

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: The Temptation and the Start of Ministry

Matthew 4:1-25

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, Matthew 4 is a pivotal chapter. It shows us the sinless Son of God genuinely tempted yet triumphant, fulfilling where Israel failed and qualifying as the faithful Savior who can sympathize with us in our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). It puts the authority and sufficiency of Scripture on vivid display, as Jesus wields the written word of God to defeat the devil. And it formally opens Jesus' ministry with the proclamation of the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God breaking into the world in Christ. This is the natural place to help your class understand what that kingdom is and is not: not a future earthly political reign achieved by force or grandeur, the very thing Jesus refused when the devil offered Him the kingdoms of the world, but the reign of God that would be established in Christ's church at Pentecost and continues now with Christ reigning at the right hand of God (Daniel 2:44; Acts 2; Colossians 1:13). Help your students get the kingdom right here, because misunderstanding it distorts much of what follows in Matthew.

At the same time, this chapter is intensely practical for the Christian life. Jesus models how to face temptation, not with willpower or argument but with the word of God hidden in the heart, and your students battle temptation every day. He shows that the path of obedience may lead through wilderness and weakness rather than around it. And He issues the call that defines every disciple: leave your nets and follow Me. The lesson aims to equip your students to stand against temptation, to treasure and use the Scriptures, and to count the cost of wholehearted discipleship.

So teach for both. Help your students grasp the identity of Jesus as the tested and triumphant Son, the authority of the word He wielded, and the nature of the kingdom He came to bring. Then let those truths shape them, sending them home better armed against temptation, more committed to the Scriptures, and more willing to drop their nets and follow the King.

Question 1

Student Question:

Each temptation begins with "If you are the Son of God" (4:3, 6), and each offers Jesus something good through a shortcut around the Father's will. What do the three temptations teach us about how the devil works and what he is really after?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by helping students see the strategy behind the three temptations. The first targets physical need: turn stones to bread after forty days of fasting (4:3). The second targets the

desire for spectacle and proof: throw yourself down from the temple and be dramatically rescued (4:5–6). The third targets ambition and power: all the kingdoms of the world, if Jesus will only bow to Satan (4:8–9). John’s summary fits perfectly, the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16).

Notice what each temptation has in common. None of them tempts Jesus toward something obviously evil. Bread, rescue, and kingdoms are not bad in themselves. The devil offers good things by a route that bypasses the Father’s will. That is his genius. Temptation rarely arrives labeled as sin; it arrives as a shortcut, a reasonable-looking path around obedience.

Point out the repeated probe: “If you are the Son of God” (4:3, 6). The tempter aims straight at the identity the Father had just affirmed at the Jordan. He wants Jesus to prove what God has already declared, to grasp by self-effort what the Father gives by grace. The enemy still works this way, whispering doubt about who we are in Christ and urging us to secure by sin what God has promised to provide.

Draw out what the devil is really after: to pull Jesus off the path of trusting, obedient sonship and onto the path of self-will. Behind every temptation is the invitation to take our lives into our own hands rather than trust the Father. Help your class recognize this pattern in their own temptations, where the bait is usually a good thing offered by a faithless route.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The strategy of temptation: good things offered through disobedient shortcuts (1 John 2:16)
- The devil’s aim to undermine our trust in God and in our identity in Christ
- Temptation rarely appearing as obvious evil, but as a reasonable-looking detour around God’s will
- Jesus genuinely tempted yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15)
- The call to trusting, obedient sonship rather than grasping self-will

Discussion Prompts

- Which of the three temptations, comfort, spectacle, or power, do you find most familiar?
- How does seeing temptation as a shortcut around God’s will change the way you recognize it?
- Where is the enemy trying to make you doubt or prove your identity in Christ?

Question 2

Student Question:

When tempted, Jesus did not rely on feelings or willpower but answered each time, “It is written” (4:4, 7, 10). What do you actually turn to first when temptation comes, and what would it take to fill your heart with Scripture the way Jesus had?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first self-examining question, so aim for honesty rather than information. Notice what Jesus did not do under temptation. He did not summon willpower, debate the devil on his own terms, or rely on His feelings. Three times He simply answered, "It is written" (4:4, 7, 10), and stood on the word of God. The sword of the Spirit was already in His hand because the word was already in His heart.

