (3:11-12); and after John has baptized Jesus, the heavens were opened and a voice declares, *“this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”* (3:17).

As Jesus’ identity has been presented in these first chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, this identity is now tested and certified when *“Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil”* (4:1). Before Jesus’ public ministry begins when he begins to proclaim *“repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”* (4:17), his identity is tested in a scene whose function is not to proscribe the means or goals of Jesus ministry but to establish its basis in Jesus’ identity; *“the scene affirms Jesus’ identity as God’s agent or son as the foundation for his ministry activity”* (Warren Carter). The temptation story in Matthew is a verbal battle between Jesus and Satan in which the Tempter tries to divert the obedient Son of God from his path. Its closest parallels in this Gospel are the debates between Jesus and the Jewish leaders later in Matthew when he is challenged *“by what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”* (21:23). Conflict with Satan is not limited to this passage but is the underlying aspect of the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, which is the plot of the whole Gospel. In Matthew’s theology, Satan continues to tempt Jesus throughout his ministry (*“But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block for me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things’”* – 16:23). Satan will also tempt Jesus at his crucifixion and into the time of the church (*“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.”* – 13:19) until the Tempter is finally abolished at the end time (*“you that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* – 25:41). Jesus is presented throughout this Gospel with *“devil-inspired diversions which serve as opportunities for him to affirm his identity and loyalty.”* (Carter).

As Jesus came from Galilee for the purpose of being baptized (3:13), he is now led by the Spirit into the wilderness for the purpose of being tempted by the devil. Jesus’

submission to temptation is not an accident or a matter of being victimized by demonic power but is part of his obedience to God. The period of “forty days and forty nights” is reminiscent of the ordeal of Moses when *“he was there with the LORD for forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water”* (Exodus 34:28). Jesus, the true Son of God who recapitulated Israel’s experience of coming out of Egypt (*“This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’”* – 2:15), is tested in the wilderness and remains obedient to God, specifically refusing to worship another. *“In contrast to Israel in the wilderness, whose faith wavered until it was restored by the miraculous manna, Jesus is hungry but remains faithful without a miracle.”* (M. Eugene Boring). The temptation begins after the forty-day period of fasting has ended, which has strengthened and prepared Jesus for his encounter with Satan but has also left him hungry. The devil senses this hunger and sees it as a way to trap Jesus at a moment of physical weakness; and so, he challenges Jesus to prove that *“if you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”* (4:3). The word “if” can also be translated “since,” implying that Satan is making his argument based on a fact he accepts as true, that Jesus is the Son of God. The disputed issue is not whether Jesus is the Son of God, but what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. It was a feature of some Jewish expectations of the Messiah that he would reproduce the miracle of the manna and that there would be a lavish supply of food in the messianic time. Jesus is challenged by Satan to show that he qualifies as the Messiah by this criterion; the plural “stones” indicates that the bread would be not only for himself but to provide food for all as would happen at the feeding of the Five Thousand (14:15-21).

The devil’s challenge would not be a temptation if Jesus were not able to turn stones into bread that could feed a multitude; but Jesus refused to prioritize the cravings of his own body or even providing food that will feed a multitude for one day over his higher obligation to do the will of the Father in all circumstances. He resists the devil’s tempting challenge through the power of Scripture: *“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’”* (4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). The miraculous feeding that Jesus will provide will be signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God in which God’s people *“will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.”* (Revelation 7:16-17).

The devil’s next temptation is to take Jesus *“to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying, ‘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."" (4:5-6). The reference to the "holy city" has eschatological overtones (*"And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband"* – Revelation 21:2). The devil chooses the Temple because this is where God had chosen to make God's presence dwell among God's people (*"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"* – Psalm 122:1). The temptation is for Jesus to make a sensational demonstration that he is the Son of God; instead of trusting in the Lord's care – which is the real message of Psalm 91:11-12 that the devil weaponizes in his challenge to Jesus – the devil urges Jesus to certify the truth of Scripture by making a daredevil's leap from the sanctuary, an attempt to manipulate God into action. But Jesus recognizes that *"such an attempt to manipulate God into action is presumptuous. The Father will not be forced to prove himself at our bidding"* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Instead of giving into this temptation, Jesus again resists the devil's enticements through the power of Scripture: *"Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'"* (4:7; Deuteronomy 6:16).

