

This morning's collect admonishes us to two things. The first is that we would withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and we'll begin here first. We will address the nature of the temptations we face and from where these temptations originate. The second request we make in the collect is asking that with pure hearts and minds, we would pursue Jesus Christ throughout our lives. The secret here is that the second request is the very way we accomplish the first one.

So then, what is this first request, to withstand temptation? We must have some understanding of man and his role in creation. Basically we must address the one fundamental question, "Who is God?" More specifically, "Is man god? Or is God God?" If man is god, then really there is no morality from which we can be tempted. There is only the question of what each man wants and if he has the power to get it. In such a world, there is no "should," and any attempt to mandate another's behavior is simply an exercise of power.

The other alternative is that God is God. By this we mean that God Created our world, our universe. He put matter and energy into place. He defined it all and brought it into being by His Word. He imbued the material world with the laws of physics and gave it all spiritual meaning. By His Spirit, He gives life to all, He pervades all. Creation flows out of the being and nature of God, and it is His being, therefore, that establishes the morality of our world. If this is so, if God is God, then all of Creation, especially the humans who were to guard and tend Creation, is bound by and to this divine morality.

So this is the fundamental questions each of us must ask. The answer isn't just an intellectual exercise, but is one that we must answer through how we live. We can either submit to God, placing Him first in our lives, or live as though He weren't really God making ourselves to be our own god for all practical intents and purposes.

Now I've set this before us as a binary – it's either one thing or the other. But don't all of us want to find a middle ground? We want just enough of God to be respectable, but what we really want is to do what we want to do. We will give God some of our selves, but we reserve the right to take advantage of any other, shall we say, "opportunities" that come our way.

Let me be clear here about a couple of things. First, God isn't fooled by our half-heartedness.

He wants our full devotion without compromise. In the Book of Revelation chapter 3, the letter to the Laodiceans, God says:

“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot.... So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.... As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

As baptized and professing Christians, our goal is that we would be fully committed to Jesus, and not that we would be halfway in and halfway out, neither hot nor cold. God is not amused by our games.

The second note here is that all of us are playing this game to some extent. The Christian life is about becoming progressively more committed to Jesus, and none of us are fully there. So we live in repentance – confessing often and receiving the gracious forgiveness of God often that we would never wander far from the loving presence of God. As fellow recipients of the grace of God, we therefore have no place to judge one another. We must be gracious to each other and encouraging to each other. We must let God act in one another's lives and resist presuming that our judgement will somehow bring about righteousness in our brothers and sisters. Let us each pursue God fully and encourage others to join us in this only truly noble endeavor.

Now anything that we do, or want, or think which undermines our primary allegiance to God is sin. Temptation— anything that draws us away from God and toward wrongdoing—is not itself sin; it is a very common plight for us all, being tempted to greater and lesser degrees many times a day. Jesus was also tempted. But when *does* temptation become sin? Well, a man can look at a beautiful woman and observe that she is beautiful. However, if that observation engages the imagination in a lustful way, then the line of sin has been crossed. And just to be explicit, following through on that imagined thought is also certainly a greater degree of sin.

Returning to the collect now, temptations come from three sources: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Let us start with our own role in tempting ourselves. By the flesh, we mean our

desires and lusts that bring ourselves pleasure outside of God's moral law. The first sin of humanity, the eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, was largely and act of the flesh. Eve, and then Adam, saw that the fruit was beautiful, and would taste good, and would make them wise. Their observations then moved to imagination and then action. The temptation stemmed from themselves, from their own desire. This is what we mean by "the flesh".

Now we know that Eve was not alone in the Garden. Satan was there also, and it was Satan, the accuser, the serpent, working on Eve's own lustful desires, who tempted Eve toward sin, encouraging her to imagine how good it would be to eat that fruit. Satan and the demons that follow him love to see us sin. They want to keep us far away from God, and it is sin that separates us from the love of God. Their favorite lie? "Oh, it's only a little thing. This one time doesn't matter." Our sins grow from there until we are completely lost.

By the world, we mean other people who resist God in their lives, and therefore determine, either intentionally or unconsciously, to undermine the faith of the followers of God. Understand that when you tell someone that you are going to church to pray, there is an implicit judgment. It isn't that you are condemning them or even care what they choose to do. But when you show the world that Jesus is a priority to you by going to church or spending time in Bible study or praying or by charitable service, it can't help but suggest that the other person should be doing such things as well. The world therefore hates all godly activity and wants to prevent it to avoid feeling judged. They accomplish this by getting you to sin right along with them. They think, "Oh ... I got so-and-so to skip church. See, I'm as good as he is."

