

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

³And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread. ⁴And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.(Luke 4:3-4, KJV)

See Jesus swinging his sword! Like Sir Lancelot of old, no, even more like Sir Galahad, who was pure, Jesus contends against the devil with what St. Paul calls “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God...” (Ephesians 6:17) The devil tempts him, the devil assaults him. Cruel spirit that he is, the devil besieges Jesus when our Lord is at low ebb, after forty days of fasting, when he is hungered and weak. Out there in the wilderness, alone, without the support or encouragement of family or friend, with the desert sun beating down on him, the devil tempts our Lord with bread. But see that desert sun flash off our Lord’s sword — that “two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit”(Hebrews 4:12). I mean the Word of God. The devil tempts Jesus, and he defeats the devil by quoting the Bible.

Do not let anyone take your Bible from you! Let no spirit of slothfulness, nor modern notions impatient with the good old book, deprive you of this flashing sword, this Word of God. For how will you stand in the day of temptation if you cannot follow the example of Jesus who conquered the devil by quoting the Bible:

⁴And Jesus answered him, saying, *It is written*, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.

This is a sermon about temptation. I hope, if God should grant me his grace, to persuade you of three themes:

(1) The heart of temptation is the willingness to hurt yourself. It is not your intention, surely,

to do yourself harm, but it is an inevitable component of temptation: to yield to temptation is to consent to your own harm.

- (2) The devil is wily and relentless, and I fear that we shall have to struggle against temptation all our days. Yet there are some practical things we can do to withstand temptation. Martin Luther has some good advice about that.
- (3) Our chief weapon, our chief sword in our spiritual conflict, is Jesus himself. He is the true Word of God, and drawing near to him as we find him in the Bible and in the Church is our best defense against temptation.

So, first, the self-destructiveness of temptation: Whenever we yield to temptation, we are thereby flinging ourselves from the pinnacle and dashing ourselves down against the stones. As it was in the beginning so it is now: the heart of temptation is the temptation to hurt ourselves.

Remember the devil’s temptation in the Garden of Eden. The Lord had warned Adam and Eve to beware a certain tree, for eating of that tree would harm them:

¹⁶And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: ¹⁷But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.(Gen 2:16-17, KJV)

Well, the heart of the serpent’s temptation there in the Garden was this: it was the temptation to die. The Lord says, do not eat of this tree, lest

you die, but they ate of it nonetheless. In God's mercy, Adam and Eve did not die, at least not immediately, and yet the devil had accomplished his bitter purposes with them: He had beguiled them into thinking that they could flourish by disobeying the Lord. But that was a lie. It was really the path toward hurting themselves.

Temptation continues to have this character: it threatens to dash us to the ground. It suggests that we can flourish by departing from the ways of the Lord, but it is miserable deceit. Temptation is really the path toward hurting ourselves, and therefore temptation deserves to be resisted.

In this world or the next, yielding to temptation will catch up with us. Does the pirate really profit from his theft and murder? He lives the remainder of his days in fear of the naval ship appearing on the horizon. He'll be outgunned. He'll be tracked to the ends of the earth. He'll have no safe harbor in which to spend his money. And he will have no real complaint if his men turn treacherous on him and do him in for the sake of his wealth, as he did others in for the sake of their wealth.

Does the adulterer really gain life, or lose it? Ask King David. For a while, for a season, he enjoyed his adultery. But oh! that adultery enmeshed him in a web of deceit and wickedness, coarsened his spirit, cheapened his character, and ultimately left him disquieted and broken-hearted. The tempter promised life, but delivered misery!

Does that greed that labors to be as rich as Midas and stacks gold up to the ceiling, that cares little for the poor, and hesitates to spend even on oneself... does that greed enrich the human life, or rather does it deplete that life. The tempter promises material wealth, but also delivers spiritual poverty.

Does that extra beer, that extra donut really bring happiness? Homer Simpson answers Yes, yet poor Homer wastes a lot of money on beer that he could be spending on his family, and he risks his health and his brain cells in the process.

So, that's my first proposal: Let us flee from temptation lest we harm ourselves.

