

This morning, let us begin with the gospel lesson, first setting the context for this passage. The triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem takes place in Matthew 21 and then we see in v. 17 of that chapter, that Jesus returns to Bethany for the night. The next day, Christ comes into the city again, going once more to the temple where He encounters the religious leader. This is, of course, where they would be. Christ is no longer hiding from them. As He teaches and attracts the people, these leaders certainly feel their pride pricked, and they begin to engage with Christ.

The Pharisees and Sadducees and other scribes and lawyers try to entrap Jesus with tricky questions, but He, being the Son of God, sees through the dilemmas they set. He cuts to the real issues, answering in ways that condemn these leaders for their hypocrisy and their failure to actually lead the people into godliness. As the Old Testament lesson from Amos says, at this time there is a famine of hearing the Word of God in the land, and these leaders are responsible for it.

Jesus also responds to them by asking questions which they cannot answer, either because they do not know the answer (as we will see in the second half of our Gospel lesson) or they do not want to say what they really think for fear of the crowds. This whole section of Matthew is very contentious. Christ doesn't shrink away from the challenges of the Pharisees, but rather puts them on the defensive, often making them look foolish. He is confrontational, provoking them through their own pride and hate to strike out at Him, and we know this provocation eventually leads to His arrest and crucifixion.

Now today's Gospel lesson begins by noting that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. He had confounded their wisdom so that they would no longer risk asking Him questions. They had had enough of being made the fool. The Pharisees, obviously showing themselves to be less bright, are not quite ready to throw in the towel. They gather around Jesus and ask Him, "...

which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Notice that this question was an attempt to catch Him in an error so that they could discredit Him in the sight of the people. The text says that this lawyer was *tempting* him.

That word, "tempt," is also found in today's collect

"LORD, we beseech thee, grant thy people grace to withstand the *temptations* of the world, the flesh, and the devil; and with pure hearts and minds to follow thee, the only God; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

We pray in this collect that we would withstand temptations, and this connects us to the what we just read in St. Matthew, that the Pharisee was tempting Jesus. Often we think of temptations strictly as those things which draw us into sin, and certainly we should include this basic notion in our idea of the word. But we also see here a broader meaning. A temptation can be anything that challenges or confronts our faith, that may cause us to disguise our true convictions, and maybe that even threatens our faith.

Now none of us goes through this life unscathed. Our faith will be pressed on from every direction, and we desire to be able to press back against such temptations appropriately. Sometimes we will fail to do this effectively. In fact, if we think that we can press back using our own strength, our own wisdom, our own learning, then we will fail to counter the temptation. We need to be connected with Christ, this is the only true means to withstand temptations to sin, to doubt our faith, or to speak up about our faith to others, and this is why we have prayed, and must continue to pray, that God would give us the grace to withstand such temptations no matter where they originate. We must be people of prayer if we wish to persevere in the Christian faith.

Our Epistle lesson this morning also reinforces these ideas. In it, St. Paul thanks God for the grace already given to the Corinthian believers. The Apostle also gives thanks to God for the

knowledge and wisdom with which he has blessed these believers. Couched within this thanksgiving is a prayer that *they would continue*, “in all utterance, and in all knowledge.” Let us then remind ourselves that we have already received the grace of God to understand and speak of the things of God, but at the same time, may we always pray for and seek more understanding, more wisdom, and more courage to speak a well-seasoned word to those around us.

It is worth taking a brief moment to think about the sources of temptation listed in our collect. These are the world, the flesh, and the devil. Most of the time, we focus upon the devil as the source of temptation. Certainly he and his demons, the malicious spiritual powers, will tempt us as they find opportunity, but we often over-estimate their influence upon us. Sometimes we blame these beings for sins in order to offload our personal culpability. This is the classic, “The devil made me do it.” Most of the time, their influence is subtle, merely nudging us in areas where our souls are deficient in godliness and virtue.

The second source of temptation listed in the collect is the, “world.” Basically, this is the other people around us who do not follow Christ, and it also involves the systems of power that the ungodly have put in place. In ordinary life, you will daily encounter individuals who see the world completely differently than you, as a follower of Jesus, do. These people will want you to abuse alcohol or drugs, because that is what they do. They will want you to cheat insurance companies, or corporations, or the government, because that is what they do. They rationalize that it doesn’t really hurt anyone. They will refer to God in derogatory ways, and they will mock your faith. Some of them even go to church, but they refuse to let God influence their lives too much. When we are struggling with others who don’t understand Christian faith or charity or hope, then we are struggling with the world.

