

February 18, 2018
First Sunday in Lent

“The One Never Tempted”

Mark 1:9-15

So here we are in Lent. We kicked it off this past Wednesday with the somber imposition of ashes and now many Christians are doing their “Lenten discipline” of special devotion time or Bible study or fasting and prayer. Some give up a favorite food or practice during Lent. Some give extra to church or charity. All this is rightly done in humble repentance as we approach Holy Week commemorating the love and grace of God in sending His Son to die and rise for our salvation.

But we can do this Lenten Discipline wrongly and I think sometimes we do. We can’t help it. Our fallen nature is self-centered, so unfortunately, it’s just natural for us to start thinking whatever it is that we’re doing for Lent, we’re doing for God—that it’s about us. And my point isn’t about us falling into thinking our good behavior merits God’s favor, although that is error and should be avoided. My point is this, how many folks are going to mess up their Lenten discipline? Skip a devotion? Get too busy to keep of the Bible readings? Break down and have that chocolate treat or cup of coffee you so solemnly sacrificed for Lent?

If that Lenten discipline is about us, we’ve ruined it. We’ve failed. We’ve dropped the ball and it’s spoiled. And really, why would we expect different. Lenten discipline is after all, another thing we do as broken people in need of our Savior.

After Jesus’ baptism by John, St. Mark tells us simply, *“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted (which is probably better understood as tested) by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.”* You might call this Jesus’ forty-day Lenten discipline. Satan tests Christ’s mettle and throws down the gauntlet of battle. We know Jesus successfully endures this testing, but Mark’s account really doesn’t say that, maybe because Mark’s focus is on this battle of the Kingdom of heaven versus the kingdom of the world. This testing is just the opening salvo. This fight will come to its climax in Christ’s victory on the cross.

But perhaps in this season of Lent when we Christians focus so much on repentance, turning away from our own sin, we should remember a big reason Jesus is successful in His testing and we so often fail in our own temptation. Ironically, the comforting answer comes from the book of James, an epistle often described as having too much law: *“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”*

The comfort is right in the middle of all that: “For God cannot be tempted by evil.”

You see Jesus, having no sin in and of Himself, cannot be tempted as we are. Remember, He is holy God come down and joined with our human nature so that there would be a human person who pleases God, who does the law rightly, who stands up without failing in the slightest measure. He remains righteous and holy, arriving at His passion with no sin of His own to suffer and die for in order that He can and will perfectly follow the will of the Father, taking the world’s sin, your sin, to the cross and into the grave to its end.

This is the comfort of God in your skin for you. Human life has already been done right for you. This is the gift of righteousness in which you stand in your baptism into this Christ who cannot be tempted with evil. This is the gift in that man's perfect body and blood in the Lord's Supper. It's not you. It's Him.

Get this right in Lent, and in all of life. Repentance is a big deal so it's right for us to give it special focus in Lent. But repentance is not our obedience. Repentance is not our doing better in life. Repentance is not your keeping your Lenten discipline and it most certainly is not never falling to temptation. If you think this is what repentance is about, when you fail you will despair of your faith, because some of that faith was in you.

"Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial" is not remaining steadfast by one's own will and power. One does this by repenting, turning, changing direction toward the one who has always had the ability to stand firm, because He cannot be tempted by evil. The one turning toward Jesus receives the crown of life not because they resisted sin, but because they did exactly what Jesus said, *"Repent and believe in the Gospel"*; the Gospel of Christ, not the Gospel of you.

You and I are just like St. James says: *"Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."* You might keep your Lenten discipline, but you cannot keep a righteous life apart from Christ. St. Paul is speaking the truth when he writes, *"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."* But I'm sorry to say that St. James is also correct, your fallen nature desires not to escape the temptation.

Does this mean we give up the fight? Certainly not! But the fight is repentance—turning in a different direction; away from sin and toward the victor over sin—the risen Christ. Jesus offers not only forgiveness when we've fallen to temptation, but also the strength in His victory for us by faith to resist temptation. Repentance is not just avoiding sin. It's following Jesus; believing His Gospel promise.

So can you do Lent better? Sure. But not because of you; because of Jesus. Can you resist temptation better? Yes, but not because of you; because of Jesus. Do you wear this day the crown of life? Indeed. But not because of you; because of Jesus.

I say this a lot, because us self-centered sinners need to hear it repeatedly because we find it so easy to forget. Get over yourself. It's not you. It's Jesus. He is the only human being that has not and cannot be tempted by evil, because He is the only human being that is the divine Son of God. Salvation is found in no one else. Enduring strength against Satan and sin is found in no one else. Resurrection to perfect life is found in no one else.

Thanks be to God that He was sent into your skin specifically for you, and He was, is and every shall be victorious in that mission. So if you're tempted, repent and turn to the one who is not. If you sin, repent, and turn to the one who did not. Dead in your trespasses, turn to the one who took them to His grave and now lives forever beyond them, and has baptized you into that same resurrection.

Repentance is not, cannot be about you. It's about Jesus. And repentance always gains the crown of life because it is faith in the victorious Christ.

Amen.