

Lent I A - February 26, 2023

“On Countering Temptation, Part 1”

ST. THOMAS’ EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

Genesis 2: 15-17; 3: 1-7 • Psalm 32 • Romans 5: 12-19 • Matthew 4: 1-11



If you haven't picked up on it yet, we're in a new liturgical season, so welcome to Lent! This forty day season prepares us both spiritually and physically for Easter, and takes us through the most dramatic and startling aspects of Jesus' story. Here on the first Sunday of Lent, in each of the three lectionary cycles, we always get the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke's gospel have the fullest account of it, with Mark's gospel, in its customary fashion, having a somewhat abbreviated version. A question that frequently gets asked when this story is read, very similarly to the story of Jesus' baptism, is "why was Jesus tempted?" A quick glance at the three temptations yields an understanding that the Devil was trying to get Jesus to use his divine power for his own gain. But why did the Devil do this, or perhaps more directly, why did Jesus, the Son of God, assent to this process? In the sixth century Gregory the Great addressed this very question, which should at least comfort those of us who are asking it still that with the knowledge that this question has been around for a while. He said, *"It was not unworthy of our Redeemer to wish to be*

tempted, who came also to be slain; in order that by His temptations He might conquer our temptations, just as by His death He overcame our death." So, according to Gregory, Christ consented to be tempted to strengthen us against our temptations. But what are those temptations?

A twentieth century Romanian Orthodox monk is very helpful here. Elder Cleopa (Ilie), who lived from 1912-1998 and was ensconced at the Sihastria Monastery in Romania wrote an instructive piece about how the Devil tempts us from eight sides. So what I'd like to do is tell you about those eight means of temptation that he identified, and also share with you some means of combating those temptations, which I hope to back up with Scripture. I hope also that as you hear these, if you identify one or more with which you particularly struggle, that you might be inspired to focus on it this Lent. So, that's the plan and you can tell me later if it was successful.

Elder Cleopa begins by suggesting the first temptation comes from behind, by which he means our own past. Remembering our past misdeeds, dwelling on our past failures, churning them over in our minds and bodies, and even despairing on account of them. Who among us has not done this? This

temptation from behind can hamper our spiritual growth by entangling us so much with what is over and done with that we are unable to move forward.

However, there is a relatively simple way to combat this temptation, and that is the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or Confession. In the first letter of John 2:1-2 it says: *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."* Many people are frightened by the idea of confessing their sins to God in the presence of a priest, but if you can overcome that fear, I submit to you that you will find the practice so life-giving, so rewarding, and so unburdening that you will be surprised you never did it before. All you have to do is give me or Rev. Anne a call and we can make it happen.

The second temptation then comes from the front. If the first temptation focused on the past, this temptation focuses on the future. We are tempted in this way to be afraid of what the future may hold, what will happen to us or to our world, even how much longer we will live or if we will have enough. This temptation prevents us from living into the calling God has for us because it freezes us in place. But to this Christ says in Matthew 6: 25-27, *"...do not worry*

about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" And do we combat this by trusting in God's love for us. And then by remembering God's grace.

With apologies to our lefties, who have forever been associated with the sinister (that was a Latin joke), the third temptation comes from the left through the call to commit obvious sins and clearly evil deeds in an open and brazen way. My guess is that if you're here today, this particular temptation may not be the one that works the most on you, but you never know. To fight this temptation, I suggest that one adopts the discipline of focusing on an adherence to the Law, beginning with the ten commandments. Psalm 19: 7-10 is really helpful for this particular temptation. It reads: *"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever; the ordinances*

of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb."

If the third temptation came from the left, the fourth comes from the right in the form of the performance of good deeds for malicious intent or personal gain at the expense of others. I'm going to give big money to this charity but not because it feels good and right to do so but rather so that I may be seen by others in my community giving big. Perhaps it doesn't matter to the charity, but as this temptation suggests, it might matter to your soul. The counter to temptation is suggested by the example: through charity. Not the act of giving to a beneficent institution, but the theological virtue of charity. Aquinas defines it helpfully this way: charity is *"that love which is together with benevolence, when, to wit, we love someone so as to wish good to him."* Practicing charity toward our neighbors defends against this fourth temptation for as it says in 1 John 3:17: *"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"* Aquinas, again, is helpful when he writes that charity is absolutely necessary for happiness.

When I set out to write this sermon, I in no way imagined it as another two-parter. But I'm afraid if I kept going and addressed the last four temptations, I'd keep you here for too long. So, stay tuned for next week when I'll address the temptations that come at us from below, from above, from within, and from without. Perhaps, upon consideration, countering four temptations is enough work for the first week of Lent for any of us. God bless you this week as you practice these skills.

Amen.