

By Every Word
(From the Gospel)

The Book of Common Prayer, p. 126

1 Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. 2 And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. 3 And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. 4 But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God. 5 Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, 6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. 7 Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. 8 Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; 9 And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. 10 Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. 11 Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

The forty days of Lent are intended in part to allow us to draw nearer to our Lord Jesus in His suffering on our behalf for sin. The culmination of His work will occur, of course, during Passion Week, and finally upon the Cross of Calvary. But the specific period of forty days stems from an experience at the very beginning of His public ministry, three years before His atoning death for the sins of the whole world. It is a very real part of His preparation for that climactic event, for Scripture declares: ... *it was fitting for Him [God, the Father], for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation [Christ] perfect through sufferings* (Heb. 2:10). His “temptations in the wilderness” will be repeated in many subtler forms throughout the Gospel account, as this process of being *made perfect* continues.

But the point I want to make today is that our Lord’s specific trials during those days are also meant to typify our own struggles as His believing children. We will run into them over and over again throughout life, although we may not recognize them as such, until an “aha” moment allows us to see what has really been going on. In today’s Gospel, Satan makes no effort to disguise himself, or render himself invisible, in this titanic confrontation with our Lord. It is a mercy from God that our own encounters with the Enemy are on a far lower level, but they are nevertheless as potentially mortally dangerous to our spiritual health as they were to our Lord.

It will do us well here to remember words from the rite of Holy Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer. To the adult sponsors of children, or to adults about to be baptized, the question is asked:

Dost thou renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, and all the covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow them, nor be led by them? (p. 277).

The response is:

I renounce them all; and, by God’s help, will endeavor not to follow, nor be led by them.

These solemn words arise directly from Scripture:

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. (1 Jn. 2:15, 16)

Our Gospel text clearly proclaims that the devil's territory is *the world*, and everything in it. In a parallel account of Christ's temptation offered in St. Luke, the devil is quoted as saying: *All this power will I give thee, and the glory of them: for that is delivered unto me; and to whomsoever I will I give it (4:6)*. Our Lord, however, was looking beyond even the vast splendors of this earth which were the substance of Satan's allurements, to the invisible Kingdom of God which He would win upon Mt. Calvary, only by overcoming and mortally wounding the Tempter, the very one who was offering Him easy terms for its procurement.

But the devil comes to each of us to wrestle us to the mat, and he uses the same tactics, clearly demonstrated in today's text. I will call the first temptation: "God wants me to be satisfied": *And when the tempter came to [Jesus], he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread*. Yes, God wants us satisfied, but not with that which will never satisfy us ultimately: *But [Jesus] answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God*. God is not here to serve our needs. Although He graciously provides—for we pray *Give us this day our daily bread*—He does so in order to secure our love, and commitment, and devotion. As Americans, we have a tremendously hard time being spiritual. If you asked most men and women how their needs are provided for, few would reference God in the process. They would credit education, heredity, talent, hard work, ambition—anything but God—as the author of their success. And if God is brought in, it's only to keep the supply coming, because after all, they reason, what else would God want to do anyway? But Christians join with the Lord, and refuse to substitute God's Word with *bread*, no matter how much, and no matter how good, it is. And what does His Word say? "Deny the flesh. Subdue carnal appetites. Turn away from the world. Despise anything that obscures God's will. Press through to the end. Persevere. Be strong." By *every word* we live...

Failing in that attempt, Satan came to Jesus again:

Then the devil taketh him into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, 6 And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone.

I'll call this temptation: "God wants me to be fulfilled". It is the attitude of unbridled, almost manic ambition that drives parents to push their children off into topnotch colleges, forcing them into lifelong debt. It places profession, attainment, position, authority, and accomplishment as the highest goals in life. It breeds a spirit of competition at all costs. There is no place in it anywhere for rest, for quiet contemplation, for stepping off the track to breathe for a few moments, for an opportunity to scrutinize objectively such a rat-race, and reassess its real value. For many, in spite of the multiplied visions of prizes and rewards that are dangled before them to urge them to take this road, its end is despondency and disappointment. Often marriage and family are sacrificed in the process. The place of attainment, once arrived at, is discovered to be a dead end of

emptiness and disillusionment. Jesus was invited to *set himself on a pinnacle of the temple*. You might put it this way: “Well, Jesus, now that You’ve arrived, now that You have everything, You can do anything You want! You can even be foolish enough to do something extreme and ridiculous. You could even appear on a nationally syndicated talk show and take questions from the audience. You could be seen in public with the most famous comedians, politicians, and pundits. I mean, who will criticize You? You’re at the top!” But *Jesus said unto him, It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God*. The nature of our life on earth is “faith”, written in big letters. We as believers will absolutely refuse to try to bring to pass those things which should be left to God alone: *For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge : he putteth down one, and setteth up another* (Ps. 75:6,7). Jesus infuriated the devil once again, by looking steadfastly past the visible to the invisible. And we must do the same.

Lastly,

the devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

I’ll call this final temptation: “God wants me to be happy”. This is the last and most desperate cry of the modern inhabitant of our culture. It is the stuff of phony religion, and false representations of God. It is the sort of pabulum that, when combined with lofty spiritual talk, is dished up all over the land under the banner of faith. It is exactly what everyone wants to hear. And the more nervous and uneasy we feel because of the nagging voice of our collective national conscience testifying against us, or because of the disturbing news whether from home or abroad that seems to draw ever nearer, the readier we are to run to anyone who promises to export happiness to us in God’s name.

All of these immensely powerful temptations came to Christ at a time of great weakness, *for he had fasted forty days and forty nights, [and] was afterward an hungred*. From the human perspective, He might easily have given in to Satan’s pressure. It is in like manner that the devil comes to us to test us. Our weakness, however, is from different sources: we are vitiated by our abundance, our relative lack of hardship, and the considerable amount of leisure that many of us enjoy. As noted previously, our hour of temptation may come and go largely unknown to us, although its invisible agent has certainly crafted it. The great danger to the Church is that if its individual members are not prevailing in their respective struggles, the Church will reflect this in its failure to fulfill its mission.

Three temptations for today’s believer: “God wants me to be satisfied”; “God wants me to be fulfilled”; and “God wants me to be happy”. It should be enough to say that He certainly wants us to be satisfied, fulfilled, and happy, but not at His expense, and thus to our detriment. Our Lord knew that the way of life is the way of the Cross. Without the suffering that is entailed in getting there, the goal will never be reached. One might stuff one’s face full of bread instead, but it is a fix that will not last until the next time one chooses to gobble more down, instead of turning to God’s Word. One might be elevated to the top of the ladder of success, and it might

feel really great. But then one would have to look down with shame and regret to the bleeding heads of those upon whom one stepped to get up there. And lastly, one might somehow receive everything one ever wanted, but only at the expense of one's soul. It is the devil's scheme to blind us to the truth of our choices, and to keep us ignorant of their consequence.

As we move through these forty days together, we can be of assistance to one another in keeping our eyes by faith on what Scripture presents as that *building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens* (2 Cor. 5:1), that *better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called [our] God: for he hath prepared for [us] a city* (Heb. 11:16). Jesus knew that the only way to all He desired was through the doorway of the Cross, not by accepting Satan's suggestions to Him in a time of difficulty and vulnerability.

Will it be any different for us?

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