

In the last petition of the Lord's prayer, we pray for our Father to "deliver us from evil," or from the evil one – the devil. This has its greatest fulfillment at the cross, where Jesus crushes the head of the serpent. Yet even mortally wounded, our adversary the devil still prowls around like a lion, seeking someone to devour by tempting him into sin.

And so, in addition to the great victory of the cross, our Lord gives us many other weapons against the devil, including fasting, prayer, and the Scriptures. In the appointed reading for today, we are shown how the devil attacks Christ – and also those who belong to Christ – and also how we overcome the devil through the word of God.

So, to the three temptations. For each one we'll ask (1) what's going on in this temptation, (2) how do we experience this temptation in our lives, and (3) what is the answer to the temptation.

For the first temptation, we read, "And the tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.'" What's going on here? First, note that the devil attacks Jesus with a real need. Food is not a luxury or something optional for humanity. We must eat to survive. And after fasting for forty days, Jesus is very much aware of that need.

Tied to this is a second thing. Jesus is here tempted to do something that doesn't seem like that big of a deal. It's just a loaf of bread. Jesus is the God who made the universe; it's not like one loaf is going to stretch His power. Could the fate of mankind really rest on a little bit of bread?

This then connects to a third element of this temptation. The devil tempts Jesus with something that, in a different setting, would be perfectly fine. Eating bread is not against the Commandments of God. Jesus has eaten plenty of bread up to that point, and He'll eat even more when He's out of the wilderness. But here, the temptation to make bread is a temptation to doubt God, to think that He won't actually provide for His Son.

These all add up to get to the fourth and key part of this temptation: make God the Father out to be evil. The devil is essentially asking Jesus, "What kind of father would allow his son to go hungry when it's easily in his power to give him food?" He is trying to use suffering to get Jesus to doubt His Father's goodness and love.

We see all these things still sent at us by the devil today. What temptations do you face that come in the face of actual needs, that would be seen as just "little things," that are permissible in other circumstances, that finally make God look like the bad guy? Quite a few temptations could fit this description. I'll give just two examples.

Think about when you're tempted to skip church for the sake of leisure or entertainment. Now, do humans have an actual need for rest and relaxation? Yes! Plus, it certainly seems like just a "little thing" when it's only one Sunday, or two, or more, because there's always next Sunday. And is there anything inherently sinful with playing sports or going fishing or sleeping in? No, there isn't! And doesn't it all culminate in making God seem like the bad guy? "God is just so demanding! Why doesn't He want me to have any fun? Keeping the Commandments is so legalistic!"

Or, think about all the temptations to sexual immorality in our society. For most people, aside from those whom God has blessed with the gift of celibacy, there is a genuine need for sexual relations. And there is nothing inherently sinful about sex; God Himself invented it. Plus, our society is so awash in it that for us, sexual immorality in many of its various forms seems like a little thing – everyone’s doing it, watching it, living in it, so it can’t be that big of a deal. And again, what’s the final effect? “God is such a prude for requiring this of us! God’s word is so repressive! The Sixth Commandment is just unrealistic in our day and age!”

As you can see, the devil is active as ever in using the first temptation of Christ against us. So what is the answer? Jesus replies to the devil, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” God’s word is the answer, then and now. And what does that word tell us?

First, God knows our needs. Note that the word says “bread alone.” He knows you need bread. He knows your needs even better than you do, because He made you, body and soul. Recall Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount: “For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” Remember, your body, even given everything possible for it, will die eventually. You cannot live on bread alone. Only the word of God sustains the faith that grants eternal life.

And note also, it’s “every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Jesus doesn’t drive off temptation by referring to “some” of the word, or “the fewest words necessary.” Every word – because God gives us every word for our blessing, for our benefit. And every word is given out of His love for us. In His word, He guides us through this life and grants life that goes beyond the grave.

When the devil would tempt you with “just little things,” or “only things you really need,” then go to God’s word, both to be reminded of what truly matters and to hear of the God who loves you so much He was willing to give up His very life so that you may live.

On to the second temptation. We read, “Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, “He will command his angels concerning you,” and “On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.”’”

What are the issues in this temptation? Perhaps one of the most obvious is the misuse of Holy Scripture. Jesus has thrown back the first temptation using Scripture, and so the devil figures that two can play at that game. He takes a couple verses out of the Psalms and tries to use them to lead Jesus into sin. Yet notice how the devil picks and chooses. Compare his quotation with the gradual for today, where we spoke the entirety of those two verses. What got left out? “To guard you in all your ways.” This omission is no accident, because this Psalm says the Lord sends His angels to guard you as you go about the ways of righteousness, having the Lord as your dwelling place and the Most High your refuge – not as you do whatever you please.

This connects to the second big issue in this temptation. Satan is tempting Jesus to misuse His status as God's Son, to test God by demanding God go beyond what He has said. If Jesus doesn't do this, Satan would accuse Him of not really trusting His Father.

Luther helpfully explains this temptation by comparing it to the first. In that one, there was a great need for bread, and so the temptation was to get bread rather than trust God. In this temptation, it would be like if a person had been given plenty of bread by God, but refused to eat it and instead stood outside and demanded that God send manna from heaven. God's plan for His Son did not involve Him jumping from the peak of the temple to impress those watching or prove something to the devil. To demand that His Father allow Him to do so would be to commit the sin of pride.

