

Throughout Lent, a recurring theme we encounter is that of temptation. The first Sunday in Lent focuses on Jesus being tempted in the wilderness by Satan. The second Sunday, last Sunday, we encounter a woman who is tempted to think that Jesus isn't listening to her cries or caring for her daughter.

This Sunday, we get a temptation that perhaps isn't as obvious in the text, which is fitting, as this particular temptation is very subtle. In today's Gospel reading, we encounter the temptation of secularism, the temptation to think that there are parts of life that aren't influenced or affected by God, the temptation that there is a neutral ground one can be in.

How does our text show this? Well, how do temptations usually come about? Almost always, you start with God's Word, and then Satan comes along and says "Did God really say?" That's how it worked in the Garden of Eden, that's how it worked with Jesus and Satan in the wilderness, that's how it works in our own lives.

In this case, the clear Word of God is this: Jesus says, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." There is God, and there is everything opposed to God. No middle ground. Pretty clear, straightforward, black-and-white.

But then along comes Satan who says, "Did God really say, 'Whoever is not with me is against me'?" Seems pretty harsh. Surely He doesn't include everything in that?"

When we listen to the deceiver, and decide that maybe God doesn't really mean what He said, we end up carving out chunks of life that we decide God has no business in. We decide that some parts of life are secular, things that don't concern God. And this ends as it usually does when we ignore God's Word: badly.

Before we consider specific examples of this temptation to secularism in our lives, let's step back and ask why this temptation is so successful in our lives, in our society. We just sort of assume that there are plenty of parts of life that don't really involve God. There are the religious areas, and there are the secular.

We take this as true, but for most of human history, and in many places still today, this was not the case. Rather, it was understood that the spiritual world and the physical world were one and the same, that what went on in one directly affected the other.

In Christendom, it was a given that God was the Creator of the world, the One who upheld it, the One who gave it order and purpose. This didn't mean that people were always looking for miraculous signs or visions or something, but it was understood that God was indeed Lord of everything, every part of life.

Then along came what we call the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is a complex event in history, but to greatly oversimplify, it was the elevation of human reason above any other source of knowledge or truth.

If we can't understand something, if it doesn't make sense to us, then it must not be true. The miraculous began to be viewed with suspicion, God's Word as absolutely true and free of error became suspect, and the whole spiritual realm was thrown into doubt.

It didn't all happen overnight, but rather was decades, even centuries in the making. But the overall effect was to decrease what God was responsible for, or needed for, in the world. There were now more places where one didn't have to be for or against God, but rather independent, governed by pure reason.

This line of thought, this temptation, is so effective because it appeals to our sinful pride. What did Adam and Eve desire? To be like God, knowing good and evil. What does this secularism offer? To be like God, deciding good and evil.

It lets us carve out parts of life that we decide are under our control, our reason, rather than God's will. We get to be in charge of whatever we decide is secular, not having to take orders from God.

These might only be small parts, seemingly inconsequential, but remember, Satan is patient. He's got eternity in hell to look forward to, so if he just gives mankind little suggestions here and there, little lies to reject God's will, he can wait.

Satan also knows that when a society pushes God out of certain areas of life, it's very hard to reverse that. So even if he's only gaining ground an inch at a time, he's not going to be pushed back easily. Think of Jesus' words on the evil spirit who leaves and then returns with seven more demons. That host is going to be much more difficult to drive out than just the one.

This temptation is dangerous as well, not only because it is hard to reverse, but the more we give in, the easier it becomes to give in further. As more and more becomes secular, then the faith becomes more abstract, more irrelevant to life. God goes from being the center and foundation of reality to just someone that you can approach when you need something to a totally optional myth that you can do just fine in life without.

If you believe that you can decide which parts of life God's Word applies to, your sinful flesh, aided by the devil and the world, will try to push God out completely.

So what does this temptation to decide that things can be neither for God nor against Him look like in practice? As this temptation is so widespread, I can't hope to cover everything here, nor can I take it in as much depth as you might like, but through several examples I hope to show just how widespread and serious it is.

So let's start with something that seems pretty minor, something you'd probably figure, "Pastor, you're making a mountain out of a molehill on this one." Let's talk clothing.

It seems nuts to say that what you wear could be for or against Christ. Why would God care what color your socks are? And that's true, your salvation is not at all influenced by what color they are. But what if I showed you my socks this morning, and they had pentagrams on them, and "Hail Satan" written above that? Would that be indifferent, no big deal? It would be a very big deal! Sinful, even!

Why is that? Because your clothing is a form of expression. You say something about yourself by what you wear. And what you say, with words or without, comes from what is in your heart.

Christians, then, express what they believe through their clothing. Christians dress modestly because Scripture's words about sexual immortality and impurity – like in our Epistle reading – apply to not just what we say with our mouths but what we say with our actions. Christians dress modestly because they love one another and don't want to lead others into temptation through revealing their bodies.

Christians also dress up for church because we believe that we are truly in the presence of the Lord, and we show honor as humans by dressing up. What "dressing up" looks like is different for every person, but across human cultures, and in the examples given in the Bible, people show honor and respect through changing their appearance.

Does this mean that we throw out people who show up in dirty clothes or institute some sort of congregational dress code? No, of course not! Hear me clearly on that!

But if we truly believe that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and that when we gather here, God Almighty is present, then that will be reflected in our actions. As Scripture says, "Glorify God in your body."