Secondly, let me share a couple notes on "temptation" from Martin Luther. In every Gospel version of the story of Jesus' temptation in the

desert it is the same: Jesus comes up out of the waters of the Jordan where he has been baptized and identified as God's beloved Son and immediately he is driven out into the wilderness for forty days to be tempted by the devil. It's not that baptism is the end of temptation for Jesus, it seems to commence it!

And so it is for us. To be baptized into Christ Jesus is not to be henceforth spared temptation. In fact it is just the reverse as Luther explains in the *Large Catechism*:

We Christians must be armed and prepared for incessant attacks. Then we shall not go about securely and heedlessly as if the devil were far from us but shall at all times expect his blows and parry them. Even if at present I am chaste, patient, kind, and firm in faith, the devil is likely in this very hour to send such a shaft into my heart that I can scarcely stand, for he is an enemy who never stops or becomes weary; when one attack ceases, new ones always arise. (LC pg. 79)

So, Luther believed what many Christians believe: that temptations are unavoidable. Nonetheless, that does not mean that we must yield to them. Luther puts the points this way:

No one may be exempt from temptation. But we can certainly defend ourselves and relieve all temptations by praying for and imploring the help of God. In the book on the old fathers of the church we read that a young brother wanted to be rid of his evil thoughts. The old father said, Dear brother, you cannot prevent the birds from flying in the air over your head, but you can certainly prevent them from building a nest in your hair. (*What Luther Says*, Volume 3, #4317)

You see Luther's point, I am sure. We cannot stop temptations from coming our way. To be human is to be tempted. But we can stop them

from “building a nest in our hair.” That is, though temptations come, we can resist them. We can drive them away.

How? Again, Luther gives some practical advice:

In every temptation simply close your eyes, and follow the Word. (*What Luther Says*, Volume 3, #4333)

And,

The most effective remedy for temptations is to draw your thoughts away from them, that is, to speak about the Venetians or about other matters which have no bearing whatever on your trouble, or to busy yourself with prayer or the simple text of the Gospel. (*What Luther Says*, Volume 3, #4337)

Or again,

Taught by experience, I am able to say how you must treat your soul in temptations. When you are tempted by sadness or despair or some other pang of conscience, then eat, drink, and seek to converse with people. (*What Luther Says*, Volume 3, #4340)

So, my brothers and sisters, let us fight on against the devil and his temptations, by whatever methods we can devise. And let us be encouraged by that great New Testament promise concerning victory:

Submit yourselves therefore to God.
Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7, KJV)

My third recommendation concerning temptation is my highest one: draw closer to Jesus.

Earlier this week I read an evening devotion in which the author spoke of our Lord’s victory over temptation, as if it were tranquil and certain. The

author used beautiful images, but I have some doubts. He said this:

When Satan tempts us, his sparks fall upon tinder; but in Christ’s case, it was like striking sparks on water...
(Spurgeon, evening devotion for February 20)

The part of this saying that I wonder about is how effortless it seems: sparks hit a lake and are thereby extinguished. Temptations come to Jesus and he conquers them. But I do not know whether it was so easy for Jesus to conquer temptation. It is not easy for us, and he was “one who in every respect has been tempted *as we are*, yet without sin.” Also we have that saying from Gethsemane that Jesus was so troubled by his approaching cross that he was in agony:

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. (Luke 22:44, KJV)

He conquered his fear, triumphed over any temptation to avoid the cup of suffering, and submitted to the will of his heavenly Father, yes, but it does not sound easy for him.

On the other hand, the image of sparks on water is a true image to express the victory of Jesus over temptation, regardless of whether it was easy for him or very hard. We have a Lord who never consented to temptation and who never will. And therefore, he is our shelter under the heat of temptation. As we follow him, we gain practice in resisting temptation, for that is what he always did.

And if we should fall into temptation, then let us hasten back to him, for he will pick us up again, forgive our sins, and beckon us onward with him again, to walk in better paths and become more planted beside rivers of water, where we do not perish, but flourish in life and in our ability to bring glory to him, to whom belongs the glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.