

Today's collect reads,

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.

Let us begin this morning by reminding ourselves of what we mean by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Now if you do an online search for this phrase, you will not find it explicitly quoted this way in the Bible. However, probably the clearest biblical reference to these three comes from the beginning of the second chapter of St. Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, which reads:

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

The earliest reference to this exact phrase comes from Peter Abelard in the mid 1130s, who writes, "There are three things which tempt us, the flesh, the world, and the devil."

So what do we mean by these terms. By "the world", we simply mean temptations arising from other people and from the anti-God power systems they have established. The world around us does not like being told that they are sinners and need to repent and submit to Christ. Instead, they blame Christianity for their problems, and therefore they oppose, sometimes through open hostility, the gospel and the messengers of the gospel. This is what we mean by the world.

And as there are human opponents to our Lord Jesus Christ, so too, there are spiritual

opponents to Jesus and to His Church. These are the demons led by Satan, the Devil. They attack subtly, trying to lead those who follow Christ, astray. They also influence those outside of the Church to keep them from God and to encourage their pursuits of wickedness.

Finally, we have the Flesh, our sinful spiritual nature. When we come to Christ and are baptized into the Church, our hearts are enlivened by the Holy Spirit. We say they are regenerated. Yet this does not remove the old sinful nature with which we were born. Prior to regeneration, we do not have a choice but to live according to the flesh, but once we have been given that spiritual life in God, we now are called to choose to live in the Spirit, not according to the flesh, which remains a source of temptation for us throughout our lives in this world.

These then are how we categorize the sources of temptations: the world, the flesh, and the devil. Having defined these categories, it is tempting to think that they attack us singly, to think that our temptations come from just once of these sources, but that is a mistake. Most typically these three work together to undo us. The devils know the weaknesses of our flesh and are happy to influence those in the world to bring those temptations into our presence. Rarely are we tempted by just one of these sources, and it is a mistake to then only be on guard against one of these temptations at a time. We must be vigilant against all three, all the time.

Now returning to our collect. In it we pray that God would give us grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. As it is a mistake to guard against only one of these three at a time, so too is it a mistake to think that the grace to resist temptation is received passively. Faith is not a passive thing. To live by faith, to live in the Spirit of God, is to actively do things to strengthen our spiritual lives and our connection to Christ. If we do not nurture our spiritual lives, then why should we think that we would be strengthened

with the grace that we need to withstand temptation? We should remember the AWANA theme verse, 2 Timothy 2:15, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Faith is not passive. Grace isn’t cheap. We are required to expend ourselves in the pursuit of God, and then God is faithful to give us the growth.

To see this, we might think of the analogy of the farmer. If a farmer desires a good crop of wheat, then he does not sit around, wistfully watching the field, hoping that wheat will miraculously come forth. All farmers know that they must prepare the ground, they must plant the correct seed, they must water consistently, they must protect the crop against weeds, pests, and wildlife, and then finally they must harvest at the appropriate time. Farming requires diligent effort.

At the same time, we must recognize God’s hand superintending the whole process. The farmer cannot make a seed come to life. The farmer cannot make the plants absorb the water and the nutrients from the soil. The farmer cannot make the cells of the plant divide just so, until the plant and its seed has matured. All of this is God’s realm, His order established at the dawn of Creation – every plant bringing forth its own kind. The farmer cannot make it rain or shine. The farmer cannot change the seasons. All these things are in the province of God. The farmer knows that to have a successful harvest, he must do his part, working within the context of God’s creation. God, unless He has other purposes, will also do His part, and then the farmer can expect a harvest.

The amazing and the miraculous happen at the interface of God grace and man’s labor. Our rebirth in Christ is a gift of God’s grace, and only of God’s grace, not a result of works that no man should boast. But let us not stifle the gift of new life. Instead, in gratitude to God, let us nurture it. In other words, we are saved (past tense), we are being saved (present tense), and

we will be saved (future tense). As St. Paul says in our epistle this morning, "... even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you," which is followed a few words later with, "Jesus Christ: who shall (also) confirm you unto the end." Our faith has been confirmed and is being confirmed by Christ until the end. He is the context within which our spiritual growth happens, but that growth is not automatic or effortless. It requires intentionality (that is planning and prioritization) and real work (that is execution).

We might also be quick to think of "Temptation" primarily in regards to sin. But in the context of our lessons today, a temptation could be anything that challenges our faith or undermines God's work. Certainly the temptation to sin is a rather frontal assault upon our profession of faith, but anything that casts doubt upon the Word of God or confronts our understanding of doctrine would also be a temptation. This is what we see in our Gospel, which states clearly that an expert in the law, who was a Pharisee, put a question to Jesus, "tempting Him." Here we see the world trying to tempt Christ, but also the demonic powers that are stoking envy of Christ and malice towards Christ within the circle of the religious leaders of Christ's day. This lawyer was trying to catch Jesus – to get Him to say something which they could criticize, thus discrediting the Son of God.

Jesus then turns the tables. He drills exactly into the spiritual blindness of these religious leaders. They knew that David's son was going to be the Messiah, but David, inspired by the Holy Spirit in Psalm 110, states, "The Lord said to my Lord." The Messiah, who comes from David, is referred to by David as being his, David's, Lord. That which derives of David is therefore greater than David. This precept made no sense in the natural way of thinking, in the ancient way of thinking, which says what is derivative cannot be greater than what it is derived from. Yet David is inspired by God to affirm the miraculous.

Well, the Pharisees, the experts in the Law were unable to answer this question. They could

not see that the Messiah was God incarnate and was therefore greater than their greatest king. Jesus shuts them down for good. Their temptation of Christ was greatly inadequate to cause Him any distress. They were the ones whose expertise and smugness, whose pride, was brought low. "And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions."

Now, let's be honest here, none of us is as able to confront those who would challenge us as effectively as the Son of God. That is just the reality of the situation. But also, let us remember the many many times that Jesus went off by Himself to pray to the Father alone, to reconnect with God. If Jesus tended to His spiritual needs in this way, why would we think that we need to do so any less? We, not being sinless, not being God from eternity past, still battling the flesh within us, need to put in the work of prayer and of study. Christ easily rebuffed the Pharisees, but we should not be cavalier about the temptations that will come our way. Having been made regenerate by the grace of God, illuminated as the Church Fathers would say, we are now able to wrestle with the Word of God. By the grace of Christ, we can grow in spiritual understanding and in love of God and neighbor. Let us drop our passivity, our apathy really, and embrace this calling.

I am reminded of Christ admonition to us last week not only towards humility, but that He says to each of us, "Friend, come up higher." We know that we don't have all the answers. We aren't Jesus. But that does not excuse us from doing by God's grace, what we are able to do. It does not excuse us from striving after spiritual understanding, striving by the Spirit of God working in us, for that which is higher. It does not relieve us from the responsibility to push back against the world, against the flesh, and against the devil, harder than they push us.

So let us recommit this morning to our preparations for the battle with the world, the flesh,

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and the devil. Let us throw off passivity. As we have been strengthened in our faith, may we evermore, by God's grace, seek further strengthening so that we would be indeed confirmed unto the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

IN the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.