

Lent II A - March 5, 2023

**“On Countering Temptation, Part 2”**

ST. THOMAS’ EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

*Genesis 12: 1-4a • Psalm 121 • Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17 • John 3: 1-7*



Last week in church we heard again the story of Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the desert. I began to explore with you the nature of temptation itself and shared that I discovered, in my own research, the work of a 20<sup>th</sup> century Romanian Orthodox monk named Fr. Cleopa Ilie, who identified eight ways, or directions, that temptation enters our lives. As illuminating as Fr. Cleopa’s work was, it lacked any commentary on what we, as individual Christians, could do to ward off those temptations. So, what I endeavored to do was provide you not only with a description of his means of temptation, but also ways to combat it and then backed that up with a scripture verse.

Last week we made it through the first four of those means of temptation and today I’d like to go through the last four, but before I do that, I want to give a brief recap of where we’ve been in case you might have missed last week or just want a brief refresher. The first temptation comes from behind, which is to say dwelling on our past sins. I suggested that the way to counter that temptation was through the sacrament of reconciliation, or confession. The second temptation comes from in front of us, which

means worrying about our future. We fight that temptation by putting our trust in God, wholly. The third temptation comes from the left and is characterized by openly and brazenly committing sin and notorious deeds. We counter that sinister temptation by adhering to God's Law more strictly and closely. The fourth temptation comes at us from the right, which means doing good or charitable deeds, but only for personal gain, fame, or profit. We fight that one through the theological virtue of charity, which Aquinas defined as, "*that love which is together with benevolence, when, to wit, we love someone so as to wish good to him.*" So, those are the first four and how to combat them. Today we turn to the last four after hearing about which we will be well armed to, in the words of the great Litany, "beat down Satan under our feet."

Ok, ready? Here we go! The fifth temptation comes from below. This temptation is about giving in to inertia. It shows up when you are capable of performing good deeds, or making greater efforts in your labor, but do not do so. One story I love to tell is about how, when someone would give money to Mother Teresa, her response was always the same, no matter whether it was a dollar or a million dollars. She would smile at them and say, "Is that all?" I think this is a temptation that affects us all, at one time or another. But we can combat it through answering the divine summons to love

our neighbor as ourself. If we actively work on loving our neighbor we will necessarily want to do good for them, and even more so. The Book of Proverbs is useful here, for in chapter three it says, *“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again; tomorrow I will give it’ – when you have it with you.”* In this immediate post-lockdown era, we have all succumbed to a certain amount of inertia. Perhaps what we need to do is ask ourselves how we might better serve our neighbors and thus guard against the temptation from below.

The sixth temptation comes from above, and happens in two ways. One way is when we take on a discipline that is more than we can handle and we know it. For example, if for a Lenten discipline you really wanted to give up going to fast food restaurants, but instead of just naming that for yourself, you decided I’ll give up meat for Lent. One week in and you’re hitting up that ground beef at Publix with kind of a crazed look in your eye, justifying it cause it’s not a double quarter pounder with cheese at least. You took on too much. The second way this temptation works is when you try teach an aspect of the faith to others when you yourself do not yet have the spiritual maturity to grasp it. This way is particularly dangerous because it affects not just yourself but others. Fr. Cleopa said that when we give into this kind of temptation

it is like we're trying to chew through a bone with baby teeth. So before you decide to teach a class on prayer, make sure that your prayer life is solid. Before you try to educate someone about the Scriptures, make sure that you're actively reading your Bible. The letter of Paul to the Romans puts it this way, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."*

The seventh temptation comes from within, from deep in your own heart. This is pretty insidious stuff here, because this temptation doesn't actually come from the Devil, but from us, from what's already within our own hearts. We're to blame for this one. When some Pharisees were complaining that his disciples didn't observe the law by washing their hands before eating, Jesus said, *"It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come..."* This is where sinful thoughts, lusts and impure desires, and evil intentions dwell. They corrode from within, breaking us down, turning us against ourselves. And so we have to fight this temptation from within through a surgery of self-reflection, honest to goodness, deep self-analysis. How many of you participated in the mirror prayer station on Ash

Wednesday? That was a start. To fight this temptation we have to remember who made us, and whose we are. For these evil things in our own hearts are not the only things there, not by far! In 2 Timothy 1 Paul writes, *“For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”* So through prayer, such as healing intercessory prayer by others, we are reminded of our God-given courage to look deep within, to rekindle our love of God and our spirit of oblation.

Finally we come to the eighth temptation, which comes from without via external things, occasions, and persons. It includes everything that comes into us through our senses, which are the soul’s windows. Fr. Cleopa is careful to say that these external things are not evil in and of themselves, but it is by means of them that we may be tempted to sin. So, just as Jesus admonished his disciples to cut off limbs that caused them to sin, so too should we cut out of our lives those externals which, for us particularly and individually, lead us into temptation. For example, most of those in recovery from alcoholism should not frequent a bar, nor should those who have lost their shirts at casinos vacation in Las Vegas. We combat these external temptations therefore by watchfulness and discipline. 1 Peter is helpful here when it says:

*“Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.*

*And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen.”*

So, there you have it, the eight directions by which sin enters our lives and a few hints and scriptural encouragements to combat each one. I hope this has been helpful and heartening. I want to close with the summarizing words of Fr. Cleopa himself, who said *“the Holy Fathers said that the battle against all temptations and passions consists in the following: guarding all one’s mind, soul, and body from temptation – this is our ascetic struggle, from our human point of view; from the Divine side, one must continuously and prayerfully call upon the help of the All-Merciful Lord Jesus Christ – and this is that unceasing and primary prayer of the [monks] called the Jesus Prayer: **“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner!”***

Amen.