So let's pick another example. How about science? Science must be secular, right? Doesn't religion interfering with science lead to people believing that the world is flat or that the sun goes around the earth?

Well, what is science? It's simply the gathering of knowledge about the world in a systematic, observable, repeatable way. Who is the author of all knowledge? God. Who is the One who created the world? God! So, if you try to pull God from the process it will have some pretty far reaching effects.

For instance, we have been given knowledge about the human body and medicine. Should we use that knowledge to alleviate suffering, eliminate diseases, allow people to see, walk, and talk better? Or should we use it to irreversibly mutilate and drug children, allow people to freeze babies until they get just the right one, and make a lot of money in the process? If medicine is secular, then it's whatever we want.

Or we've been given knowledge about physics and electrical engineering and everything else that goes into making something like the Internet. Do we use it to let people communicate with loved ones who would otherwise be totally isolated, video chat with grandma on her birthday? Or do we use it to make pornography easily accessible to more and younger people? If it's secular, if science is neither for Christ nor against Him, then do whatever makes you feel good, or makes you money!

Let's come to another area that we view as necessarily secular: government. The government has to be secular – otherwise we'd end up in something crazy like Iran or Afghanistan under the Taliban, right?

And what about separation of church and state? It should give us pause as Christians that we can readily quote that line from Thomas Jefferson – a man who made his own bible by cutting out all

the miracles and other things he saw as human additions – but we forget the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to Pontius Pilate: “You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above.”

Governments are established by God, as Scripture says, “for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good.” Good and evil are established by God, not man. And if you think, “Well, you can’t legislate morality,” what is the ultimate source of our laws? God’s established morality! Things like theft, assault, arson, rape, and murder are illegal ultimately because they are immoral!

If we heed the world’s directions to keep our religion out of the public square, then we’re saying that morality, right and wrong, good and evil, are up to man to decide. And as history shows us over and over again, when man decides this, great wickedness and suffering follow.

One last example: education. Our society has bought into the idea that an education can be secular, neutral. Well, what is education? A simple definition could be the process of passing on knowledge (which God established) to people (who are made in God’s image) so that they can be successful in life (which God has given to them). God is literally involved in every part of the process, and so if you try to take Him out of it, what’s left?

Yes, you can teach facts like the parts of speech and the water cycle and the Pythagorean Theorem, but without purpose and meaning, what good is knowledge? You can’t tell children that they are the unique creations of a loving God, and so you’re left with the explanation that they’re just advanced apes, just the result of freak coincidences. You can’t point to creation and say that God has created all things for a purpose, and so instead the universe is just a collection of randomness, and we are just one infinitesimally small, meaningless blip in it all.

It’s no wonder that our nation’s children are struggling with record levels of depression and anxiety, when we’ve made the greatest source of hope we have a quaint fairy tale at best and punishable hate speech at worst.

There are many other examples we could talk about, trying to make what we do for a living secular, what we do for fun secular, how we order our families secular, but the point is that as we’ve tried to shove Christ and His Word out of our lives, our lives have not remained swept and put in order. Where the Holy Spirit is driven out, evil spirits will come to fill the void.

When we try to have part of our lives in the Kingdom of Christ and part in the kingdom of the world, our lives, our houses, our kingdoms, crumble and fall. Jesus said, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters,” and He meant it.

So what to do? If things are so awful, so far gone, what can you do? You aren’t the ruler of the world, able to fix all the problems with a wave of your hand.

But you are Christians. You are those who have been liberated from the strong man, Satan, by the stronger man, Christ. He has broken the chains that enslaved you to sin and death, and granted you a new life in Holy Baptism, a life that by His Spirit you are enabled to live in accord with His will. And so, start with you.

First off, look at yourself in the mirror of the Scriptures, the Law of God, and confess your sins. Where you realize that you have been taken captive by the lies of Satan, fallen for his deceptions and temptations, repent.

Repent of chasing after the pleasures of this life rather than the joys of the life to come. Repent of those times you went along with the world because it was the easy thing to do, because everyone else is doing it. Repent of taking the things of eternity for granted, treating salvation as something you are entitled too, rather than a gift that the Son of God bought for you at the price of His own life.

And as you repent, know that Jesus Christ has paid for every one of your sins. Our God is never insincere in His call for His people to turn from their transgressions and come again to Him.

Even as the people of Israel and Judah were filling the temple with idols and burning their own children alive, God sent His prophets to call them to repentance, that He might heal their land. Even as Jesus was being crucified, He called out "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

No matter how many times you have fallen, and no matter how many times you will fall, Jesus is always there to pick you back up, to wash away your sins and make you white as snow.

Having repented, hear the Word of God and keep it, as Jesus says. You are part of the Church militant, the saints still in battle against the powers of this present darkness.

The Word of God, the Bible, is the Sword of the Spirit, your weapon against the evil one. No soldier today, knowing that his life and the lives of his comrades depend on his ability to use his rifle, would be content with just having read the manual on it back in basic training, putting a couple rounds through it every now and then, and never cleaning it. We must not be content with having studied the Bible back in confirmation class, hearing it once a week (or less) at church, and letting it collect dust at home.

Rather, hear the word and keep it. Hold it in your heart as a great treasure. Plant it deep in the soil of your soul, that the Holy Spirit would tend it and cause it to bring forth fruit.

The finally, let that fruit come forth. Let the Word shape your life. Don't just know it. Believe it. