

Matthew 4:1-11 (NIV)

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

4 Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 6 “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.’”

7 Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

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

10 Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

40-04-01-Christ in the Wilderness

spiritual warfare, temptation, guidance, solitude, a Sunday before Lent
Mat 4:1-11

Self-denial is the Christian’s testing ground.

INTRODUCTION: (Text as Scripture reading)

–At Lent we recall and try to identify with **Christ in the Wilderness.**

[fasting from **Ash Wednesday to Easter**, 40 “week” days, excluding Sundays].

–Whenever we fast for spiritual purposes, or try to identify with Christ in self-denial, it opens us, as it did Jesus, to temptation and trial by the enemy of self-denial, because **HOM.idea**.

I. Self-denial is Holy Ground (This is *God’s* view of self-denial.)

A. As separation for service, self-denial must be “led by the Spirit”–

1. First, we are separated unto God (similar to *Christ’s baptism*, just before He was led into the wilderness [**Epiphany** before **Lent**]).
2. Next, we are separated from self by a “fast” (similar to *Christ’s fasting* in “the desert”)– the fasting makes us...
 - a. uncomfortable [“the desert” was hot, cold, dry, rough, lonely, barren]
 - b. ...“hungry” (self-denial highlights our neediness, dependence)

B. Whenever separated for service, we will be “tempted by the devil”–

1. tested– Is our faith authentic? [**illus**: *Abraham’s test*; told to offer Isaac]
2. tried– Is our faith pure? [**refining fire**: making gold more purely gold]

TRANS: Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness, and why should we follow Him there in a *Lenten fast*? From **God’s perspective**, self-denial is “holy ground,” where separation to God and from self is authenticated. **Self-denial is a Christian’s testing ground.**

II. Self-denial is Battle Ground (This is *Satan’s* view of self-denial.)

A. Satan tries to make self-denial defeat us, because he knows that...

1. self-denial exposes our weaknesses (Satan uses suffering), BUT
2. it can also destroy his dominion (The cross defeats darkness).

B. During our self-denial, how does “the tempter” do battle, and how must we fight back? (His tactics haven’t changed since his attack on us *in the Garden*– [keeping in mind how he tempted Jesus...] **Gen 3:6a**, When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.):

1. He tempted Eve with what looked “good for food” & Christ with: “If you’re His Son, why doesn’t God provide you with bread?”
 - a. Satan tries to focus us on our hunger in temporary situations:
 - (1) Have you ever been eaten up with worry?– Mat 6:25,31-32, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?.... So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.
 - (2) Or eaten up with work?– John 6:27, Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.
 - b. God wants us to have a hunger for eternal satisfaction:
 - (1) This is holy hunger– Mat 6:33, But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
 - (2) It’s a humble hunger– Deut 8:3, He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.
2. He tempted Eve with what seemed “desirable for gaining wisdom” [a lust for *being right*] & Christ with: “If you’re God’s Son, prove it.”
 - a. To be self-directed is a wrong ambition (especially if it’s in the context of religious aspiration: “the highest point of the temple.”):
 - (1) “God bless my will and plans, with Your grace, of course!”
 - (2) Don’t “test” God by trying to take control of what He alone controls: “Prove your love, God!”– Exo 17:7, And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they **tested the LORD** saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”
 - b. The right ambition for us is to be forever God-dependent:
 - (1) Let’s put Satan’s quote (v.6) in its context (a relationship with God)– Psa 91:14, “Because he loves me,” says the LORD, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name.”
 - (2) Obedience is the only context of a right [righteous] ambition– Jos 1:8-9, Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. **Then you will be prosperous and successful.**
3. He tempted Eve with what was “pleasing to the eye” & Christ with: “Look, you can have **all You see**, by making **me** your god!”)
 - a. “Love at first sight” and “seeing is believing” are ways that “the

- kingdoms of the world and their splendor” can become idols to distort both faith and worship– Rom 1:25, They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator...
- b. Christ directs our vision to our proper faith and worship:
 - (1) Turn your eyes off the king of things: “Away from me, Satan!”
 - (2) Turn your eyes onto the **King of kings**, and “...serve Him only.”

TRANS: Self-denial is the Christian’s testing ground. No matter how you choose to fast—whether you skip a meal, give up coffee, stop eating sweets, unplug the TV or the computer— Satan will fight you on it, trying to get you to give up on giving up. But don’t worry, even though self-denial is battle ground, it is holy ground, and that means...

III. Self-denial is Safe Ground (It should be *our view* of self-denial.)

- A. Remember this: Satan at some point will have to leave...
 1. Satan’s power is limited—he’s only a finite creature—
 2. But Satan’s hostility persists– Luke 4:13, When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an **opportune time**. (Satan continues to tempt us, because God continues to call us to closer to Him.)
- B. Self-denial is safe, because angels attend those who fear the Lord:
 1. Temptations don’t remove us from God’s care– Psa 34:7, The angel of the LORD encamps around **those who fear him**, and he delivers them.
 2. Times of testing are interspersed with times of refreshing (Each Sunday in Lent is a celebration day: “six days you shall labor”)

CONCLUSION:

–**Self-denial is a Christian’s testing ground.** What did self-denial in the wilderness do for Jesus? It strengthened and confirmed Him. What will self-denial do for us? It will strengthen our dependence on God alone, and confirm our commitment to God alone. **Self-denial will...**

- **defeat** Satan in the areas of temptation where humanity first fell,
- **define** which side of the battle line we are on,
- **develop** our spiritual skill in fighting the enemy of our souls.

–Choose to follow Jesus into the wilderness of the Lenten season. Let the Holy Spirit lead you, as He led Christ, into a time of self-denial, as you anticipate these coming days between Ash Wednesday and Easter.