

“Fighting Temptation: Selfishness”

Back in 1789, Ben Franklin wrote in a letter that “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” Scripture would add one more thing to the list. **“When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him (Jesus) until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13).** As long as the world is still in existence the Devil is going to tempt human beings – that is he is going to test them with the intent to cause them to sin. The ultimate goal is to solidify unbelievers in their unbelief and to try to pull believers back into a life of unbelief that would ultimately lead to eternal damnation in Hell. The devil doesn’t have to work very hard on the unbelievers since he already controls them. That is why he spends the majority of his attention prowling around believers hoping to have the opportunity to devour faith. While God is never responsible for tempting people to sin, Scripture does tell us that the devil is constantly asking God for his permission to test the faith of believers. God does allow this at times. Sometimes it is our own fault as we put ourselves in situations where it is easy for the devil to tempt us. Other times, God leads Christians out onto the battlefield to face the devil. Jesus was a perfect example of that.

When our sermon lesson takes place Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Judah, and Moses are in heaven. The nation of Israel had been freed from slavery in Egypt. The Red Sea had already been miraculously crossed and God had already taken care of 2 million Israelites for 40 years while they wandered around in the wilderness. And now it was time for God to keep another promise that he made to Abraham 700 years earlier by giving this great nation of Israel the land of Canaan to call their own. The first city in Canaan that they conquered was Jericho and what a special victory it was as God caused the walls of Jericho to fall down as the Israelites simply walked around them. Not all the victories were going to be that easy, but it certainly would set the tone for all the other battles telling Israel that God was with them and they were fighting God’s battles for him. At Jericho, God commanded that ALL the plunder of this first victory be dedicated to him and put in the church treasury. It seems all in Israel followed God’s command concerning Jericho’s plunder except for a man named Achan. The nation of Israel didn’t know about Achan’s sin until they went to conquer the next city, Ai. Ai was much smaller than Jericho. The people of Israel felt confident going into battle. Their confidence, however, turned into discouragement as they were defeated by Ai and Jewish soldiers died. Our sermon lesson for today is taken from Joshua 7:16-26. This is the aftermath of the defeat at Ai as God reveals who was responsible for this loss.

¹⁶ Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was taken. ¹⁷ The clans of Judah came forward, and he took the Zerahites. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was taken. ¹⁸ Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

¹⁹ Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.” ²⁰ Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹ When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.” ²² So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. ²³ They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD.

²⁴ Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. ²⁵ Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today.” Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. ²⁶ Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day.

Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

This section of Scripture presents us with many questions. Did Achan have a chance to come forward and repent before God made it clear before all of Israel that he was guilty? Does the punishment (death penalty) fit the crime (stealing a beautiful coat and \$4000 worth of silver and gold? Why did his family have to die too? Where is the forgiveness and mercy of God in this section of Scripture? Will we see Achan and his family in Heaven? All great questions worthy of many sermons and further discussion. However, what I want us to think about here this morning is what was the real reason that Achan stole the coat, silver, and gold? Was it not “selfishness?” God wanted Achan to embrace the mindset that God comes first, me second. But when the temptation came for Achan to put me first, and God second – he couldn’t resist.

Are we any different? God wants us to embrace the mindset that God comes first, me second. God also wants us to embrace the mindset that others come first, me second. Yet every temptation could really be boiled down to that – the devil tempts me to put myself ahead of God and others. Luke tells us that Jesus faced many temptations during those 40 days in the wilderness and throughout his whole life, but let’s consider the three that Scripture shares with us. During those 40 days in the wilderness Jesus didn’t eat any food. So the devil harmlessly, so it seems, encourages Jesus to turn some stones into food so he can satisfy his hunger. Paul speaks to the danger of this temptation in 1 Corinthians 6:12: **“Everything is permissible for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.”** It’s not wrong to have cravings for food, drink, work, entertainment, recreation, exercise, relaxation, sex, and companionship. Those cravings are actually a natural part of life and a gift from God when you can enjoy them. They become a sin, however, when the devil tempts me to selfishly become mastered by these cravings. I become mastered by them when I feel I need these things to be happy more than I find happiness in being a forgiven child of God and heir of eternal life through faith in Jesus as Savior. I become mastered by these cravings whenever we make selfishly fulfilling these cravings more important than serving other people. I become mastered by them when I can’t deny myself these cravings for a time. During those 40 days in the wilderness the Devil tempted Jesus by offering him earthly success in exchange for Jesus worshipping the Devil. That seems like an easy temptation to fight off except for the fact we all selfishly want earthly success. I want the work I do on earth to receive proper recognition. I want my relationships to satisfy my desires. I want earthly pleasure and comfort at all times and nothing hard. And if I don’t get those things I selfishly become irritable, angry, and depressed. And if I do get those things I selfishly become arrogant, materialistic, and unsatisfied. Either way, when that happens the Devil is worshipped and God is mocked. During the 40 days in the wilderness the Devil tempted Jesus to jump off the highest point of the temple because God will send his angels to protect him. The temptation was “it’s your life Jesus, do with it whatever you please.” Aren’t we all guilty of falling for that temptation? “It’s my life, I will do with it whatever I please” is the opening line to a plethora of selfish and reckless sins that have nothing to do with pleasing God and serving others.

Like Achan, each of us has a need to repent. There is a monument of stones in the Valley of Achor (“trouble”) that serves as a lasting testament to this fact screaming to us that God is serious about the sin of selfishness. We deserve death and Hell for our selfish sins. But God offers good news to selfish sinners like us today. **“For we do not have a (Savior) who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are yet is without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”** (Hebrews 4:15-16). And let’s not forget this good news for selfish sinners like us. **“For even the Son of Man (Jesus) did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”** (Mark 10:45). Your Savior Jesus paid the price of Hell when he died on the cross for your selfish sins and mine. You are forgiven. You are an heir of eternal life in Heaven. You are now free and empowered to say no to the selfish temptations of the Devil. Jesus fights with you! So let’s go fight those temptations to sin following the lead of Jesus. Let’s put God and others first ahead of ourselves remembering that when the Devil tempts us to do otherwise, one little Word of God defeats the Devil every time. Amen.