

"The Beginning And End of Temptation"

James 1:12-18

February 18, 2018

The First Sunday in Lent

Everyone seems to be frustrated with, tired of, or annoyed by the recent weather we've been experiencing.. The temperatures remain cold and, in addition to that, snow falls upon snow which falls upon snow. So, today, I want you just lay back, close your eyes, and think of the warm spring weather which will be coming soon. While many think this will be an improvement on the present situation we are experiencing, it still will not be perfect. Instead of working hard to keep snow off your driveways and sidewalks, you'll have to work on keeping weeds out of your flowerbeds and lawns. And you know that simply cutting off the dandelions, the thistles, and the other weeds, stuffing them in a bag, and burning them in the fire is not enough to alleviate the problem. You also have to work hard in dealing with those things which lead up to the weeds. You have to carefully care for the soil and apply sufficient weed killer in order to prevent weeds in the first place.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Our situation in Lent is like the situation in dealing with a lawn or a flower bed. With a lawn, you must take seriously the problem of weeds and work hard, not only to get rid of the weeds, but to prevent anything and everything that leads up to the growth of weeds. In the same way, during Lent, we take seriously our sin. However, we must also take seriously and deal with all that leads up to sin, namely, temptation.

While many people, even Christians, do not take seriously the problem of sin, many more people fail to take seriously the problem of temptation which leads to sin. It seems like no big deal. Just don't give into temptation. In our text for today, James says, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." See, just ignore or resist temptation and you are blessed.

Many people get the idea that resisting the tempter and overcoming temptation is simply a matter of the will. They think it is like being tempted by a piece of chocolate cake while you're on a diet. If you just try hard enough, then you can resist the temptation to break your diet. Some people think that resisting temptation in more serious matters and, thus, not entering into sin, is also a matter of the will. Back in the 1980's, Nancy Reagan came up with a plan to deal with drug abuse in which the biggest strategy was, "Just Say No!" This plan was criticized and ridiculed for being too naïve. It was said that one could not prevent a serious problem by "just saying no".

In your ongoing battle against sin, how are you dealing with the temptation to sin.? Is it a piece of cake? Are you able to resist temptations to sin against God or your neighbor by "just saying no"? Since sin still abounds, then, either people do not care about avoiding sin (a topic for another sermon) or people are unsuccessful in their bids to resist temptation.

If we cannot overcome temptation and, thus, fall into sin often, then our next plan of action is to blame somebody else and avoid responsibility. Our first target for blame is God. Ever since the time of Adam who blamed his sin upon God for giving him the woman who gave him the forbidden fruit. In similar manner, we blame God for the temptations which come into our lives. It is somehow his fault that we experience temptation and are unable to do anything but give into it. It is God's fault for creating the beautiful Big Sky scenery which tempts us to spend our weekends in those mountains instead of in the house of God. It is God's fault that we were tempted to fall into sexual sin because He didn't provide a suitable choice for a spouse. It is God's fault that he gave us such a wasteful government that forces me to cheat on my income taxes.

As tempting as it might be to blame God (no pun intended), James reminds us that this is simply not true. James writes, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." So, we look for others to blame for the temptations which lead us into sin.

We blame Satan. "The devil made me do it" was a popular phrase that describes this. I had no choice. The devil forced me into doing sin. We blame other people. "It's not my fault," we may say. "Someone else was doing it and they made me do it too." Even if we honestly want to try and overcome temptation, we think it just involves avoiding contact with those things or people or beings which tempt us. How's that going for you? Even if you could avoid Satan and his evil angels at every turn and even if you could avoid the things in the people which tempt you in our world, it still wouldn't solve the problem.

What makes matters worse is that we often do not make any attempt to avoid temptation. We don't take temptation seriously. In fact, we place ourselves directly in the line of temptation. I saw a T-shirt which said on the front, "Lead us not into temptation ... Oh hell, follow me. I know a shortcut." Temptation is merely a joke. It's like getting within eight feet of a vicious dog who is on a ten foot leash and wondering why we are mauled. We ignore the temptation and give into the sin.

The problem here appears to be twofold. First, we cannot overcome temptation or ignore it on our own. Second, we are unable to avoid the influence that temptation has and we fall into sin.

