**Self-Control**

Matthew 4:1-11

Self-Control is thinking, saying, and doing the **Right** thing - no matter how you **Feel**.

***We all do this one perfectly already***, just like with patience last week. So we can just wrap up and pray, giving thanks for our perfection in thinking, saying and doing. Ah, if only, right? The trouble is that last phrase - “no matter how you feel.” So often how we feel, what we WANT, takes over and we don’t control what we think, say or do.

But Jesus did this perfectly - so **let’s look at His example in the temptation account** of Matthew 4 and learn how we can grow more into His image and likeness. What a great way to start this new year, reflecting on our priorities and intentionality in what we think, say, and do.

The temptation account is a powerful window into ***the full humanity of our Lord.***

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.” Matthew 4:1-2

***It was not the devil’s initiative*** to tempt Jesus but was the leading of the Spirit as part of the full obedience of Jesus to the will of the Father. Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness through a totally human life defined by perfect self-control - full submission to the will of God.

***Jesus had to succeed at every point that Israel had failed.*** Significantly, every response to temptation came from **Deuteronomy 6 and 8** - the heart of the Jewish Torah. The wilderness was not a random site but was the place of Israel’s punishment after their failure to enter the promised land. There in the wilderness ***Israel was purified through sufferin***g - and Hebrews tells us that Jesus, too, was made perfect through what he suffered.

**Like Moses**, Jesus went forty days without food. Moses spent forty YEARS in the wilderness as a shepherd, so Jesus’ forty days is also a nod to that divine preparation of the great prophet and Law-Giver, Moses. And like all of us - after so many days without food, Jesus was hungry. What a massive understatement! Jesus was on the brink of starvation. 40 days without food is the limit of human endurance. This shows that Jesus endured the full force of temptation - he had no shelter, no limit.

Yet, depending on the Holy Spirit and trusting in the Father’s plan, ***Jesus was able to stand firm through the devil’s temptations***. He exercised perfect control over his thoughts, words and actions. We’ll take them in that order. Of course thought, word and action play into all three temptations and responses, but the point of emphasis follows that progression from thought to word to action, so we will take them in that order.

1. Right **Thinking**

“And the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.’” Matthew 4:3

Now, on the one hand, Jesus was perfectly capable of turning stones into bread, or just conjuring bread out of the air. In His full divinity, Jesus could have simply spoken a word and had a complete gourmet feast in front of him. Later, **when Jesus fed the 5,000** it wasn’t like he needed the little boy’s meal to create the food from - it was simply another way for Him to teach us how He wants us to give Him whatever we have, however meager it may seem, so He can multiply it.

The reason it would have been wrong for Jesus to turn these stones into bread was simply because it was not the Father’s will for Jesus to satisfy his hunger in that way. The devil was appealing to the desires of Jesus’ human body - the lusts of the flesh - the lowest form of temptation.

But even though he was desperately hungry, even though he felt a strong pressure to eat right then, Jesus did not let this thought percolate in his mind. ***He did not toy with the idea.*** One pastor well said:

“Desire dwelt upon makes sin a matter of time.”

* A former pastor from Chicago

For all forty days in the wilderness, ***Jesus must have been tempted to focus on his hunger.*** Think of the self-control it took to take captive every thought and ignore those hunger pangs and devote Himself to prayer and meditation on Scripture!

So often ***we fall to temptation “in the moment,” because we have already been thinking about the desires for a while.*** Let’s say, for example, you always find yourself walking down the ice cream aisle in Publix just hoping for a BOGO on their premium ice cream. Can you really claim innocence for that “impulse buy”? I don’t call that one “giving in,” I call it “good stewardship.”

Or a more serious example - ***how does someone embezzle funds*** from their company? The first little infraction, skimming a little off, may feel like a spur of the moment choice - but in all probability the employee has been feeling neglected, underpaid, underappreciated, and has nursed those feelings and dwelt on the desire for more money.

