

## Worship Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, lead us by your Spirit into truth without condemnation. Re-aim our lives toward the Father. Form us into a steady, holy people whose love holds under pressure. Amen.

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Matthew 4:1–11 (with Genesis 2–3; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12–19) (NIV)

In the wilderness, Jesus reveals the true “mark”—faithful communion with the Father—and grace restores our aim when we miss, forming holiness in us over time.

## Sermon Opener: Something in my bones

Friends, I want to start with something that’s in my bones.

I learned to shoot from my great-uncle Bill Brown. He was an excellent shot—steady, patient, and precise. I remember being young and seeing how quickly things could change: a rabbit would pop up close—fifteen feet—bouncing all around—and it didn’t make it very far. That moment taught me something I didn’t have words for yet: intention isn’t enough. In the moment of surprise, you discover whether your aim is steady.

As I grew older, I found I had a knack for target shooting. I even shot in competition while serving in the National Guard. Most misses in competitive shooting come from small things: breathing or distraction. You don’t fix it by yelling at yourself.

That’s why one of the most helpful New Testament words for sin is **hamartia**—it carries the sense of **missing the mark**. Sin is real. It’s not a minor mistake. It can be rebellion. It can be harm. It can be a deep turning-away. But it is also often experienced as **mis-aimed life under pressure**, reaching for a shortcut when trust is required, proving ourselves when abiding is required, grasping for control when worship is required.

And that is exactly where today begins, not with an audition, but with mercy.

## Introduction: Lent begins with mercy

Scripture says, “*Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*” (Matt. 4:1, NIV). The wilderness is not evidence of God’s absence. It becomes a place where God reveals what is true in the Son... And it is where the Father trains our aim by grace.

So today we’re going to watch Jesus hold to the center when everything in him is being pressed off target. And we’re going to receive grace not as shame-management, but as God’s mercy and power that restores our aim over time.

## Scripture Reading

Read Matthew 4:1–11

## Where temptation concentrates

Matthew wastes no time showing us where spiritual pressure concentrates. After naming the Spirit's leading, the text adds a plain human detail: "*After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry*" (Matt. 4:2, NIV).

In other words, the testing is not hypothetical. It comes when the body is thin, when the nerves are exposed, when you are more reactive than reflective. And if we're honest, most of our "missing the mark" is not planned rebellion; when that happens, we feel pressure toward the "quick fix"—relief now, consequences later.<sup>1</sup>

And none of this should produce shame. It should produce **awareness**—because we know who we are. We are followers of Jesus, and Lent is the season where Christ meets us under pressure, not to condemn us, but to re-form us in it.

## The three temptations: provision, proving, and power

The tempter says, "*If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread*" (Matt. 4:3, NIV). The temptations come in a pattern that is both ancient and familiar: **provision, proving, and power**.

He first temptation **provision**: you're hungry, here eat; it's a temptation to secure life by "your" control, this is relief without reliance... provision without trust.

Jesus answers, "*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God*" (Matt. 4:4, NIV). Jesus refuses the **shortcut** because HE knows the mark: communion with the Father is life.

### [Brief pause.]

Some of us are living here right now. We're hungry in some way: tired, stretched, afraid... and the temptation is to fix it fast. And the Lord's mercy is not condemnation. The Lord's mercy is re-aiming our desire.

### *Proving instead of abiding*

The next temptation is Proving... Then the devil takes Jesus to the holy city and says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down" (Matt. 4:6, NIV). This is the temptation to perform your identity instead of receive it. It's spiritual theater.

Jesus answers, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Matt. 4:7, NIV). In other words: *I don't need to prove the Father's love*. I don't need to manufacture certainty.

### **I will trust.**

This is one of the places where holiness becomes fragmented in church life. Holiness turns into image-management: look strong, sound certain, appear successful. But the gospel calls us to be an honest presence.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 10th Anniversary rev. ed. (New York: Church Publishing, 2017).