Press students on what they actually reach for first when temptation comes. Many of us reach for willpower, gritting our teeth and resolving to do better, and willpower fails. Others reach for rationalization, talking themselves into the sin. Few of us instinctively reach, as Jesus did, for a specific word of God already stored up and ready. The honest answer to this question is often convicting.

Make the connection to a hidden word. Jesus could quote Deuteronomy in the heat of temptation because He had treasured it long before the test came. The psalmist said, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11). Scripture cannot defend us in the moment of crisis if it is not already in us before the crisis. The battle is largely won or lost in advance.

Move toward a concrete plan. Encourage each student to identify their most common point of temptation and to find and memorize a specific passage that speaks to it, so that the next time the test comes, they too have something ready to draw. The goal is not more guilt but a better-armed heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The word of God as the believer's primary weapon against temptation (Ephesians 6:17)
- Scripture hidden in the heart before the moment of testing (Psalm 119:11)
- The insufficiency of willpower alone to overcome temptation
- Spiritual preparation as the key to standing firm in the trial
- Jesus as the model for resisting temptation by the word

Discussion Prompts

- What do you honestly reach for first when temptation hits?
- What is one passage you could memorize to meet your most common temptation?
- How might storing up Scripture now change the next time you are tested?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus quotes Deuteronomy three times, standing on the authority of God's written word against the devil himself (4:4, 7, 10). What does this reveal about the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for the Christian's life and warfare?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the authority Jesus assigns to Scripture. Facing the devil himself, the Son of God does not improvise; He quotes the written word, three times from Deuteronomy (4:4, 7, 10). For Jesus, "It is written" settles the matter. If the incarnate Son treated the Scriptures as the final authority and sufficient weapon, how much more should we.

Draw out the sufficiency on display. Jesus did not need new revelation, a special sign, or a clever new argument to defeat the tempter. The already-written word of God was enough. This points your class toward a settled conviction: the Scriptures are sufficient to equip us for every battle and every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). We are not waiting for some further word; God has spoken, and His word stands.

Help students grasp the practical weight of this for the church. The same word that defeated the devil is our authority for faith and practice. We do not need to supplement Scripture with human tradition, the latest spiritual fad, or claims of present-day new revelation. The completed New Testament is the all-sufficient pattern and guide for the people of God.

Then make it personal. Treating Scripture as authoritative means letting it actually decide things, even when it cuts against our preferences. Ask your students whether the Bible truly functions as the final word in their lives, or whether it competes with feelings, culture, and convenience for the deciding vote.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The authority of Scripture as the final word, modeled by Christ Himself (Matthew 4:4)
- The sufficiency of Scripture to equip us for every good work and every battle (2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The completed New Testament as the all-sufficient pattern for the church, without need of new revelation
- Scripture as the standard that must outrank feelings, culture, and convenience
- The written word as the believer's sword against the enemy (Ephesians 6:17)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell you that Jesus met the devil with Scripture rather than His own power?
- Does the Bible actually function as the final authority in your daily decisions?
- Where are you tempted to let feelings or culture outrank the clear word of God?

Question 4

Student Question:

The devil even quoted Scripture to Jesus, twisting Psalm 91 to serve his purpose (4:6). Where are you tempted to bend or selectively use God's word to justify what you already want to do, and how can you guard against handling Scripture that way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Turn to the unsettling detail in the second temptation. The devil himself quotes Scripture, citing Psalm 91:11–12 about angels guarding God's servant (4:6). The enemy knows the Bible and is happy to use it, twisted and ripped out of context, to serve his ends. Jesus answers not by rejecting Scripture but by quoting Scripture rightly: "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test" (4:7).

Help students draw the sober lesson. It is possible to quote the Bible and still be wrong, even to use the Bible against God's will. A verse pulled from its context and bent toward what we already want is a dangerous thing. The defense is not less Scripture but Scripture handled rightly, read in context and balanced by the whole counsel of God.

Press the self-examination. We are all tempted, at times, to go hunting for a verse that will justify a decision we have already made, rather than submitting our decisions to the Scriptures. We seize on a promise out of context, ignore the commands we dislike, and quietly edit the Bible down to what suits us. Ask where students are tempted to handle the word this way.

