

## Playing with Fire – Acts 15:5-11

There is an infamous **cult of quasi-Christians** living in the hills of West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. Every once in a while they pull out their stash of **rattlesnakes** and play with them in their church services. They **carry** them; they **stroke** them; they even **hold** them up to their **faces, taunting** and **teasing** them. These people believe that the promises of **Mark 16** apply to them: *“And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.”* Sometimes these people have been bitten by their rattlers, and sometimes they have recovered. The bite of a rattlesnake is not necessarily fatal to some people even without the promise of God. But some of these cultists have died from the poison of their snakes. And I’m sure that the explanation would include something about a lack of faith on the part of deceased.

I don’t know how you define snake-handling, but I call it *“playing with fire,”* and **I don’t recommend it**. I don’t believe that **Mark 16** is giving anyone the authority to **tempt those snakes** to bite. Nor does that scripture give anyone the authority to **tempt the Lord** to heal the person once he’s bitten. And that is perhaps a good definition for the old adage *“playing with fire.”* It is playing with fire to try to blackmail Jehovah into doing things for sinners like us.

We are going to come back to this in a few minutes, but a critical part of **Satan’s temptation of Christ** actually involved tempting God the Father. Satan suggested that the Lord Jesus do things which would have forced the Father to react. But Jesus’ reply was, *“Thou shalt NOT tempt the Lord thy God.”*

Here is the question for us this morning: *“Do you ever tempt God?”* When anyone tempts the Lord, even a Christian, it is like holding up a loaded rattlesnake before his face. To tempt the Lord our God is *“playing with fire,”* and eventually we are going to be burned. Perhaps you aren’t sure how to answer my question. You don’t know if you ever tempt the Lord. Well then, let’s make a brief survey of the scriptures which talk about this subject.

### **We tempt God when we try to usurp His AUTHORITY and quarrel with His WORD.**

The first thing to recognize is that the Judaizers of our scripture were probably saints of God. All these people were members of the Lord’s first church – the local assembly in Jerusalem. Maybe you’ll be bold enough to say that some of these were hypocrites and not truly born again, but you’ll have to do that without any clear scriptural support. You might reach that conclusion logically by examining their doctrine, but I don’t think that their faith was actually misplaced. **They** may not have been trusting their Jewishness, but when they told the gentile believers that they had to be circumcised, they were almost forcing those people to divert their faith from Christ to Jewish ceremonialism. The Judaizer’s faith may have been pure, but the results of their doctrine was a poison to others. And in putting their rattlesnake to the face of these Gentile believers they were committing the sin of tempting the Lord. In fact, if the Lord Jesus would have sinned, if HE had tempted the Father. While on at the pinnacle of the temple, Satan said, *“Cast thyself down, for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning thee.”* But *“Jesus said unto him, It is written ... thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.”* The Lord Jesus, was never tempted to *“play with fire.”* He could not be induced tempt the Father, because that would have been sin, and He was sinless and impeccable.

Here in **Acts**, what was it that the Judaizers were doing to draw this rebuke from Peter? Weren’t they trying to **usurp the authority of God?** Weren’t were telling Paul that what the Lord had taught him was not correct; that it was unbiblical? Weren’t they saying that what GOD had revealed to him was unbiblical? Obviously, those were not the words they used, nor was that even thinking. They would admit that only Paul was wrong, not that GOD was wrong. But Peter when heard Paul’s testimony and added it to the instruction that he had received from the Lord, he realized that his fellow church members were actually quarreling with the Lord.

How often do professing Christians criticize or correct the Word of God? Have you ever thought, *“I will never love that person – because of what he did to me.”* In effect you are telling God that He has no business commanding you to love your enemies. Have you ever said, *“God, this is MY money, and I’m not going to listen to your instructions about how to spend MY money.”* Have you ever said, *“I refuse to submit myself to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him.”* How many people have sat in those pews and heard me read scriptures which spoke about God’s sovereign election, but they said that they would never, never, ever believe those verses?

Every time we read Paul’s words, refusing to believe them or practice them, we are tempting God. Because the words of Paul, as found in the Bible, are the words of God – inspired by the Holy Spirit. Have you ever tempted the Lord by rejecting or despising His Word or His authority?

