

# 1

For all the complexity in life,  
and all the ambiguity in the practice of our faith,  
and all the inconsistency in our lives,  
sometimes it IS very simple...

There IS a God.  
You and I are not God  
Serve God and serve your neighbor in God's name  
Nurture a thankful heart.

There is an ancient line of reasoning in Christian thought:

That the greatest thing or being or reality that the human being can begin to comprehend is what we call "God."

If you accept this definition, then, the argument is never about whether or not there IS a god, it is simply a disagreement over the *nature* of god.

Is God good? Is God loving? Is god personal? Does God care about my life?

If "God" is the greatest thing in our life, then what is "my god?" Who or what is "your god?"

On a personal, practical level: What is the most important thing in your life?

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It is good to consider some possible “candidates,” if you will, for “god” in our life:

- 1.) Personal comfort and pleasure can be our god.
- 2.) Safety and security can be our god.
- 3.) Power, wealth, or status can be our god.

In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the story is told of Jesus’ temptation in the desert. All the internal and external temptations and wrong turns of life are personified in this story in the character of “Satan, the devil”:

*<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup>After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup>The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."*

*<sup>4</sup>Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.' <sup>a</sup>"*

*<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup>"If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:*

*" 'He will command his angels concerning you,  
and they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' <sup>b</sup>"*

*<sup>7</sup>Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.' <sup>c</sup>"*

*<sup>8</sup>Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. <sup>9</sup>"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."*

### 3

*<sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'<sup>d</sup>"*

*<sup>11</sup>Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.*

Keep in mind the three temptations:

- 1.) Stones become bread: Personal comfort and pleasure can be our god.
- 2.) Throw yourself down: Safety and security can be our god.
- 3.) All the Kingdoms of the world: Power, wealth, or status can be our god.

After the temptations, Satan left him and departed for a more opportune time.

... And now he's back.

In the Eighth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, from which we read a few minutes ago, Jesus begins to teach his disciples of the things that are to come: hardship, persecution, his own death and resurrection. All things that disrupt (even end) our comfort, pleasure, safety, security, power, wealth, and status in the eyes of the world.

When Jesus asks his disciples "Who do you think that I am," they stumble upon the answer: the Messiah. But then Jesus explains that the Messiah will not be who they think he is. The Messiah will not be someone who raises an army and frees Judea from the yoke of the mighty Roman Empire, for example. He won't bring them great wealth and prosperity. These were all things that many people in the time of Jesus *expected* from the long-promised Messiah.

But God is up to something much greater than the political liberation of Israel. God seeks to heal the pain that lies at the heart of the human condition. Victory even over death, says the language of the Prayer Book.

In a dramatic moment, Jesus is confronted with the right ordering in *his* life of all these things: His own safety, his own comfort; maybe even the basic human desire for wealth pleasure, and power.

None of these things are necessarily bad in our lives. Comfort, pleasure, safety, *all are blessings from God*; power is the ability to make things happen, wealth the accumulation of resources that can be used for the good of others and ourselves, and status simply the recognition of the good that God is doing through us in this world...

But if any of these things becomes *first* in our lives, that is, if they take the place of the love of God and the love of our neighbor as ourselves, these otherwise “good things” can distort our lives, our purpose in this world, and even our own true sense of self and identity.

Once we have crossed that line, and placed any of these things in service to our *self, not to God*, it is only a matter of time and degree before we find that we have displaced the rightful place of God in our lives.

Though it pains us to think of it, and we will loudly object to saying it, but we have put our *self* in the place of God.

That is what hangs in the balance for Jesus, when Peter objects to Jesus telling him that he won't be the “messiah” they hope he will be – one that bring military victory over Rome, or fame, wealth, or worldly power, and so Jesus turns to Peter and rebukes Peter with the famous line, “Get behind me, Satan.” Jesus hears in Peter's objections the invitation to “take the easy way out,” to seek after the things that this world values and to turn aside from God's calling to heal not just himself, but all of creation.

And so... we fast and sacrifice, and deny ourselves from time to time, and we do not give in to everything our hearts and minds and stomachs want and demand, that we might remember the needs of others, that even our “daily bread” comes from God, and that we ourselves do not live by bread alone.

We take risky chances, and we step out of our comfort zones again and again in response to the call of the Gospel, that we might remember that true safety and security come only in following God’s call.

We sacrifice our reputations in the eyes of others and in the eyes of this world, to embrace the lame, the marginalized, the unpopular, and the outcast in the name of Christ, who called all people to himself.

And we tithe... we give of ourselves... yes, money and time, the gods of post-modern culture... ...giving proportionally from what God has given us, returning the first fruits of the harvest of our lives back to God in thankfulness, so that wealth and possessions can never become for us an end unto themselves, but only a means by which we can better serve God in the limited days we have been given on this earth. Thank you for that.

For all the complexity in life,  
and all the ambiguity in the practice of our faith,  
and all the inconsistency in our lives,  
sometimes it IS very simple...

There IS a God.      You and I are NOT God

May we always seek first the face of God  
And all other things shall be added in their time and places.

Serve God and serve your neighbor in God’s name  
Love. One. Another.

**6**

Nurture a thankful heart. Amen

