

Today, we revisit the temptation of Jesus Christ in the wilderness by the devil. It is important to note the immediately preceding story at the end of St. Matthew's Gospel, chapter 3 which is the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. Verses 16 and 17 of that chapter read:

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

This passage then sets the context for the temptation narrative. God had just declared that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, the Messiah, the heir of the Throne of David, and this declaration becomes intrinsic to how we are to understand what the devil is actually questioning when he approaches Christ.

The gospel passage begins, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil." At stake here is the redemption of humanity; for to be our Savior, Christ must be both fully God and fully man, and He must in His actions throughout His life and ministry demonstrate the perfection required of the Messiah. In order to represent us, to be the once and for all sacrifice for the sins of the world, He must be the perfection of humanity. Likewise, in order to take all the sins of the world upon Himself, He must be fully God. Moral perfection is required for Christ to be a propitiatory sacrifice and to demonstrate to the world that He is God and therefore is able to cleanse from their sins all those who would believe on Him. Where mankind had failed, Christ must triumph; and thus He is led, compelled to go into the wilderness, demonstrating His perfection to the world and to the devil.

The victory of Jesus over temptation is often contrasted to the people of Israel in the wilderness. Israel in disbelief failed to obey God at the borders of the promised land, resulting in a purgation of 40 years, over which time they continually grumbled and complained, "testing" God, as it were, by their complaints and hard hearts. But Christ is not only the new Israel, He is the new humanity, for here we see the original temptation of humanity in the Garden revisited. Adam and Eve in the garden were surrounded by abundant food provided by God. They existed in continual blessing, being in the very presence of God, and yet they were unable to resist the tempter.

Let's take a closer look at the nature of the temptation, which Eve was subjected to by the devil. The narrator of Genesis three gives us insight into the precise way she was tempted. In verse 6 of chapter 3 of Genesis we read, "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." It seems straightforward enough; but in this verse, we see that Eve is presented with every temptation in the world.

How? Compare the story of the Fall of Man to the first Epistle of St. John chapter 2, verse 16. “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” First, note that Eve saw that the fruit was good for food. This is the lust of the flesh; it occurs when we desire something in itself to satisfy our bodily appetites. We use things or people for our own pleasure. Really this comes down to either our wanting to eat something or to have sex with something. Such disordered appetites lead us to destruction.

Next we see that the forbidden fruit was pleasant to behold. This is the lust of the eyes. We look with desire upon that which we are forbidden from having, and we desire to exercise control over that thing and to possess it for ourselves. This is not primarily about fulfilling our bodily appetites, but more about the fact that the thing is forbidden; and furthermore we rail against such limitations. Each of these lusts is merely a different side of the same coin – we want something we should not or cannot have, first for its own sake, and second, because we have been forbidden from it.

Finally Eve desires the fruit because she believes that it will make her wise. Here is the boastful pride of life, which is in essence self-idolatry. We sometimes want to be our own gods, to exalt ourselves above God, in the pretense of defining our own selves, instead of embracing the being and the limitations, that God has created for us. And often we don't believe that God is faithful to take care of us, especially during the difficulties of life. Of course this is nonsense, for we did not bring ourselves into the world, and we will have no direct control over our eternal existence; we cannot will ourselves to be other than we are. The only choice we make is whether we will follow Christ or turn from Him. God establishes the consequences of either path, not us.

Notice that all three of humanity's temptations started when the devil questioned the Word of God. At the end of the first verse of Genesis 3: “And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” In other words, “What did God really say, Eve? Why would He say that? Such a rule seems arbitrary. Surely God didn't mean what you think you heard Him say. I'm sure it is fine if you take a bite. It will be good for you, in fact.” And thus the devil sets us down a path of rationalizing away the commandments, the statutes, and the laws of God until, we have convinced ourselves that by disobeying, we are actually doing good. Such logic leads us to perdition, not to perfection.

And the devil seemed to conclude that what worked with the first human beings, created in God's image, prior to the Fall, would no doubt work with the eternal image of God in man. And so Satan also begins the temptation of Christ by attacking the declaration of God just made, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.” The first words spoken by the devil to Christ are, “If you are the Son of God”: “Jesus, why are you out in the wilderness hungry? God isn't providing for you? If God were good, why would He have you suffer like this? Are you

sure you are that special after all? You could prove it once and for all right here. Doesn't a nice warm loaf of bread sound delicious right now?"