James tells us the truth about the origin of temptation and how sin flows out of it. James writes, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." The awful truth is that temptation cannot be blamed on God, on the devil, or on other people. As *Pogo*, a comic strip from the 50s and the 60s about a group of talking animals in the Okefenokee Swamp, put it, "We have met the enemy and they is us."

Temptation ultimately comes from within, that is, our sinful nature. James likens it to a perverse imitation of childbirth. Temptation begins when we are lured and enticed by our own sinful desires. Outside forces may influence this, but the source of temptation comes from within. That desire conceives and gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.

Two bad things happen as a result of this. We can never escape temptation because we can never escape ourselves. This means we can never stop sinning as long as our sinful nature is alive and well. Secondly, Satan can use this reality to his advantage and to our detriment. He knows that he has an ally with our sinful nature in working against us.

We stand no chance against Satan, as a result. He has been in the tempting business for thousands of years. It is like a skilled professional athlete. No matter how skilled he or she might be, their skills will eventually be diminished and forced him out of the league. People have said that, with regards to athletic competition and success, Father Time is undefeated. In the same way, no matter how pious and religious we might try to be, we will eventually be overcome by Satan and sin on our own. For Satan, with regard to temptation and sin, is undefeated... Except once.

James reminds us, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow do to change." With regard, not only to sin, but also to temptation, Jesus is that good and perfect gift for us. He came down from heaven to, not only die for our sin in order to earn forgiveness, but He came down to take on Satan and temptation for us and in our place.

We start the season of Lent, not by focusing on Jesus final victory over sin on the cross, but the beginning of His victory over temptation. After identifying as one of us by standing in the Jordan River to be baptized, our text says that Jesus was then driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. There, He took on Satan. Not having a sinful nature, Jesus was able to resist temptation into sin and to overcome the Tempter himself. Jesus defeated Satan in our place and for our good. Now, Satan has no power to hurt us, defeat us, or overcome us. Jesus has already defeated Satan and we share in that victory. Some have compared Satan with a toothless wolf. He may seem very frightening and dangerous, but his bark is far worse than his bite.

Thus, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus fires the first volley in his battle against Satan and sin in order to save us. He overcomes temptation to sin for us. Three years later, He overcomes sin itself, as well as God's wrath against sin and the punishment of eternal death which sin brings. We have protection from temptation through Jesus' battle with Satan. We have forgiveness for all of our sins through Jesus' death on the cross. All of this is confirmed by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus' resurrection guarantees our victory over temptation, sin, death, and hell.

Does this mean that temptation will now cease and that we, as Christians, no longer need to deal with temptation? Obviously, that's not true at all. In fact, we may experience greater volumes of testing and tempting because we are God's people through faith in Jesus Christ. So, how do we handle temptation now?

First, when we experience times of temptation, don't try to go at it alone. You not only have Satan and the world fighting against you, but you are fighting against yourself. Don't simply try to emulate Jesus. You cannot do what he has done. Rather, turn to Him in prayer and faith. Know the Word of God so that you might use it against Satan, against the world, and even against your own sinful flesh. Call upon Jesus in prayer, seeking His strength and His victory.

When you are bogged down by temptation and mired in sin, resist the urge to just try harder the next time to be like Jesus. It won't work, but it doesn't have to. Simply, confess your sin to God the Father and accept forgiveness for all of your sin for the sake of God the son, Jesus Christ. Then move on from there in the strength of the Lord and by the power of His victory over temptation, as well as sin.

If you came into the service late this morning during the singing of the first hymn, you might've been confused. Is it Reformation Day already? That seems to be the only time when we bring this hymn out. However, it has much to say regarding our fight against temptation, sin, and especially the devil. After writing in the first two verses about Satan's desire to lead us into sin, death, and hell and our total inability to match Satan's might, Luther writes in the final two verses,

*Though hordes of devils filled the land All threatening to devour us?
We Tremble Not, Unmoved We Stand; they cannot overpower us.
Let this world's tyrant rage; In battle we'll engage
His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.*

*God's Word forever shall abide, No thanks to foes, who fear it;
For God Himself fights by our side With weapons of the Spirit.
Were they to take our house, Goods, honor, child, or spouse.
Though life be wrenched away, They cannot win the day.
The Kingdom's ours forever!*