

Triumphant in Temptation

In the name of him who as our brother in flesh faced the enemy and defeated him, dear friends in Christ: I like the Lenten season. Yes, its theme is darker than the rest of the church year, and it means that my schedule is busier than usual; but there's no other time that we concentrate quite so intently on what's most important to our Christian faith: the problem of our sin, Jesus Christ, and the terrible price he paid to save us. During Lent we journey with our Savior on the path that leads to Jerusalem, to sorrow and suffering, and to death so that we, repentant sinners who tremble before the just wrath of God, can hear week after week all the year through the powerful, life-giving words, "Your sins are forgiven." At its most foundational level, this is what Christianity is all about.

Today's Gospel lesson however, reminds us that there's another strategy for dealing with sin, which is not to fall into it in the first place. It's like they tell youth how to deal with drugs: just say no. Yes, that's easier said than done – impossible in fact. We sin continuously because we are sinners. It's what we do. That's why we so desperately need the forgiveness Jesus died to secure for us. But with his forgiveness Jesus also gives us new life in him, and with it the power to stand against the devil and overcome temptation. We won't win all of the battles; but following in Jesus' footsteps and learning by his example, we can become increasingly triumphant in temptation – as he was all the time. In today's Gospel, Jesus shows us how.

Still, when we study the temptations that the devil threw at Jesus, we're going to encounter something of a disconnect when trying to make direct application to ourselves. I mean, Satan is never going to tempt you to turn stones into bread because you can't do it. Nor is he likely to offer you authority over all the kingdoms of the world if you bow down and worship him – not because you wouldn't find the offer appealing; but because he knows he could command your undying devotion at a fraction of the price. Finally, we can be reasonably sure that he's not going to whisk you away to some precipitous height and suggest that you throw yourself from it just so that you can prove that you trust the Lord enough to save you even from your own reckless stupidity.

No, these temptations were tailor made for Jesus. They are temptations like no other because Jesus is a man like no other in that he is also fully divine – true God and true man united in one person. So these temptations had to be out of the ordinary. But if we can discover the devil's strategy behind the temptations, we can translate them into something he might use on us.

Take the first temptation. Jesus is hungry. It's no wonder: he hasn't eaten in forty days. The devil suggests that he use his divine power to change some stones into bread. On the surface it seems reasonable. It's no sin for Jesus to make bread – even by miracle. At the feeding of the 5000 he'll make tons of it. So what's the trap the devil is trying to spring? It's this: in order for Jesus to be our substitute on the cross, he must truly live as a man – as one of us – that is, by faith in the Word and promises of God. One thing you will never see is Jesus using his divine power for his own benefit. He uses it to help others, to prove his divinity, and to illustrate theological concepts; but never to make his own life easier or better. Why? Because you can't. You have to live by faith, and so did he. In this case, the Spirit of God directed him out into the desert for this time of testing and temptation. So Jesus must trust that his heavenly Father has a plan for ensuring his survival. The core of the temptation is to doubt God's providential care. It's to think the Lord isn't providing for my needs as I attempt to stay within his will, and therefore I must rely on myself and whatever illicit means I might employ to provide for myself.

How might this same temptation come to us? I'll give an extreme example. I read about a Christian man who lost his high paying job, and who was therefore having trouble making ends meet. He was in danger of losing his McMansion-like home, and was unable to maintain his family in the luxurious standard of living to which they had become accustomed. The only way he could think of to do his duty as a husband and father and provide for his dependents was to buy a lot of life insurance and then commit suicide in such a way that it would look like an accident. And you can see how Satan baits this trap with what appears to be genuine virtue. The man feels that he's making the ultimate sacrifice for the people he loves, and he gets to save face in the process. He avoids the humiliation of facing financial ruin. Never mind that it involves the sins of self murder and the defrauding of an insurance company. Fortunately in this case, the man mentioned to a Christian friend what he was contemplating and he was helped to see both the peril to his own soul and the devastation and guilt that he would inflict upon his family if he were to follow through. He ended up working at a job that paid less. He had to scale back, providing for his family more modestly than before; but more importantly, he learned to trust not in riches, but in the Lord. The result was that his family, even with and to a certain degree because of the struggles they had to face, became a lot closer than before.

That's an extreme case, but it illustrates the basic principle quite well. The Lord has promised to take care of our needs. He calls upon us to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness – the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus by hearing his Word – and all the things we need for this body and life will be provided. That doesn't mean that hardship won't come. It means that when the Lord in his wisdom sends hardship, he calls upon us to trust him all the more because he intends it for our greater good. The temptation is to doubt this, and to imagine that since the Lord appears to be failing to be good to his word, means that are either immoral or illegal must be used. It's what leads people to prostitute themselves, to steal, cheat on taxes, engage in illegal business practices, and all manner of other sins – and to justify it by thinking, "I need to do this in order to survive." A more subtle way this occurs is when people think that embryonic stem cell research is an acceptable means of finding cures for diseases and injuries. If we murder babies today, we might be able to cure paralysis tomorrow.