All sin works this way. ***We give in to sin because we fail to control our THOUGHTS.***

1. Right **Thinking**

* Shaped by God’s **Word**

“But he answered, ‘It is written, “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.””” Matthew 4:4 (Deut. 8:3)

Jesus resisted temptation because all of his thoughts were shaped by God’s Word. As a young man around the age of 30, Jesus no doubt had other desires and urges in his body. But he had ***trained himself not to focus on those desires*** - not to be conformed to the patterns of the ancient world, but to be transformed by the renewal of His mind.

He had learned to really believe and cling to this truth - that the Word of God was more important, more life-giving, even than food. That is how close Jesus was with His Father. That is how much Jesus prized His foremost relationship!

Do we do the same? ***Are our thoughts shaped by God’s Word or by this world?*** Have we trained ourselves to take captive our thoughts and bring them into submission to Scripture, or have we simply mastered the art of SOUNDING spiritual and knowledgeable about the Bible without letting it actually FILL our hearts and minds?

This is why it’s so important to have **daily time in God’s Word** - and to really process and pray through what you read, not just read as an empty habit to simply perform. We need to discipline ourselves to memorize and meditate on Scripture. In our family we’ve found it helpful to use a Bible reading plan together as a family. We share a verse or two each day that stands out to us.

I had the advantage of doing AWANA as a child, a competitive Bible program that rewards Scripture memory. And after that, my church was a part of a **Bible Quizzing** contest in the Midwest that was a big deal in the EFCA 30 years ago. I’m not saying my motives were the best, but the result was that I learned a lot of Scripture. The trophies have not survived our thirteen moves as a family, but a lot of the Bible verses have.

**Kristin’s family** worked together to memorize whole chapters of Scripture together during times of stress. Her Dad was in the Army and was sometimes deployed in the field. So they memorized Psalm 91 during one of those stressful times and Psalm 139 during another. Those are special passages that still comfort Kristin today.

How have you worked to let your thoughts be shaped by God’s Word? ***What are your goals and plans for this year?*** Our Lord Jesus had perfect self control in his words and actions BECAUSE He exercised perfect control of His thoughts. We fail in our words and actions because we fail to discipline our thoughts. Let’s look at the second temptation:

1. Right **Speaking**

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you… on their hands they will bear you up.’” Matthew 4:6

Notice how clever the tempter is: always questioning Jesus’ identity - tempting him to PROVE his special status with God the Father; and now the devil has ***the audacity to quote Scripture himself!*** The enemy uses God’s own promises in the Psalms - promises of protection and loving care - to entice Jesus to presume on the Father’s intervention apart from His direction.

The temptation in this case wasn’t the adrenaline rush of bungy jumping off the temple’s pinnacle. The temptation was ***for Jesus to make a public spectacle of himself*** for the Jewish people. That idea could certainly have grown in Jesus’ heart and mind - a fast way to win over the nation of Israel through a very visible public miracle. A swan dive from 150 feet at the heart of Jewish civilization, followed by a visible manifestation of angelic intervention - like a celestial trust fall - would, no doubt, have made the front page of all the papers in Israel.

But look at Jesus response:

1. Right **Speaking**

* Filled with God’s **Goodness**

“Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Matthew 4:7 (Deut. 6:16)

Israel failed at this over and over again. Instead of trusting God to provide what they needed, **they TESTED God**. Exodus 17 tells the story of Israel right after crossing the Red Sea and entering the wilderness. After a couple of days, they ran out of water and could not find any in that desert area. So they complained to Moses, their leader, and ***demanded water from him.***

Essentially, they said to the God who had just saved them from slavery in Egypt: “If you don’t give us water right now we will not trust you or serve you.” They gave God a TEST to prove His faithfulness and goodness to them.

***Do you see how this was an utter failure in self-control?*** They gave in to their feelings - their physical desire for water. They did not remember and focus on God’s faithfulness to them as He had just demonstrated it a couple of days earlier. Instead, they gave Him an ultimatum.