Now, is it morally wrong to make bread, especially when one is starving? No, but should Christ do so through His divine power, He would capitulate mastery over His body, and remove Himself from the common plight of humanity. People cannot turn rocks into stone, and Christ must live as a common man if He is to represent the common man. He here demonstrates that physical needs will not compromise His divine mission, and in His refusal to succumb to the hunger of the flesh, He reveals His divine nature, for God is love and love does not seek its own. Love always sacrifices itself for others. Christ responds to Satan with a quote from Deuteronomy 8:3. Notice that where the devil questions and doubts the Word of God, the very Word Himself reaffirms the life-giving power of God's spoken Word. Man lives by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

Next, what about the lust of the eyes? This corresponds most closely with the third temptation. Satan takes Christ to an exceedingly high mountain. "See all of the kingdoms of the world, Jesus? What are you willing to do so that they would be yours? I can give these to you easily if you look to me to provide instead of waiting on God, instead of suffering as God wills you to suffer." We fall into this temptation so easily. We look at what others have, or what we see in the media, and think that if we only had that house, that car, that wife, that bank account, then that is all that we need to be happy. What are we willing to give to obtain those things? What moral compromise are we willing to entertain in order to obtain those thing upon which we look with longing and desire, those things that are "pleasant to the eyes"? No doubt we've all played this game a little. "The lottery is at \$1.5 billion dollars, and it can be mine! All my problems will vanish overnight!" At least that is what we tell ourselves. Jesus, just one little bow, just one little compromise, and all of this could be yours! Think of the good you could do if you ruled the world! But the reality is that all would have been lost if Christ fell for this. Only God deserves our homage, our worship. To bow to anything else, to look to anything else as our salvation, or as a quick fix, is idolatry.

There are no quick fixes; there is only transformation. In our baptism we are given new hearts which are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and this begins the long process of our transformation into the image of Christ. It is a transformation that is only accomplished through time, through daily submission to God, through looking upon the face of Christ and desiring Him no matter what the cost. There is no shortcut to achieving holiness. There was no shortcut for Christ to realize His Rightful and Righteous Reign in the earth. Only God is to be worshipped, and it is only God that will work the transformation of the kingdom of the devil into the Kingdom of God.

The third temptation here, listed second in Matthew's gospel narrative, is an appeal to the boastful pride of life. Now for you and m, I suspect that to throw ourselves down from a very

high place would not be much of a temptation. But this temptation wasn't aimed at human lust. It wasn't about Christ getting something for Himself. It was aimed at Christ's identity. Again the devil begins with, "If you are the son of God." He attacks by questioning God's Word, which in this case is questioning the identity of Christ. "Ok Jesus, prove that you are the Son of God, not just to me, but to you. You claim to be this, you claim to have heard God say this, but how do you really know? You are just fooling yourself." And the devil is a bit smarter here for he quotes scripture back to Jesus. "God said He would take care of you, but will He? If you don't jump, then you will never know absolutely. You will always have doubts that you are really God's son."

In this temptation, the devil is playing upon humanity's tendency to doubt when suffering. Yet the true child of God bears suffering patiently as a gift of God for it is only through this gift that we draw the nearest to God as is possible. Your sufferings through fasting and in this life allow you to share in a small way with the sufferings of Christ. They bind you to Him. Do not think that you are abandoned when you suffer. You are God's child, and He is giving you a chance to come closer, to approach more intimately. You are who God declares you to be. Rest in that. Do not let the tempter draw you away from this blessing. You don't have to prove anything to the devil or to any person. You only have to cling to Jesus.

Now thanks be to God that He, in Christ, succeeded where we, in our first parents, failed. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life still tempt us every day, and the question now posed to us is, Will we fail again or will we receive the gifts, both blessings and trials, that God has for us as His children, His sons and daughters?

A few important points that we must remember in order to stand firm in the day of temptation. First: know what God has said, and what He hasn't said. He has said that we are His children and that He cares for us. He did not say that we wouldn't suffer. In fact he guarantees the opposite – we are commanded to take up our crosses daily and follow Him. Once again we come to the conclusion that God is more interested in our holiness than in our happiness. The difference between the two is trust. Have confidence in God's Word; and the only way to such confidence is to know without doubt what God has said.

Second: avoid the shortcuts, easy ways to accomplish what we think God wants. Sometimes God provides miraculously, but most of the time, the path forward just requires gutting it out, walking day by day with faithfulness in the little things. Watch out for "freebies" that may have strings attached. Are you truly receiving a gift, or does someone actually want more from you than you are acknowledging? Daily faithfulness, requiring real effort and difficulty, is the way of Christ. Avoid situations where you may be tempted to compromise.

Lastly, learn to rest in God. Are you motivated by fear that God will not provide? Or are you moving forward with confidence that somehow God will work things together for good as He has promised? Everything that we need ultimately comes from God, but it also usually

requires obedience and effort on our part. Life is hard, but God is with us, and continually receives our love for Him in our obedience through Christ. All things come from Thee, O God; nothing real or eternal comes from our shortcuts to grasp after the things of this world.

Thanks be to God that Christ suffered hunger and endured temptation for us. And may God give us the grace of confidence in His Word and of self-denial to follow in the footsteps of Christ by enduring whatever temptations may come our way. AMEN.