Finally, as if things weren’t difficult enough, we also have our own sin nature with which to

contend. St. Paul calls this the flesh. Even though we have been saved by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, that original nature doesn't just go away. We have to contend with it throughout our lives, putting to death our inherent selfishness and conscientiously living in the new life we have through the Spirit of God. This is a process of purification, of sanctification, which all believers must pass through. It is the means whereby God prepares us for eternity. Our sin nature, our flesh, as St. Paul refers to it, is a constant source of temptation to sin, to doubt the truth of God's Word, and to resent the sanctifying work of God throughout our lives.

We often want to blame our sin on the world or the devil. Yet, in honesty, our own flesh does a fine enough job of tempting us on its own, we generally aren't justified in blaming our failures on the world or on the devil. And we shouldn't think that temptation comes from just one of these sources at a time. Generally the world bumps into us, then our flesh is offended and prompts us to bump back harder, and the demons only sit back and enjoy the destruction we cause when we completely lose self-control.

Again, thinking about temptations in broader terms, and about withstanding challenges to our faith, let us imagine what a critic of Christianity might say about our Gospel lesson today. Christ's response to the Pharisees' question is,

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."

This is the passage we quote every week in our liturgy as the Summary of the Law. Jesus here is basically quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, which reads,

"thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."

You'll notice the last word here is different. If we compare this to the parallel passage in Mark 12:30, Jesus is quoted this way,

“And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.”

And it is still different in St. Luke’s Gospel,

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind

The last two versions are fairly close except that “strength” and “mind” are listed in reverse order.

These are the kind of “discrepancies” with which critics love to attack Christians. They say that only one of these gospels can have the correct saying so therefore, the Word of God cannot be trusted. What do we do with these temptations that challenge our faith? First, it is important to realize that if a person approaches this challenge in faith, that it just is not that big of a deal. What Jesus is saying is that we must love God with everything that we are and with everything that we have. There is no part of ourselves that we reserve for ourselves and keep from God. This is the commandment we are given. Second, we should recognize that there are some rational explanations for the differences that will satisfy our need for an explanation if we are willing to accept them. I will leave it to you to ask about and think about this problem.

On the other hand, if a skeptic wants to justify his unbelief through passages like this, he will readily do so. We must understand that, just like the Pharisees in today’s lesson, such questions typically are not asked with the goal of obtaining greater understanding or a rational answer, they are asked in order to derail the challenge that Christ poses to our self-conception. We simply do not want to submit to Jesus. He is God. We aren’t. We don’t like that fact. At the deepest levels of our being, we hate that fact.

Returning to the Gospel lesson, we should also note how Jesus responds to the Pharisees after their questioning. It is instructive to us to pay attention to His rhetorical approach. Not only

here, but in many places, He uses what we today would call a Socratic technique. He poses questions back to them. This not only puts them on the defensive, but it demands that they think through their own beliefs and convictions and express them with clarity.

Of course, Jesus, being God, knows just the question to ask. David in Psalm 110 begins by saying, "The Lord said to My Lord." Now the Jews knew that the Messiah had to be the son of David, yet also knew that sons are not greater than their fathers. Christ points out that in this psalm David calls the messiah "My Lord," and then Christ asks the Pharisees to explain this. Jesus is trying to get them to understand that the Messiah isn't just a man, isn't just the natural son of David, but that He is greater than a man, he is God Incarnate.

I would encourage you to learn this approach and to use it with others who might push against your faith. When they challenge your Christians values, it isn't too difficult for us to say, "Well, I'm a Christian so I wouldn't agree with you on that point." They might then let the issue drop or perhaps respond by asking what you believe. You don't have to give a long or condescending answer; sometimes simple answers are the best. And then follow up by asking them to clarify what they believe. Often people just go with the spirit of the age, and when pressed, they really don't know why they believe what they claim to believe. Do your best to be winsome and build a respectful friendship. Don't be threatened or feel like you have to perfectly answer their challenges. Your security is in God, not in your ability to provide a perfect answer.

Thinking about the end of the Gospel lesson once again, implicit in Christ's question is the fact that the Messiah Himself, God in the flesh, at that very moment, is the one speaking to those Pharisees who had no faith in Him. And, of course, without faith, it is impossible to please God, it is impossible to understand God, and it is impossible to see God even when He is standing right in front of you. But thanks be to God, that He has opened our eyes through His gift of faith to us.

May we ever be drawn into deeper knowledge and love of God, into a deeper faith. May God grant us more grace to withstand temptations to sin and to withstand the challenges that we will inevitably face in this world. And may He ever purify our hearts and minds throughout our lives in order that we would persevere in faith to the end.

In The Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.