***Do you see how we do the same thing sometimes when we pray?*** Instead of trusting God, we TEST Him. We say in our hearts, or even out loud, “God, if you don’t give me THIS then you’re not worthy of my worship, my time, my giving.”

* If you don’t heal this illness right now…
* If you don’t give me this job right now… or a better job…
* If you don’t give us a child right now…
* If you don’t make our church grow right now…
* If you don’t make my company grow right now…

This is an issue of self-control over our thoughts and our words. ***Jesus was disciplined to speak ONLY of the GOODNESS of God***. The main reason people claim to be atheists or agnostics is because they question the goodness of God. They say that if an all-powerful God existed the world would not have so much evil and suffering in it.

Church-going Christians wouldn’t talk like that, but **we do COMPLAIN**. And when we complain, just like Israel, ***we are questioning the goodness of God***. We are TESTING Him instead of trusting Him.

The writer to the Hebrews applies this principle and this OT passage to our relationships in the church:

“Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Hebrews 3:12-13

***How would you evaluate your WORDS over the last week or two?*** Have you spoken to build others up? Have your words been filled with the GOODNESS of God, or with complaining?

There is a danger of our hearts being hardened, as happened to the Israelites in the wilderness. Sin is deceitful and cancerous to us. But an important ***treatment for this illness is EXHORTATION in the church.*** We need brothers and sisters who are close to us to speak words of life to us - to encourage and uplift us.

This was our assignment on our recent **mission trips to Cuba**. We knew the believers there are discouraged - struggling to believe in the goodness of God; struggling to trust Him when their practical situation is so difficult, when there is no way to improve things politically and when so many are leaving the island for good.

My pastor friend, Paulo, and I brought some content to share with the pastors there. He shared a lesson about Job and another on prayer. I shared some Paul Tripp counseling material about the heart and some content from Pastor Colin’s Momentum material on discipleship. But it wasn’t about the content so much as the fact that we were there to sit with them, to pray with them, to listen to them and care for them.

And the beautiful thing about being with them was ***seeing how they loved and encouraged one another***. Yes, their lives are difficult. Yes, they are struggling to put food on the table and to persevere in a challenging season of ministry. But they love the Lord; they trust the Lord; and their hearts and faces shone with His goodness even in a dark valley. To us they demonstrated the quality of self-control with their words - not giving in to discouragement but building each other up in the Lord.

This is our assignment in the church: to encourage and build each other up by ***speaking of the goodness of God***. We will often be tempted to complain, and the enemy will tempt us to QUESTION the goodness of God. But as we control our thoughts, and let God’s Word shape our minds, we will see that our words are filled with the goodness of God. And the third part of self-control follows: right acting.

1. Right **Acting**

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’” Matthew 4:8-9

We know from Revelation that this is the final result toward which God’s plan and history are moving - people from every tongue and tribe and nation worshiping King Jesus. Again, ***the Devil offered Jesus a SHORTCUT*** - an easier, quicker way to the end result He wanted.

You can hear the enemy’s whispers: “You don’t have to take the long, hard road. You don’t have to suffer and struggle dealing with these frustrating people. What are you going to do, rally together some fishermen and tax collectors, rustle up a ragtag band of nobodies to do your bidding? Can you really count on any of them? Here is a guaranteed outcome, right now!”

But because Jesus had control of his thinking and his speaking, his actions followed right along.

1. Right **Acting**

* Devoted to God’s **Will**

“Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’” Matthew 4:10 (Deut. 6:13)

Jesus must have felt the full force of this temptation - ***longing for the nations to be His***. And the devil’s message was, “It’s no big deal. Just bow down a little. Just offer me a little reverence. It’s just us out here in the desert.” ***It was a rehash of the garden of Eden!*** The devil only has a few plays that he runs, but he runs them really effectively: 1) question God’s Word; 2) question God’s goodness; 3) question God’s ways.

Jesus did not question God’s Word, He fed on it. Jesus did not question God’s goodness; His heart and voice rang with it. Jesus did not question the Father’s ways, He was committed to following them. And pleasing and serving God started with a commitment to worship God alone. There could be no compromise on that point.