**When we QUESTION God’s LEADERSHIP AND BLESSING, we tempt the Lord.**

Please turn with me to **Exodus 17:1**. *“And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, after their journeys, according to the commandment of the LORD.”* Israel marched from one campsite to another under the direct leadership of Jehovah. And one day they pitched their tents in **Rephidim** – but there was no water for the people to drink. At the command of God the nation settled at a place without water. *“Wherefore the people did chide with Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink.”* It wasn’t Moses who determined this itinerary, and they knew it. They could all see the pillar of fire as it leaned away from the Tabernacle and started to move forward, nevertheless the people blamed Moses for the lack of water in their new campground. *“And Moses said unto them, Why chide ye with me? wherefore do ye **TEMPT** the LORD? **Verse 7** – “And he called the name of the place **Massah**, and **Meribah**, because of the chiding of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the LORD, saying, Is the LORD among us, or not?”* The names **“Massah”** and **“Meribah”** mean **“temptation”** and **“contention.”** And **Exodus 17** is not the only place we find them in the Word of God.

How many times have you met people who have suffered tragedy of one sort or another, and they have become angry with the Lord for permitting their loss? They have just enough knowledge of God to recognize His sovereignty, but they haven’t begun to understand the way in which He works. *“God, what logical reason is there for leading us to an oasis without enough water?” “Lord, what RIGHT do you have to bring us into this desert?”*

The man who has 20/20 eye-sight can only see only so far down the road, even on a clear day. Those of us with astronomical myopia can’t see much beyond our noses without help. But even with perfect vision no one can see into the future; all we can do is squint and guess. The Israelites could only see that their children were thirsty; They couldn’t see their need of Sinai and the law. They couldn’t see that Rephidim was on the way to their intended destination. They couldn’t see that God had ordained a solution to their problem, but it was still a few miles down the road. Like us, Israel couldn’t see the bigger picture – only their immediate need and their limited human resources. So they began to murmur and complain against the leadership of the Lord.

That is like walking along a trail, hot, thirsty and exhausted, and all of a sudden you come across a snake. Then because you are hot, thirsty and exhausted, you pick up that snake, hold it before your face and complain to God about all your misery. Brother, just over the hill is home, water, a shower and ice cream.

Have you ever been unhappy with the leadership and providence of God in your life? Nine times out of ten we have inserted sin somewhere into the fabric of that quilt, but even when sin is not directly involved, things may not go according to our myopic perspective. And when we display displeasure against the leadership of the Lord, we have then inserted sin. We are playing with fire.

**The book of Numbers shows us that when we REFUSE TO LISTEN TO THE LORD we are tempting Him.**

When the twelve spies returned from scouting out the Promised Land, the majority report terrified the nation. But, two men, Joshua and Caleb told everyone that the Lord could be trusted and that His promise was true. *“Let’s go and take the Land.”* But the sinners of Israel were adamant: *“We’ll be gobbled up by the Anakim giants.”*

In **Numbers 14** – *“the LORD said unto Moses, How long will this people provoke me? and how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them? I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them...”* When we refuse to take God at His word; when we refuse to believe the Lord, we are tempting Him. And that chapter clearly tells us that to tempt God is a dangerous thing – it is a disastrous thing.

**WHEN WE LUST for things which God doesn’t want us to have, we tempt the Lord.**

Please turn to **I Corinthians 10**: Before we get there, let me remind you that just about every time the Bible recounts the history of Israel, those scriptures reach back to Massah and Meribah or one of their related incidents. It is as though that rebellion and complaining stand out foremost in the Lord’s memory. That is a caricature, but check it out and see how often the Holy Spirit brings up that part of Israel’s history

For example in **Psalms 78:15-21** we read: *“He clave the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink as out of the great depths. He brought streams also out of the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers. And they sinned yet more against him by provoking the most High in the wilderness. And they tempted God in their heart by asking meat for their lust. Yea, they spake against God; they said, Can God furnish a table in the wilderness? Behold, he smote the rock, that the waters gushed out, and the streams overflowed; can he give bread also? can he provide flesh for his people? Therefore the LORD heard this, and was wroth: so a fire was kindled against Jacob, and anger also came up against Israel.”*

**Verse 40:** *“How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert! Yea, they turned back and*

tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel. They remembered not his hand, nor the day when he delivered them from the enemy.” **Verse 54:** “And he brought them to the border of his sanctuary, even to this mountain, which his right hand had purchased. He cast out the heathen also before them, and divided them an inheritance by line, and made the tribes of Israel to dwell in their tents. Yet they tempted and provoked the most high God, and kept not his testimonies.”