Where do we see this temptation in our lives today? Sadly, the misuse of Scripture isn't hard to find, especially to justify sin. One of the most commonly misused passages is Jesus' words, "Judge not, lest ye be judged." This is ripped out of context in an effort to say that no one can confront sin and so we need to just let people do whatever they want.

The actual point of Jesus' words there, as shown both in the immediate context and the rest of Scripture, is that we are not to judge for ourselves what is right and wrong, but to speak and act according to God's judgment, which He has revealed in Scripture. That's what the following verse is about: "For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." God's word is the judgment and measure, not human opinion. As Jesus says in John 7, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." And there are plenty of other examples of misused Scripture out there.

The other element of this second temptation is the temptation to misuse our identity as sons of God, just as Jesus was. Jesus was tempted to do something beyond God's word and justify it because He is God's Son. Christians today are tempted to do this as well, to abuse the liberty they have in Christ.

The world – of which the devil is the prince – says that Christians are fine, as long as they aren't "too Christian." Best to have "balance:" be a "good person," but also sin a little, just to show that you're not some uptight, Bible-thumping legalist. Satan tempts Christians to think that, sometimes, you just have to sin, or that by giving in to a little sin, you'll be able to get a much bigger benefit in the end.

Against this temptation, our weapon is again God's Word. Jesus replies to Satan, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Testing God, tempting God, thinking that you'll be able to catch God in His word, is always wrong. Rather, we Christians humbly submit to God's word, trusting that our Lord has given it all to us for our good. We must spend time dwelling in the word, reading and studying it, considering individual verses and also whole chapters and books, that we might not fall prey to the devil's attempts to twist or misuse what is written.

The word of God also warns us against misusing the freedom that we have in Jesus. St. Paul addresses this several times in Romans, for example, where he says, "And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just." Sin is

always sin, it's always wrong, and Christians are always called to avoid it. Instead, we trust that our Lord will in fact command His angels concerning us, to guard us as we walk in His ways.

Finally, we come to the third temptation. "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'"

What do we find in this temptation? The devil has failed in tempting Jesus with need, and with Scripture-twisting, so now he goes with pleasure and ease. He shows Jesus all that the world has to offer. Satan offers power, wealth, adoration, glory – all those things that Jesus is having to forgo during His time of humiliation. Note again, the Father is portrayed as the bad one, the one keeping all this from His Son, whereas Satan is generously offering it.

And what's the price? "Fall down and worship me." At first, this seems ridiculous. Why would the Son of God worship a creature He made? That's absurd! And it may be, but note what Jesus doesn't have to do. He doesn't have to suffer. That's another element in this temptation. It's not just what Jesus would get, but what He wouldn't have to endure. Satan offers Jesus a path with no suffering, no pain.

If Jesus takes this offer, He won't have to come into conflict with His own family. He won't have to be betrayed by His closest friends. He won't have to feel the slaps of the Sanhedrin or the scourge of the Roman soldiers. And most especially, He won't have to endure the wrath of God, the very agony of hell, as He hangs on a cross. The devil's offer has a lot of positives, does away with nearly all the negatives... all Jesus has to do is worship him, rather than the Father who is making Jesus suffer.

Like the other two, this temptation is alive and well. Who doesn't want power? Who doesn't want to be liked by others? Who doesn't want security? And especially, who doesn't want to avoid suffering? That might be the most enticing part of this whole temptation. How many times have you known the right thing to do, known what God would have you say, but then stopped short because the consequences might be unpleasant? "If I say that, she might not speak to me again." "If I do that, my friends will think I'm one of those people." "If I live this this, then I won't be able to afford these things I'm used to."

We might not be literally bowing at the foot of the prince of demons, but when we place the things of this life above the God who gives them, we commit idolatry, which is exactly what Satan tempts Jesus toward.

Against this, as with all other temptations, stands the word of God. "Then Jesus said to him, 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."'" Only the Lord is God, only He is worthy of our worship, prayer, and service.

As the Scriptures point out, Satan only ever offers lies. You might think you're getting off easy, but that path with starts off so nicely leads to ever worse places, and finally to eternal destruction. Satan offers these nice things as bait on a hook, hoping that you leave the safety of God and impale

yourself in his trap. Whatever he would give you, he gives not because he cares for you, but because he hates you and desires you to burn alongside him for eternity. Misery loves company.

On the other hand, the Lord commands you to serve only Him because that is what is best for you. His word is what leads to true and lasting blessing, not the temporary pleasures of this life. And remember, while He commands you to serve, He also came to serve you. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus came and endured temptation and suffering and the cross for you, to redeem you, to give you everlasting life. Satan would never sacrifice anything for you. The Father sacrificed His only-begotten Son for you. Satan offers temporary joy followed by eternal suffering. God brings you through temporary suffering into eternal joy.

That’s what we get a glimpse of at the end of this account. When Jesus’ time of testing is over, Satan departs, and the Father sends the angels to care for Christ, to minister to Him, to comfort Him. When you face trials and temptations, know that they will not last forever. The Father has already appointed a time at which He will deliver you.

Cling therefore to the word, for that is the weapon against the evil one, the source of strength in temptation, the light in the darkness. Do not fear the devil, for his time is short, and the hour of Christ’s triumphant victory is already set, which all the faithful will share in.

In Jesus name, amen.