

Have you ever faced temptation in your life? Of course you have! Each and every one of us has faced life's temptations more than once, and we are always faced with the issue of how we are going to respond to them. Even Jesus was tempted, as we have heard in today's Gospel reading. We can be tempted at any and every stage in life. Do we fight temptation or give in to it? Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel gives us some idea of how we as Christians may deal with temptation.

The Gospel reading from Matthew 4:1-11 takes place shortly after Jesus' baptism - a baptism that included the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus from heaven. Now, the Holy Spirit has led Jesus to a place in the wilderness where the devil waited to tempt him. In this we see the Scripture lived out, "*He was tempted in every way as we are yet without sin.*" Our own wilderness experiences are an important aspect of our spiritual walk because they test us and teach us. We can look temptation in the face because Jesus has entered our desert experience and come out triumphant.

Jesus' wilderness experience with temptation came at a spiritually significant time in His life, and so it often is for us as well. Temptation is an active force today. If God calls us, we will be tempted. And by calls us, I don't mean to some special ministry - I mean calls us to be with Him - to follow Him. We are often persuaded to see evil as the product of social problems such as poverty, racism or ignorance. However, evil exists. Period. The Genesis reading tells us that, "*The Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'*" You see it's not that evil didn't exist before Adam and Eve ate the fruit and sinned. Evil was there already, they just did not know what it was nor had they experienced it. Now, for us all, evil is a personal, spiritual and sociological issue that lives in both our hearts and our communities.

Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread to satisfy his physical hunger, just like some of you might be tempted in a few minutes at coffee hour to eat something you "shouldn't" be eating. Junk food, snack food lots of foods satisfy our physical hunger for a short period of time, but in the long run too much "junk" is not good for us. The same is true of our spiritual hunger. We need spiritual nourishment as well as physical nourishment. God will provide us with the spiritual nourishment that we need. As long as we stay close to him, we will overflow with blessings and joy.

God has much to give us to feed our spiritual hunger, but today we are distracted from receiving His word. Things such as shopping malls, shopping online, by catalogs and TV shopping channels distract us with things we really don't need but want. Men's and women's' magazines, home improvement and decorating magazines distract us as well. Then of course there are desktop, laptop and the handheld computers, we call cell phones, that draw us more and more into the longings of this world. Yet only God can fulfill our longings. St. Augustine summed it up well when he wrote, "O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our souls are restless, searching, until they find their rest in Thee." God is the hope we have when we look into the world and see so much unrest, lack of peace and just downright evil. God is the hope we have when we look at ourselves and see our evil side.

The devil was setting a trap but Jesus wasn't going to get caught in it. If Jesus had given in to this first temptation, He would have temporarily satisfied His physical hunger but thoroughly denied His spiritual hunger. Thus, He would have turned His back on God. He would have begun His ministry by following the devil's lead rather than God's lead.

Next, Jesus was tempted by the devil to jump from the roof of the temple. PLEASE NOTE: Even Satan uses Scripture as a weapon! ALSO NOTE: These three temptations are not incentives to do bad things. They were invitations for Jesus to be someone else, to live some life other than that of the beloved Son of God. While the devil and his disciples quote Scripture and thereby appeal to our lower nature, their strongest appeal is to our sense of right and wrong. They try to persuade us to do - not what we know is wrong, but rather, what we think is right. The devil is much sneakier than the obvious and hides his temptations. He will tempt us to do good deeds by using some sort of underhanded method. He offers us shortcuts that sound so good at the time but work out so poorly for eternity. He will be like “a wolf in sheep’s clothing”, so we must stay alert at all times and always pray for guidance. We must not be fooled by the beautiful package that the temptation comes in, because often the contents are ugly. They may not even be ugly, just wrong. Look at Genesis and see. The fruit was beautiful to the eye and good for food but nonetheless forbidden! Temptations are everywhere and the tempter and his devils also stay close.

Finally, Jesus is tempted with all the kingdoms of the world. However, God has already promised them to Jesus. In reality, the devil has a stake in all the kingdoms of the world. At one level, they are his kingdom for now and many people willingly serve him today. However, few people ever sign a contract with the devil knowingly. It is Satan’s sneaky, deceptive, half-truth way of dealing that sometimes leads us astray. But don’t do a Flip Wilson and say, “the devil made me do it.” He may entice you, but he doesn’t make you.

Jesus fights fire with fire by quoting Scripture back at the devil at each turn in these three temptations. Our greatest weapon in our fight against temptation is the word of God. It is the true armor of God that Paul refers to in Ephesians chapter 6. More about that in a minute.

There will be times when we need his strength and guidance when we face temptations. The Book of James tells us, “Resist the devil and he will flee.” It doesn’t say he will flee forever. Satan will never give up. He didn’t give up on Jesus. Luke’s version of this story ends with, “*And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.*” Gethsemane. The garden. Judas. THAT was a MORE opportune time.

All of this is to say that the devil will stop at nothing to tempt us into doubting God’s word and promises. Just as the serpent did with Eve in the Garden of Eden, the deceiver will whisper words of half-truth and seek to sow doubt in us. The tempter may indicate that the Lord can’t be trusted or that what God says is only a half-truth. We know Satan is a liar and a deceiver. Ignore that whispering voice and listen for the voice of truth. When God speaks even E. F. Hutton listens. You and I would do well to listen too.

How should we respond to temptation?

First, we need to be prepared before we face it. Jesus gives us a good answer in his responses to Satan’s temptations. Jesus appealed to the unchanging word of God: “It is written!” If we want to successfully overcome temptation, we must also use God’s word as our offensive weapons against an inferior foe. This means we must take time to read and study his word. We can’t go into battle each day unarmed-and yet many people today do this very thing by ignoring the Bible and the principles it contains. Going into battle unarmed is certain death. Part of our problem in fighting temptation is that we don’t believe we’re even in a battle. But we are and it is imperative that we understand this!

Second, we can face it for what it really is. We need to understand that temptation is more than just an appeal in some way to something desired that is not in God's plan for us – it is a direct attempt to turn us away from God and God's will. As is often said, "Knowing is half the battle."

Third, we can flee from it. Even better, we can stay away from situations that tempt us or cause us to stumble. For example – don't stand in front of the fridge and say, "I will not open it. I will not open it. I will not open it." You'll give in! Instead, walk away.

Last, we must follow the instructions Paul gave us in Ephesians chapter 6 and put on the armor of God every day, before we do battle with evil. Don't wait till the time comes and then put it on. It's too late. Put it on first thing. No police officer or Sheriff's Deputy waits till there's a shootout going on to put on their protective vest. No, they put it on before they leave for work or in the locker room at the station. Put on your spiritual armor as you begin your day: 1) you're prepared and 2) you're admitting that you may be in a battle, which goes back to the first point.

Lent provides us with the training period we need to fulfill our spiritual mission. Jesus was strengthened by His wilderness experience. We can be too. Allow Lent to be a time to form new and improved spiritual habits in fighting temptation and preparing for battle. Jesus left the wilderness, called His disciples and started doing God's work. We can also leave the wilderness and do God's work, all the time being confident that we can face temptation by relying on God's strength and His wisdom and the truth in His word written.

Amen