In Paul’s history of Israel in **I Corinthians 10:6:** he said: “Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry.”

How often do we lust for things which God has apparently not wanted us to have? How often would we rather have the leeks and the garlicks of Egypt over the manna of God? How often do we wish that God didn’t require holiness so that we could join the ungodly for a little while? Even Christians need to be reminded that sin is a matter of the heart, not just the commission of some crime. And thus, even to yearn for forbidden fruit is bring the serpent up to our face.

**Matthew 5:27-28:** – “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. “Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” – **Hebrews 13:5.**

#### **To TEST THE LORD’S OMNISCIENCE is to tempt the Lord.**

Please return to **Acts 5** once again: “But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, and kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him. And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.”

As my old pastor used to say, “**Orthodoxy creates orthopraxy.**” When a person believes correctly, it produces proper behavior. Conversely, when his theology is wrong, his behavior is going to be wrong as well.

Ananias and Sapphira never learned or believed the doctrine of the omniscience of God. They somehow thought they could lie to the church and to the Holy Spirit and their lies would never be discovered. I won’t belabor the point, but that kind of idea is wrong – dead wrong. The cultist Ananias picked up a rattlesnake and held it up to his face defying it to strike him, but it did. “**Be sure your sins will find you out.**”

#### **In Matthew 4 we see that TO ASK GOD for MORE than we should is another way to tempt the Lord.**

Now please turn to **Matthew 4:1:** “Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, and saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt

*not tempt the Lord thy God. Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.*

There was a mixture of truth and error in every aspect of Satan's temptation of the Lord Jesus. The One Who multiplied the bread and fish to feed 9,000 people could certainly have commanded a few stones to become bread to feed Himself. But Jesus said that like ordinary men He was obligated to trust the Father to meet His needs. Without a doubt one day *"every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."* But for Christ to expedite that process by first bowing His knee to Satan would have been rebellion against the will of God. It would have been an act of idolatry.

Certainly God the Father would never have permitted His Son to die in a fall or an auto accident. It was ordained that Jesus would die on the cross to purchase our redemption. So if He had hurled Himself off the pinnacle of the temple, angels would have been sent to catch Him. But creating a situation which would have forced God to react would have been sin.

To drive a car down an icy road at 100 mph, praying that God keep us on that road is to tempt the Lord. And once our car leaves the road and crashes into a tree, to pray that God would spare our life is to tempt the Lord even farther.

**Romans 13** says: *"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."* When someone breaks laws designed to maintain the public good, that law-breaker had better not tempt God by praying that he be spared from the penalty of the Law.

**Perhaps in all of this you've become aware of AN OMISSION in my message thus far.**

When we are **tempted**, we are **enticed to DO** something. Usually, when we use that word *"tempted"* we think of it as a temptation to do something evil or sinful. But obviously **God cannot be tempted to do evil**. James says, *"Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed."* God cannot be tempted with evil or towards evil. But all **these verses** that we've been looking at **suggest** that **God CAN be tempted**.

What did Ananias and Sapphira actually and **really tempt the Lord to do?** To take their lives. And what was it that Israel tempted God to do when they refused to believe Joshua and Caleb? They tempted God to punish them with death in the wilderness. What is it that those cultists do when they cuddle their rattlesnakes? They may say that they are trusting God to keep them safe or to heal them, but in fact they are tempting God to kill them. When we sin against the Lord, we are not drawing out the grace of God to forgive us once again. We are tempting God to judge us.

That is what Peter was warning the Judaizers of here in **Acts 15**. That is about which we need to constantly warn ourselves. Put the serpents down and pick up the Word of God. Put your lusts down and pick up the promise of God.

Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God and live to rejoice in it.