These are the three sources of temptation, and they usually work together. Sin begins with our selfish desires. These may be encouraged and inflamed by the satanic hosts. And finally we are cheered on to rebellion by the world around us. We are called to resist the sin which results from such temptation because it exalts ourselves into the place that is reserved for God. We all know that guarding our minds and hearts to withstand such temptation is very difficult, even impossible save for the grace of God. And be reminded that just trying harder, willing ourselves better, is not the solution. In the long term, obedience merely out of a sense of duty, a brute act of the will, will cause bitterness. The true secret, if it is a secret, is to *love*

Jesus better.

But how do we do that? How do we nurture a deeper love of Jesus in our hearts?

The single best means of learning to love Jesus is committing to worshiping Him with His people weekly. Take every opportunity you can to gather with God's people in worship, for it is in the liturgy of our worship that our affections are shaped.

I will be the first to admit, attending worship can feel more like a duty than a joy. There is an act of the will that we need to engage. There is a commitment that we need to make. There is an intentional prioritization that we must acknowledge. But then over time, we change. We begin to want to be with God's people and to come into His presence with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise. God does work through worship. In fact, I have every confidence that the worship of the saints is the ultimate cause of all that is good and beautiful and worthy in this world.

Another thing to notice in the epistle is Paul's emphasis upon waiting. We believers are to wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. This does not strike me as an impatient waiting, but a waiting in rest and confidence. We see this emphasis in Psalm 62 which we read earlier.

MY soul truly waiteth still upon God;

* for of him cometh my salvation.

He verily is my strength and my salvation;

* he is my defence, so that I shall not greatly fall.

...

O put your trust in him always, ye people;

* pour out your hearts before him, for God is our hope.

So we wait not with anxiety or impatience, but in hope and confidence. God will do as He promises, and His complete trustworthiness is our refuge; it is our strength and our salvation. Nothing can undermine the plans of God for us and for the world.

And finally this morning, let us understand that the target of our disciplines and our commitments isn't ultimately our minds, but our hearts, our emotional center. We first see

this in today's reading in the gospel lesson, where the Pharisees test Jesus, tempting Him regarding the greatest commandment in the Law. To their questions, Christ answers:

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

So we are to love God with our whole being. This includes with our emotions, learning to be overwhelmed with the beauty of holiness. This emotional engagement is so very important for long-term obedience, resistance to temptation, and growth in holiness. Psalm 63 even amplifies this theme today:

O GOD, thou art my God;

* early will I seek thee.

My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh also longeth after thee,

* in a barren and dry land where no water is.

Thus have I looked for thee in the sanctuary,

* that I might behold thy power and glory.

For thy loving-kindness is better than the life itself:

* my lips shall praise thee.

As long as I live will I magnify thee in this manner,

* and lift up my hands in thy Name.

My soul shall be satisfied, even as it were with marrow and fatness,

* when my mouth praiseth thee with joyful lips.

Interestingly, the psalmist's thirst for God is satisfied within the context of worship. He looks for the power and glory of God in the sanctuary. The hunger of His soul shall be satisfied as if he were eating the richest and most tender meats when he speaks praises with joyful lips. We must not shy away from letting our hearts genuinely experience God in our worship. This does not happen every time we gather necessarily, but over time, we become freer in communing with our Creator. Thirst after God; seek after Him with mind, soul, strength, and with *heart*.

This morning we prayed that by God's grace we would withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and that we would continue faithfully following God

throughout our lives. Are we serious about this prayer? If we are, then we must commit to worshiping God with the people of God. This resolution begins with our minds, but the ultimate target of spiritual formation is the heart. In worshiping with our brothers and sisters, we learn to wait confidently on God. We get to know Him and to understand that He is our help and our defense, and will come to our aid according to His perfect will. We also learn to truly love God, to desire Him and His beauty and His holiness.

Our moral perfection, therefore—our ability to resist temptation, our desire to pursue God throughout our lives—is bound up in the worship of God; and, I assert, with the corporate worship of God surrounded by the family of God. What we have here and now is what we need. Thanks be to God for His Grace which we have in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God that His property is to always have mercy. Let us now prepare to come to His Throne of Grace, receiving Jesus as He commanded us to do.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.