The devil's third temptation is for Jesus to rule the kingdoms of the world, to assume to role presently played by the Roman emperor, and to do so by capitulating to the devil's kingship: *"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.'"* (4:8-9). The devil is offering Jesus a shortcut to achieving his messianic objectives: kingly power and glory without humiliation or torment that Jesus will endure on the Cross. But as enticing as this might be, Jesus remains unmoved, driving the devil off this time with his own words and with the words of Scripture: *"Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"* (4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13). Jesus recognizes that bowing before Satan would be an act of idolatry, and Jesus will have no part in it.

- "There is a twofold armor with which the devil is slain and which he fears: to listen unceasingly to the Word of God, to instruct oneself in it, and to be comforted and strengthened by it; then, when temptation and struggle come upon us, to lift up our hearts to that same Word and cry to God, invoking him for help." – Martin Luther, 1539.

Having overcome the powerful temptations of the devil, Jesus has proven his identity as the loyal Son of God. By placing the Kingdom of God first, even though it meant rejecting food and the help of angels, Jesus finally achieves both when *"the devil left*

him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him” (4:11). Jesus is fed by angels as Elijah was after his own ordeal (“The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, ‘Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.’” – 1 Kings 19:7). Jesus’ receiving food and the ministering of the angels anticipates his teaching to his followers to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (6:33).

- “If Jesus acts on the devil’s bidding, he becomes an agent or son of the devil. He ceases to be an agent or son of God. He would destroy his identity. Further, the devil misrepresents the nature of Jesus’ sonship. The devil’s three tests involve only displays of power. Jesus will, of course, use miraculous power, but his sonship also involves suffering and death.” – Carter.

Jesus’ ordeal in the wilderness is central to proving his identity as the true Son of God and is included in the narratives of all three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Luke adds an ominous note to the end of his narrative: *“When the devil had finished every test, he departed from Jesus until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13).* This “opportune time” would come at Golgotha, where the crowds tempted Jesus as he was dying on the Cross: *“He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!” (Luke 23:35).* Like the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus had the power to come down from the Cross and live a longer life; but in doing so, he would not longer be the Messiah of God who accomplishes God’s will through the giving of his *“holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death” (Small Catechism).* It is this fulfillment of Jesus’ identity through his resistance of any temptations that would prevent his fulfillment of God’s Will that is the source of our identity as we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, *“reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ” (ELW Holy Baptism).* As our identity is rooted in the moment when God claimed us as God’s children and when we were *“sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever,”* we have the assurance that when we face similar temptations we have the power of Christ with us that will give us the ability to resist this “two-factor identification” so that there is no doubt that we are God’s people. As the temptation in the wilderness was not the end of Jesus’ encounters with the enticements of the Evil One, we will also face trials and temptations that will attempt to throw us off the path of discipleship and call our identity as children of God into question:

- “The devil awaits that opportune time with us, that time when he can appeal to our injured pride, our wounded ego, our fear of not being appreciated, our

anger at being ignored. These are those opportune times when the devil's persistence reaps great benefits." – Peter Gomes.

Jesus knew that his followers would face the same temptations he encountered; so, in the prayer we know as the Lord's Prayer he included the petition "*lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.*" In his explanation in the *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther teaches us the meaning of this prayer in our lives as disciples of Christ:

- "It is true that God tempts no one, but we ask in this prayer that God would preserve and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, other great and shameful sins, and that, although we may be attacked by them, we may finally prevail and gain the victory."

It is not a matter if we will be tempted as Christ faced temptation, but when we will be tempted and how we might resist such enticements. As we cannot by our own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, neither can we resist temptation on our own. We are called to look to the one who "*in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*" (Hebrews 4:15-16). When we encounter trials and temptations, the Word of God reminds us that "*we should never be discouraged – take it to the Lord in prayer.*" (ELW 742).

- "Then tell the devil to get lost and decide what you will do for Lent. Better yet, decide who you will be. Worship the Lord your God and serve no one else. Expect great things, from God and from yourself. Believe that everything is possible. Why should any of us settle for less?" – Barbara Brown Taylor.

As Jesus' "two-step verification" of his identity was accomplished when he resisted the temptations of the devil and remained steadfast in his mission as the true Son of God, the proof of our identity as God's holy one comes when we trust in God and resist anything that would entice us to follow any path other than the one our Lord has called us to travel with him. As Jesus trusted in God's Word to overcome to power of the Evil One, may we remain steadfast in God's Word so that it might continue to be the source of our strength and joy as we prove our identity through fulfilling our mission to serve "*in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve, and spread God's liberating word.*" (ELW Hymn 729). Amen.