

FOLLOWING THROUGH

Matthew 4:1-11

Intro

One of the first things that we are able to notice about this passage is a number: forty. To be precise we are talking about the forty days that that Jesus spent out in the wilderness prior to the beginning of his public ministry.

The interesting thing is, this is nowhere near the first time that this particular digit shows up.

In fact, this number shows up in the Old Testament on six occasions. We hear about it in regards to Noah and the number of days that the flood took place, how many days the Israelites spied on the land of Canaan, how many days Goliath came out and mocked the Israelites before David stepped up to the task, the length of David's reign as king, and then the number of days Jonah declared Ninevah had to repent before they would be overthrown by God.

However, it is the sixth such example that catches our attention the most. Do any of you remember which instance of forty I have left out?

If you were thinking of the forty years that the Israelites spent out in the wilderness, then you were right on point. The reason it draws the most attention is not only because of forty, but also because of the reference to the wilderness. These similarities invariably cause us to link the forty years of the Israelites and the forty days of Jesus together. In doing so, in looking at them in conjunction with each other, we are able to recognize following the will of God is not an easy task. Both the Israelites and Jesus were called to do so, and yet only one of these two was able to ultimately succeed.

With that thought in our minds, I invite you to consider the following: what are the areas of temptation that that lean upon you? Are you able to hold them at bay?

Then, if the answer to that question is no, what do we do to make ourselves right with the Lord? The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 4:1-11

¹ Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

³ The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."

⁴ But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

⁵ Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, ⁶ saying to him, "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.'"

⁷ Jesus said to him, "Again it is 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 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me."

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

¹¹ Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

“Following Through”

As I started thinking about the sermon for this morning, what kept coming to mind was the word endurance: working hard over a long period of time to ultimately bring about a desired result.

However, as many of us know, endurance is not something that is easily attained as so many people succumb to various forms of temptation.

On the sporting field, many teams stop playing their hardest either because they think that they’ve got it all wrapped up (because they are winning by that much), or there is no possible way that they could catch up (because they are losing that badly).

In various areas of knowledge, you find a multitude of people who throw their hands up in the air and say, “I don’t get this; I’m done with this; I give up”. If you’re trying to come up with an example, envision the Federal Tax code and you’ll start to get a handle on what I mean.

Even something as seemingly simple as weight loss (eat better, exercise more, weight goes down), is fraught with example after example of individual after individual failing to be able to endure the pitfalls that invariably arrive.

That’s why we look at those endurance victories and we marvel and celebrate the achievements that have been accomplished. I watch someone finish a marathon, let alone something like an Iron Man competition and I think, “that’s amazing.” I watch as someone learns to walk again after being inflicted by some sort of an injury and I say, “I can’t even imagine all the work that had to be put in.” I watch a community pick themselves up and begin to put themselves back together after they have been ravaged by some sort of natural disaster and what pops into my head is, “I don’t know how they did that.” But we all know that there is example after example of people who do fight through the temptations that are there and endure.

With this morning’s passage in Matthew we have the opportunity to compare and contrast two different journeys in the wilderness. In doing so we are able to see just how by fighting through the temptation and working with God endurance can prevail. Their stories remind us that with the help of God in our lives, we really can keep going.

The people who we have come to know as the Israelites have had God working with them for a long time. God called for Abraham and Sarah to pick up and move from Haran (in modern day Turkey), to begin the connection with the land of Canaan. This communal history of being connected so closely with God was carried down through Isaac, Jacob, and then to Joseph (whose presence ultimately brought the Israelites to Egypt for the next 400 years).

This connection between humanity and the Almighty reached a new point of intimacy, however, through Moses. With God guiding Moses, Moses was able to lead the Israelites out of bondage and slavery in Egypt with the assurance that God would care for them for the rest of their lives.

The thing is, this intimate connection was not just God to the Israelites, but also the Israelites toward God. We can hear this explicitly in Exodus 19 as God said, “if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

The people’s response? “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

The Israelites agreed to this close relationship and soon thereafter, the Ten Commandments were handed down as a baseline way to live with each other. The people were told the way that they needed to live, and yet, as the generations began to pass it became more and more obvious that the people were not holding up their end of the bargain. If you have your doubts, just start reading through the Old Testament and it doesn’t take long to find another example of how far off the path the Israelites could get. Just think about how, while Moses was still up on the mountain receiving the law, they went about creating a golden calf to worship.

