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**Give Up Control**

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**Matthew 4:1-11**

*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness 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 shall 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.*

*New International Version*

Today is the first Sunday of Lent and this year I’ve chosen I Corinthians 9:24 as our theme verse: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.* Being a long time runner and track coach that has always been one of my favorite verses of Paul. But it’s not just about running. It’s about improving ourselves regardless of the area of improvement. Lent, the six weeks leading up to Easter, can be thought of as a season of training that Coach Jesus will use to help us improve our race of life that he’s called us to.

To run this race we need three things; hard work, discipline and patience. It requires focus, knowing where we’re going and what we need to do to get there because we all know that not everything in life is helpful in getting us where we want to get. Each week during Lent we’ll explore areas God might be calling us to shed so we can run the race better. By the end of Lent, hopefully having shed maybe one or two few things, we might be able to run this race more efficiently. We’ll see.

The phrase that most often comes to mind when we think of Lent is “what are you giving up for Lent?” That would be true for any training we’re involved in. What are we going to give up in order to get where we need to get? The Winter Olympic athletes we’ve been watching all week have all pushed through the snow, ice and wind or at least long hours of training, sacrificing many things in order to win.

Winning for us as Christians is knowing Christ better and becoming more like him. Does that sound a goal of yours? If you’ve had any encounter with him you simply want more. If eating one M&M isn’t enough, one encounter with Jesus is definitely never enough. Remember it’s not about being good enough to get into heaven that we want to know Christ better. That victory has already been achieved for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No, it’s about getting to know him better without having to worry about the end. All of us without exception have less than helpful habits that keep us from knowing Christ better. The overcoming those habits that hinder us is is our victory that Christ wants to help us win.

So what can we shed in our life that will make us more ready to meet Jesus? The other day I needed to go on a run. I was feeling good and nothing hurt. But instead I gave in to my flesh and took a nap until it was too late to run. Where I live running in the dark is not recommended although sometimes I do it out of desperation. After the nap I should have eaten a balanced dinner but instead with no one watching I snacked and even over snacked. Then I needed to focus my thoughts in a positive direction to get some work done and instead I let me mind wander into whatever it wanted to wander into until time ran out. Finally I had a late quiet time with our Lord and the thought hit me that I hadn’t disciplined anything in my evening instead I sought pleasure all night. I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with pleasure, but then why did I feel so physically miserable after indulging myself? I think I would have felt much better having taken a good run, showering, and eating a light, balanced dinner. I know my mind would have been more disciplined for the evening.

Giving up is kind of like exchanging one activity for another based on our values. If we value a good relationship with Jesus Christ, then we’ll gladly give up those things that hinder that relationship even though it won’t necessarily be easy. That’s what Lent reminds us each year. For six weeks leading to Resurrection Sunday we’ll at least think about things we could give up to know Christ better.

We’re going to start with what is probably the hardest thing to give up for all of us; control. In the biblical story, the problem of control started in the Garden where God gave humans control over everything they could see and touch except for one thing; the tree of life. If it hadn’t been for that blame tree, we would have been home free. But have you noticed how there always seems to be that one thing in our life that tempts us to want to take things into our own hands? We just can’t let go.

One of the hardest things for men in particular to give up is the ability to drive. Have you ever noticed how whenever a man and woman are in a car it’s usually the man who’s doing the driving? I read the tragic news this past week of a 99 year old Michigan man who had just renewed his license, drove his RV to Florida and then drove the wrong way on a street with his lights off, killing two teenagers in a head on collision along with himself. He was not giving up control of his destiny and now his legacy is a tragedy. It was a rough week for teenagers in Florida with the high school shooting later in the week that took 17 young lives. Our prayers need to be for those families.

I think the harder thing for women to give up seems to be their home. My mom’s dream was to end her days in her San Jose home. But unfortunately the house would probably have died along with her if my sister hadn’t stepped in and moved her against her wishes. Leaving her home was one of the hardest things she had to do.

We all like to control our own destiny. A recent survey of Bay Area residents showed that while we hate Bay Area traffic, we don’t want to give up our cars. I rode the bus for six months and found I couldn’t control my schedule as well as I could with a car. We like control.

Could Jesus have been that different from us? When he was baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptist, immediately the Holy Spirit fell on him and took him into a wilderness. I doubt he wanted to go there. I’m going to define wilderness as a place absent of human security and resources. For a homeless person, the streets of Fremont can be a wilderness where no one is looking out for their well being. Our free breakfast program helps make it less of a wilderness, at least for a little while.

I’ve been through REI, the big box sporting goods store and seen the camping gear now available for people of means. One can take a lot of security into the great wilderness of the Sierras if you have money to buy equipment and freeze dried food. So a wilderness is not necessarily a desert or a physically barren place. It’s a place absent of human security and resources.

For Jesus, the wilderness was an actual desert area void of human security and resources to sustain his human body. For forty days in a scary, barren place Jesus had no comforts including food. Food is what brings us comfort when we’re in a difficult place and that’s where the term “comfort food” comes from. According to the Huffington Post, the number one comfort food in America is the grilled cheese sandwich. Yes, a hot grilled cheese sandwich is what brings the most comfort at least in one survey. Comfort food is what we associate helping us through a rough time like chicken soup when we’re sick or pizza when we’re cramming for finals or working on a big project. Food has that power.