Responding to this temptation, Jesus brings us back to the truth. It isn't food or medicine or money or anything of the sort that keeps us alive. We live because God says we do. His Word is the source of all life. When we trust in his Word, he will keep us alive – even if in his wisdom we have to pass through death now in time to stay alive forever. If we simply trust in his Word we live, no matter what happens. So there's never a reason to go against his Word for the sake of survival.

The second temptation isn't about survival; it's about rewards. The devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. "You can have them now. I'll give them to you if you fall down and worship me." Implied in this temptation is the notion that there's a hard way and an easy way to achieve the same result. The devil knows very well that Jesus is here to establish his kingship – to win all power and authority in heaven and earth. He knows too that the way Jesus is pursuing it is the way of pain and humiliation – the way of the cross. "Skip all that", he says, "Do it my way. Same result. No pain. No waiting, either. All you have to do is worship me, a creature, rather than the Creator."

This temptation doesn't require a lot of unpacking to apply to ourselves. The devil uses it all the time. He tells us that the straight and narrow way, the way of the cross, is the suckers' way. "Nice guys finish last. Those who play by the rules are losers. The Lord simply doesn't know how to reward those who are faithful to him. I mean, look at them: they're persecuted, they're ridiculed, they're poor and miserable. They spend all their time and money at church. They put their morality and their integrity ahead of their own happiness. What kind of life is that? Do it my way. You want it? Take it. You like that person? Take him or her – never mind if they're married – or if you are.

Go for it. You have a right to be happy right now. Don't wait for some mystical pie-in-the-sky wonderland. All you have to do is worship the creature rather than the Creator."

It's a bad deal; it always is, to attain temporal rewards at the cost of eternal ones. Jesus saw through this trap, and taking his example so should we. What good would it have done him to win the all kingdoms of this world, since they are all doomed to destruction? And what good would it do you to gain the whole world, if it cost you your own soul? Yes, worshipping the Lord means that we look to him and only to him to provide us all good things. And the truth is that he knows very well how to reward the faithful, and he will in the life to come. For the time being, however, we've been called to take up our assigned crosses and follow the Lord Jesus. Doing so, we walk by faith, believing that all things happen for the good of those who love and trust the Lord.

And that leads to the third and final temptation. In it the devil effectively says to Jesus, "Oh, you trust the Lord, do you? Well, how much do you trust him? The Scripture says the Lord will protect you from all harm. So prove to me that you really believe that. Jump off the temple. The Psalm says the angels will catch you. This I gotta see."

The clever thing about this temptation is that it appears to be a test of faith. But there is a big difference between trusting the Lord's promise to protect you in the adversities that he brings into your life for your good, and going out of your way to create adverse circumstances for yourself in which you call upon the Lord to keep his Word. It's not really a test of your faith. Instead, it's a test of God's faithfulness. And, as Jesus points out, it's not our place to put God to any tests.

But unfortunately we often do. How? When we play the game of planned repentance. It happens when you say to yourself, "I've got this sin I want to commit. I know it's wrong; but I'm going to do it anyway. But it's okay, because afterward, I'll come back to the Lord and tell him how sorry I am. And he'll forgive me. I have his promise. 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. So, you see, in going ahead and committing this sin against the Lord, I'm only proving how much faith I have in him." And if the logic seems a bit convoluted, that's because it is. But that doesn't stop us from doing it, does it?

But there's a wrong assumption here too. It's in the very notion of planned repentance. The thought is that I have the power to repent if I want to. That's not true. If indeed I come to repentance, it's because God's Spirit working through the Word convicts my heart and causes me to be sorry for my sin. But when I consciously decide to sin against the voice of the Spirit speaking to my heart, I'm effectively silencing him. I'm saying, "Shut up. I don't want to hear what you're saying. Talk to me after I've committed the sin." This is a dangerous game to play. It's like playing Russian roulette with God's grace. It's effectively jumping not off the temple, but off and out of the Church of Jesus Christ, hoping that the Spirit will return and convict me of my sin sometime before I hit the ground and go splat.

The thing of it is, it's a game that gets easier to play over time. I mean, the first time you do it, you feel real bad about it and repent right away. Then the devil comes around and says, "Say, that was easy. Why don't you do it again?" So you do. But this time the repentance doesn't come so quick. You don't feel as bad about it – at least, not at first. And what's happening, of course, is that each time you commit the sin planning to repent of it, you silence the Spirit. After a while, if you keep at it, he stops speaking altogether. What once made you feel guilty becomes a comfortable habit of sin. At that point you're lost.

So it is that Jesus responds, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." There is profound wisdom in that answer – and we would do well to remember it, as we should remember and take to heart all the answers that Jesus gave to Satan in his temptation. He always responded

with the Word of God, which is the Sword of the Spirit – the one weapon with which he defeated all the attacks of the devil. Learning from Jesus how to wield this weapon and following his example, we too can be increasingly triumphant in temptations, and continuing to fight the good fight of faith, forgiven when we fail. The devil is always looking for an opening. So let's be on our guard. And following Jesus, let's press on toward the goal with our swords sharpened and ready. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!