Move toward faithful handling of the text. Encourage your class to read Scripture in context, to let the clear passages interpret the unclear, and to come to the Bible asking what God means rather than looking for what they want. Paul urges Timothy to be a worker who rightly handles the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). That is the safeguard against the devil's use of a verse.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of misusing or twisting Scripture, even by quoting it (Matthew 4:6; 2 Peter 3:16)
- The importance of reading Scripture in context and in light of the whole counsel of God
- Rightly handling the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15)
- The temptation to use the Bible to justify what we already want
- Submitting our desires to Scripture rather than bending Scripture to our desires

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you tempted to use a verse to justify what you already want to do?
- How can you guard against twisting Scripture to fit your preferences?
- What habits help you read the Bible in context and submit to its meaning?

Question 5**Student Question:**

Jesus began His public ministry with the same message as John: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). What does Jesus mean by the kingdom of heaven, and what does it mean that it was, even then, drawing near in His person?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Center this question on Jesus’ opening proclamation: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). Matthew tells us this is the heart of Jesus’ message from the start, the same word John had preached. Help your class understand what this kingdom is, because much of Matthew depends on getting it right.

Define the kingdom of heaven as the reign or rule of God, His kingly sovereignty breaking into the world in the person of Christ the King. It is not first a place but a reign, the active rule of God reclaiming what is His. When Jesus says it is “at hand,” He means it has drawn near in Him. The King has arrived; the long-awaited reign of God is breaking in.

Trace where this is going, so your students are not left with a vague notion. The kingdom Jesus announces as near would be fully established in power at Pentecost, when the church began (Mark 9:1; Acts 2). From then until now, Christ reigns as King from the right hand of God, and His kingdom is His church, the realm where His rule is gladly received (Colossians 1:13; Acts 2:30–36). This was foretold by Daniel, who saw God set up a kingdom that “shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44).

Connect repentance to the kingdom once more. Because the King has come and the reign of God is breaking in, the only fitting response is to repent, to change allegiance and submit to the King. You do not drift into the kingdom; you turn and enter it. Help students feel the urgency Jesus packed into that one electric sentence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The kingdom of heaven as the reign and rule of God breaking in through Christ (Matthew 4:17)
- The kingdom drawing near in the person of the King Himself
- The kingdom established in power at Pentecost in Christ’s church (Mark 9:1; Acts 2)
- Christ reigning now as King at the right hand of God (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13)
- The kingdom foretold by Daniel as one that shall never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44)
- Repentance as the fitting response to the arrival of the King

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to you that the kingdom is the reign of God rather than first a place?
- How does it change things to know that Christ is reigning as King right now?
- What does it look like, practically, to live as a citizen under the reign of the King?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and “immediately they left their nets” and their father to follow Him (4:20, 22). What is Jesus asking you to leave behind in order to follow Him more fully, and what makes it hard to let go?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Look closely at the call of the first disciples. Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men,” and Matthew records that “immediately they left their nets and followed him” (4:19–20). James and John leave not only the nets but the boat and their father (4:22). The response is immediate and costly; they walk away from livelihood and family ties to follow.

Help students feel the weight of what was left. The nets were their income, their security, their identity as fishermen. Following Jesus meant releasing the very things their lives had been built on. Discipleship has always involved leaving, letting go of whatever competes with allegiance to Christ.

Press the question into specifics. What is Jesus asking each student to leave? For one it may be a sinful habit; for another a career idol, a relationship that pulls them from God, a grudge, a comfort, or a plan they have clutched too tightly. The nets are different for each of us, but the call to leave them and follow is the same.

Acknowledge honestly why it is hard. We cling to our nets because they feel safe, because we have invested in them, because we cannot yet see what following will cost or bring. Encourage students that what they leave for Christ is never a loss; the One who calls them also remakes them, turning fishermen into fishers of men. Following Jesus is the best exchange a person can ever make.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The call to follow Christ as a call to leave whatever competes with Him (Luke 14:33)
- Immediate, wholehearted obedience as the response to Jesus’ call (Matthew 4:20, 22)
- The cost of discipleship and the surrender of security and idols
- Christ’s promise to remake those who follow Him, turning them into fishers of men
- Following Jesus as gain, not loss (Philippians 3:7–8)

Discussion Prompts

- What net is Jesus asking you to leave in order to follow Him more fully?
- What makes that particular thing so hard to let go of?
- What gives you confidence that what you leave for Christ is never truly lost?