The tempter always wants us to ***think that things are no big deal***: a little lie here, a little glance there, a thought or two, a word or two - nothing to worry about; nothing you can’t handle! But every little sinful choice is a failure to worship and serve only God. Every little compromise is a form of idolatry - the worship of someone or something other than the One True God.

Jesus saw this truth with crystal clarity. **There could be no compromise at all with worship**. And from that commitment to worship in spirit and in truth came a life of total devotion to the Father’s will. Jesus said in John’s gospel, “I can do nothing on my own, but only what I see my Father doing.” Jesus lived in harmony and unity with the Father’s will and walked in perfect step with the Spirit’s leading in His life.

So here is our summary for today:

Self-Control is thinking, saying and doing the right thing - no matter how you feel.

1. Right **Thinking**
   * Shaped by God’s **Word**
2. Right **Speaking**
   * Filled with God’s **Goodness**
3. Right **Acting**
   * Devoted to God’s **Will**

There you go. Easy peasy. Just be like Jesus - thinking, saying and doing the right thing, all the time, no matter how you feel. Now, let’s apply the gospel.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **↑** | Jesus thought, said, and did the right thing, no matter how He felt. |
| **↓** | We are slaves to our sinful, selfish desires |
| **♥** | Jesus died to set us free from the power of sin |
| **→** | The Holy Spirit guides and strengthens us as we walk with Him |

First, we have **looked up at the perfection of Jesus**. This is a critical step in Christian growth because if we only compare ourselves to other people we might think that we are actually pretty good in areas like self-control. But when we look at Jesus as the ultimate standard, we realize how very far we fall short of His glory.

While Jesus exercised perfect self-control, ***we are slaves*** to our sinful, selfish desires. Even as Christians we continue to struggle with the passions of our old, sinful nature. It is a daily battle to put to death the misdeeds of the flesh and to walk in the Spirit. Do you know the tendencies and subtleties of your flesh, your old nature? If you aren’t aware of the common lies of your flesh and of the devil, you will continue to fall for them.

Here is a big one - I wonder if you caught it. Biblically **we aren’t slaves anymore** - that is what we WERE before Jesus. But if the devil can convince you that you are still in bondage to your sin - that you are powerless over it - then you will live in regular failure, giving in again and again to wrong ways of thinking, speaking, and acting.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **↑** | Jesus thought, said, and did the right thing, no matter how He felt. |
| **↓** | We ***were*** slaves to our sinful, selfish desires |
| **♥** | Jesus died to set us free from the power of sin |
| **→** | The Holy Spirit guides and strengthens us as we walk with Him |

Self-control begins with right THINKING. We have to know and believe the truth deeply about who we are in Christ and all He has done for us. This is what it means to apply the gospel. Romans 8:1-2 expresses this so beautifully - first teaching us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But then going right from forgiveness to freedom. Not only did Jesus’ death pay the penalty for our sin - ***it broke the power of sin over us.***

Now we can walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh. But we have to deliberately choose to set our minds on the Spirit, not on the flesh. We have to choose to walk each day in devotion to God’s will, not being conformed to the sinful patterns of the world.

And again, to be successful in this, we need each other! Don’t try to walk alone. It is a war zone, and the devil loves outliers who stray to the edge of the herd.

So here is your homework for this week: **read and pray through Romans 8:1-5**. Ask the Lord to show you where you really are in the area of self-control. How are you doing with your thinking, speaking, and acting? As you reflect on the perfect self-control of Jesus himself, what does that show you about your own?

How can you grow in letting your mind be shaped by God’s Word this year?

How can you grow in speaking more of the goodness of God? How can you encourage and strengthen others through your experience?

How can you grow in your overall obedience to God’s will?

Use the Character x Calling worksheet as a tool to guide your prayer and planning for this new year. Ask the Lord to show you specific steps you need to take. If you’re not in a Community Group or Discipleship Group, please contact me or Jason - we would love to help you get connected and growing with us!  
  
Let’s pray.