I find when I’m tense (and I’m tense whenever I’m writing a sermon because I’m always writing against a weekly deadline) that food comforts me. I will say that it’s really hard to write a sermon when I’m fasting. I just want to munch on peanuts or candy or pretzels or my pen, or whatever I can put in my mouth. Munching brings me comfort when I’m stressed.

Imagine Jesus in the wilderness for forty days. There are no berries to munch on. There are no cacti to cut and drink from. There’s nothing but hot sun and dirt with a some useless sage bushes. And what did he do for those forty days? Forty days from now is April 1, Easter Sunday. What would you do in a wilderness with no laptop, no Kindle, no cellphone, no human or dog to talk to, not even a lounge chair? There’s no food to fix, no dishes to wash up afterward, no shower and no laundry to do. There’s also no car or camel to go for a ride on. What did he do all day?

Now it says in verse 2 *After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry.* We can call that an understatement. “He was hungry.” You think? Try to remember the last time you were hungry. I have never gone forty days without food although I discovered there are many forty day fast plans on the internet. The longest I have gone without food, I think, is 24 hours. I used to fast regularly when I was younger and I’ve started up again as a spiritual discipline. I find it really helps clear my mind since the body isn’t spending so much energy digesting food. But my fast has only been sundown to sundown so far.

Imagine Jesus after forty days with nothing to do in the desert but commune with his father in heaven. His mind would now be crystal clear but his body vulnerably weak. It says the devil came to tempt him. Traditionally the devil has been understood to be a fallen angel. The devil gives Jesus three temptations. I’m going to summarize them with three words; 1) hedonism or satisfaction (“tell these stones to become bread”), 2) egoism (“you can control the world if you really are who you think you are) and 3) materialism (“you can have everything in the world if you bow down to me”). John the Evangelist in his little letter in I John describes these temptations as "lust of the body" (hedonism), "pride of life" (egoism), and "lust of the eyes" (materialism). Those are the three basic temptations that trip us all up on a regular basis. They aim to mislead and pervert the three main human characteristics; the ability to think, wish and feel which are inside our mind, heart and soul.

Think about all the temptations you face in a given day in working toward your goals. Let’s say your goal is to lose a pound a week. Proper exercise and meals should take the weight off. But you get sick or you have an especially long day at work and you need high calorie comfort food that works counter to your goals. That would be the temptation of hedonism or satisfaction. Like that afternoon I should have gone running and eaten a light, healthy dinner instead of taking a nap and over snacking.

The temptation starts to control us. What if for Lent we decide to give up control to God instead of to temptation? Sure, but how? We need a 24/7 focus. 24 means all day and 7 means every day. There is no hour of any day that we take a vacation from our focus. Never. That’s 24/7 focus. I’m pretty certain that no athlete is competing in this Olympics who lacks 24/7 focus. All of those athletes, all, were tempted in the last four years to do something else. But a 24/7 focus means control no longer goes to temptation but to our designated focus.

This is how Jesus overcame his three temptations. We now know that Jesus as a devout Jew walking with God, recited something called the Jewish shema , a little creed that was recited three times a day by those who were serious about their faith. “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one, love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength and soul.” They would recite it first thing in the morning, during the day and before retiring for the evening. Jesus added the words “and love your neighbor as yourself.”

What that little creed does is refocuses our mind from random temptations that are always going to be there trying to mislead and pervert our day back to what your purpose is for our life. For example, when we’re tempted to fight back and defend our ego in a discussion, the Jesus Creed brings us back to answer the question how does defending my ego in this discussion help me to love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind, strength and soul? How? When you’re tempted to buy something because it’s a really good deal and well of course we all know you deserve it, how does this purchase help me to love the Lord my God with all my heart, mind, strength and soul? It may not stop you but the creed plants seeds of thought in your mind.

Creeds are really good at keeping us focused. If you’re trying to lose weight write a little creed that says something like “I will only eat foods and amounts of foods that will help me reach my goal.” Try reciting that creed every hour for awhile until it becomes a part of who you are. Eventually every food that you see will be evaluated in your mind by that little creed.

That’s what giving up control means. What a great thing to give up for Lent. Take the Jesus Creed and recite it every hour or at least every four hours. Put a timer on to remind you for awhile. Then take whatever you want to change in your life and write a little creed about it. Recite it every four hours or whatever is helpful for you.

If you read the Bible you can even do what Jesus did and claim it’s promises when you’re tempted. It works. For take away control from temptation and give it to God through carefully written short creeds. Start with the Jesus Creed that we talked about today and add the specific thing you want to change. Then recite it throughout the day. Your mind and body will eventually follow.

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**To learn and encourage one another**

**IF YOU’D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO**

**GET STARTED IN FAITH**

**1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s ideal**

**Romans 3:23-24**

**2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death**

**Romans 6:23**

**3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us**

**Romans 5:8**

**4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to become the master of our life**

**Romans 10:13**

**Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below…**

*“Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me.”*