Question 7**Student Question:**

After the testing, Jesus went throughout Galilee “teaching, preaching, and healing” (4:23), and great crowds followed. What does the pattern of Jesus’ ministry teach us about the heart of God toward broken and hurting people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Look at the pattern of Jesus’ opening ministry in verses 23 through 25. He went throughout Galilee “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (4:23). Word spread, and crowds came from everywhere, bringing the sick, the suffering, the demon-oppressed, the paralyzed. Jesus healed them.

Help students see the heart of God revealed here. Jesus does not hold the broken at arm’s length or treat their suffering as an inconvenience. He moves toward the hurting. The same Son who refused to turn stones to bread for Himself freely pours out healing for others. His power is wielded not for self-display but in compassion for people in pain.

Draw out the balance in His ministry. Jesus both proclaimed truth and met needs, both preached the gospel of the kingdom and healed bodies. He cared about the whole person. His teaching was not cold doctrine and His compassion was not empty sentiment; the two went together. That balance is a model for how His people are to love.

Then make it practical for the church today. While the age of miraculous healing through the apostles served to confirm the word in its time, the compassion of Christ remains the calling of His people now. Ask students how they can reflect that same heart, moving toward the hurting around them with both the truth of the gospel and tangible love, rather than keeping their distance.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The compassion of Christ toward the broken and suffering (Matthew 4:23–24; 9:36)
- Jesus moving toward the hurting rather than away from them
- The balance of proclaiming truth and meeting needs in Jesus’ ministry
- The gospel of the kingdom as central to Jesus’ preaching (Matthew 4:23)
- The compassion of Christ as a calling for His people to imitate (Galatians 6:10)

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus’ movement toward the hurting reveal about the heart of God?
- How do you hold together proclaiming truth and showing compassion?
- Who is one hurting person God is calling you to move toward this week?

Question 8

Student Question:

The first disciples were ordinary working men, not scholars or religious leaders, yet Jesus called them to “follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (4:19). Where do you sell short what God could do through an ordinary life surrendered to Christ, including your own?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice who Jesus called first. Not scribes, priests, or scholars, but ordinary fishermen at their nets, working men with calloused hands and no religious credentials (4:18–22). The Lord chose to build His ministry on common people, and He promised to make them into something they could never have made themselves: fishers of men.

Help students confront the way we underestimate what God can do through ordinary lives. We tend to assume that God uses the gifted, the trained, the impressive, and that people like us are spectators. The calling of these fishermen says otherwise. God delights to take ordinary people and do extraordinary things through them, so that the glory is plainly His (1 Corinthians 1:26–29).

Press the self-examination gently. Many believers quietly sideline themselves, thinking they have too little to offer, too ordinary a life, too small a platform. This is a subtle form of unbelief, underestimating not ourselves but the God who calls and equips. The same Lord who made fishermen into apostles is at work in your students.

Encourage a concrete step of availability. The point is not to chase greatness but to make oneself available. Ask students where they have been holding back, assuming they are not the kind of person God uses, and invite them to offer their ordinary life, gifts, and circumstances to Christ, trusting Him to do the making.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s pattern of using ordinary, unlikely people for His purposes (1 Corinthians 1:26–29)
- Christ’s promise to make and equip those He calls (Matthew 4:19)
- The sin of underestimating what God can do through a surrendered life
- Availability to God as more important than natural credentials
- The glory belonging to God when He works through the ordinary

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you sell short what God could do through your ordinary life?
- What keeps you on the sidelines, assuming you are not the kind of person God uses?
- What would it look like to make yourself fully available to Christ this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus refused the devil's offer of "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" in exchange for worship (4:8–10), choosing the Father's path to a very different kind of kingdom. What does this teach us about the nature of Christ's kingdom, how it is established, and the kind of King Jesus chose to be?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, so give it the fullest treatment. Return to the third temptation, the most revealing of the three. The devil shows Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" and offers them in exchange for worship (4:8–9). It is a staggering offer: the very thing Jesus came to win, dominion over all the earth, handed over instantly, without a cross. And Jesus refuses, driving the tempter away with the word: "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (4:10).