Even from the beginning of the agreement, the Israelites were already getting so much of it wrong. They were not following through on the promises that they had made to God and found themselves continually missing the mark. In many ways, the generations that followed those who wandered for forty years in the wilderness were tempted, by political power, by physical longings, and by the peer pressure of their geographical neighbors and the gods that they worshiped, and they did not follow through. There’s the first example.

The complete 180 of this comes to us in the one who spent forty days in the wilderness. In Jesus, we have the example of someone who was willing to sacrifice his personal well-being and pleasure so that the will of God the Father might be followed through in total obedience. No matter what temptations crossed his path, he would not bend.

And don’t fool yourself into thinking that what Jesus was declining were things that were inconsequential. What the Devil offered the son of God were legitimate ways to test his willingness and ability to follow through. With that being said, let’s take a look at the ways that Jesus was able resist temptation and follow through.

The first temptation of bread strikes at Jesus in a two-pronged manor. To start with, there is the hunger factor. Fasting, for any length of time, causes any kind of food to look extremely appetizing.

The second way that the bread is a temptation is because the Roman rulers of the day found that a method to keep the masses quiet was to feed them with bread. Essentially, people will follow you if their bellies are full.

Jesus response to Satan of, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” declares that the word of God is more vital to humanities existence, then the food it eats. Jesus is not going to become a Messiah for the physically hungry, but for the spiritually thirsting.

The second temptation of tossing himself off the pinnacle off the temple in the holy city only to have angels lift him back up is meant to draw the power of God to be on display for all to see. Jesus’ answer of “Do not put the Lord your God to the test” shows that Jesus is not going to simply wow the people into following God because of some divine parlor tricks. He wants people to turn over their lives

because of a deep, heartfelt commitment to the truth that God is putting forth through His son and as realized through the movement of the Holy Spirit. Following God is not meant to be contingent upon miracles and Jesus refuses to yield to this temptation.

The final enticement is frighteningly real. What the devil offers is a release from all of the humiliation and suffering that Jesus is going to face in the next three years, from being rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, to being betrayed by one of those closest to him, to being denied freedom because a thug was deemed to be a more beneficial to society than he was, to being beaten, hung, and killed at the hands of the Romans. Jesus would have been able to avoid all that. How many of us would be able to resist such a temptation?

Unfortunately, the answer to that question is none of us could, for the only person who would be able to follow through on their commitment to God's plan in those sorts of extreme circumstances is Jesus Christ.

The good thing is, and for this we must be eternally grateful, because Jesus was able to follow through in his commitment to the will of the Father, we do not have to face similar temptations with such incredible stakes on the line.

However, this does not mean that we are off the hook. Just because Jesus was able to face down the devil does not mean that we, as followers of Christ, must not also resist temptation. Sex, gambling, gluttony, material possessions, vanity, power, money all pull at us in varying degrees. What we must be sure of is that follow the path that Jesus has trod and not the one that the Israelites created. As Christians we have said that we are willing to give our lives over to the Almighty so that the kingdom of God might be served. We now need to follow through in that commitment and give it nothing less than everything we have. Do not be satisfied with what has been deemed 'good enough' by the world; only be content when the will of God has been followed.

Allow this time of Lent, these six weeks prior to Easter to be a time when you concentrate on who you are in relation to God and following through in following the Almighty, as best you, with the help of the Holy Spirit, can. There are going to be temptations that we lure us from this path, but if we follow the example that Jesus has set for us and remain true to God the Father, we will become a lot closer to the being the people that God would have us be.

God is calling for us to follow His son who spent those 40 days out in the wilderness facing the temptations of the devil for our sake. Let's follow through and see how close to hitting the mark we can be.

After Sermon Prayer

O holy God, we know that temptations are around every corner. Whether those lures be carnal, intellectual, or sociological, they bombard us from every angle. However, as we have seen in our scripture this morning, these temptations can be resisted if we put our focus on You. Lord, grant us the strength that we need to persevere through all the temptations that haunt us so that we might be able to follow through as Your son has taught. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.