## *Power without worship*

The final temptation is all about power, the devil offers the kingdoms of the world and says, “*All this I will give you... if you will bow down and worship me*” (Matt. 4:9, NIV). This is the most direct miss: exchanging worship (wholeness) for influence, trading holiness (a Good Life with Christ) for control.

Jesus answers, “*Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only*” (Matt. 4:10, NIV). He points us back to the center: a worship-first, life. God at the center. Everything else, put it in its place.

These temptations is like today, pushing us toward a crown without the cross; which gives people the idea that I can be good without obedience.<sup>2</sup> Here is these verses, Jesus is living Israel’s story faithfully... While others failed in wilderness testing, Jesus holds steady.<sup>3</sup> So here is the point: Jesus refuses the quick-fix, he refuses the shortcut and points obedience to the Will of God.

## **Hamartia and grace:**

So, friends, our sin can be seen as **hamartia**: missing the mark, a mis-aimed life; it can be accidental, but it is never harmless, because the mark is communion with God, love of neighbor, and faithful worship. Sin fractures trust. Sin distorts desire. Sin wounds communities.

But here is the mercy for us: the gospel does not leave us staring at the target with shame.

Psalm 32 says, “*Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered*” (Ps. 32:1, NIV). And it gets even more personal, the psalmist says: “*I will confess my transgressions to the LORD. And you forgave the guilt of my sin*” (Ps. 32:5, NIV).

That is not denial. That is forgiveness that clears the fog so we can aim back towards the center.

Romans 5 widens the story: our misses are not isolated, they ripple through a whole human narrative, but Christ’s obedience opens a new story, a new humanity. “*For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous*” (Rom. 5:19, NIV).

This is the gospel of God for anxious people: Christ does not merely point at the mark. Christ becomes our righteousness and our new humanity.

## **The Flow of Holiness: river, current, and re-aiming**

Now let me say it the way we’ve been learning to say it:

**Holiness is not a ladder we climb; it’s a river we enter.**

**The headwaters are Jesus revealed; the downstream is Jesus reproduced.**

In the Flow of Holiness: Grace is the current and it awakens us to the truth; God Grace forgives and restores, it retrains our aim and takes that restored life outward in love.

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996)

This as a life re-centered in the Divine Center, an obedience that grows out of communion, not strain.<sup>4</sup> Holiness is not mere moralism but Spirit-formed life grounded in union with Christ and lived together.<sup>5</sup>

So holiness is not you white-knuckling your way through life. Holiness is grace restoring your aim, again and again... Until worship becomes your reflex, trust becomes your reflex, obedience becomes your reflex.

Think about it, church doesn't need more religious information; it needs lived transformation that people can see and touch.<sup>6</sup> That's what we're after: a holiness that becomes visible as steady love.

## Take-away: the “small stone” question

So here's the question I want you to carry like a small stone in your pocket all week:

### What shortcut is being offered to you right now?

Not the dramatic kind—the ordinary kind.

- The shortcut to provision without trust: “Just take control and fix it.”
- The shortcut to proving: “Just perform—make sure they see you're legitimate.”
- The shortcut to power: “Just win—make it go your way.”

In my experience, most of our misses happen right here... not because we hate God, but because we are hungry, tired, reactive, and trying to quiet anxiety as fast as possible.

## Refusing the shortcut together

Now, the wilderness is loud with temptation, but Jesus answers from a deeper quiet. That's why, as a meeting, we practice silence, this is not as empty time, but as a way of refusing the anxious shortcut.

### One minute before you answer

So, I going to encourage you to keep up on the practice of “**Pause before you answer.**”

Before you send that email, have a hard conversation, make a snap decision...

In that minute, pray one honest sentence: “Lord, show me what I'm reaching for.”

And then one obedient sentence: “Lord, re-aim me toward worship and trust.”

If you miss the mark this week, and some of us will, Psalm 32 gives you the next faithful step: “I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Ps. 32:5, NIV).

Confess quickly. Repair quickly. Aim again.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

## **Conclusion: the river and the center**

Friends, the mark we all should be aiming for is not spiritual impressiveness. The mark is faithful communion with the Father: it is a worship-first life, trust-first life, obedience-from-love.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.