Draw out what Jesus rejected and why. He refused to gain the kingdom by the devil's route, through shortcut, spectacle, and worldly power. He would not seize an earthly empire of force and glory. The kind of kingship the devil offered, political dominion grasped without the cross, was precisely the kind Jesus came to reject. His kingdom would come another way entirely.

Lay out clearly what kind of kingdom Jesus chose, because this is vital for your class. Jesus would establish His kingdom not by armies or thrones won through compromise, but through obedience to the Father all the way to the cross, through dying for His people and rising again, and through gathering willing subjects who gladly receive His reign. His kingdom would be established in power at Pentecost as His church, and He reigns now from the right hand of God (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13). Daniel had foreseen a kingdom God Himself would set up, one that would never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44).

Here is where you can gently but firmly correct a common error. The kingdom Jesus refused in the wilderness, an earthly political empire of worldly power and glory, is exactly the kind of kingdom some still expect Him to set up, whether the Israel of His day longing for a political messiah or those today who look for a future earthly thousand-year reign on a throne in Jerusalem. But Jesus turned that down at the very start of His ministry. His kingdom is not of this world; it is His spiritual reign, already established and already advancing, with Christ ruling now over His church. We are not waiting for an earthly political kingdom; we are living under the reign of the King who already sits enthroned.

Close in worship, not mere argument. Marvel with your class at the King who refused the easy crown and chose the cross, who would not grasp by compromise what He would win by sacrifice. The astonishing thing is not only what kind of kingdom He built, but what it cost Him to build it, and that He invites us to bow gladly to a King who first gave Himself for us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus refusing to gain the kingdom by worldly power, shortcut, or compromise (Matthew 4:8–10)
- The nature of Christ's kingdom: spiritual, established through the cross and resurrection, not by force
- The kingdom established at Pentecost as Christ's church, with Christ reigning now (Acts 2:30–36; Colossians 1:13)
- Daniel's foretold kingdom that shall never be destroyed (Daniel 2:44)
- Correcting the expectation of a future earthly political kingdom or thousand-year reign in Jerusalem
- Worship and service belonging to God alone (Matthew 4:10)

Discussion Prompts

- Why do you think Jesus refused the kingdoms the devil offered Him?
- How is the kingdom Jesus chose to build different from an earthly political empire?
- What does it stir in you that the King refused the easy crown and chose the cross?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter: the wilderness testing, the sword of Scripture, the call to follow. Name one specific way Jesus is calling you to resist temptation, lean on His word, or follow Him more wholeheartedly this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole chapter and turn it toward the heart. Matthew 4 has shown us the tested and triumphant Son, the sword of Scripture, the proclamation of the kingdom, and the call to leave the nets and follow. The aim now is not more information but a single, honest yes.

Encourage specificity, because vague resolutions fade by Tuesday. A real answer might sound like: "I will memorize a passage to meet the temptation that keeps defeating me," or "I will finally leave the net I have been clutching and follow Christ in this area," or "I will move toward a hurting person this week instead of keeping my distance." Help each person find their one thing.

Let the question land personally. You might give a moment of silence for each student to write a single sentence before sharing. The goal is that no one leaves having merely admired Jesus in the wilderness; each should leave having decided to follow Him more closely in some concrete way.

Close in worship, not only in resolve. The wonder of Matthew 4 is that the King faced the tempter for us, refused the easy crown for us, and now calls us to follow Him. Lead your class to

marvel at such a King, and let resistance to temptation, love for His word, and wholehearted following all flow from that wonder.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The integration of doctrine and daily transformation
- Resisting temptation, treasuring Scripture, and following Christ as fruits of genuine encounter with Him
- Specific, concrete obedience as the response to truth
- Worship and gratitude as the proper motive for Christian obedience and discipleship

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from Matthew 4 that God most wants to work into your heart?
- What specific step will you take this week, whether to resist temptation, lean on His word, or follow Him?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?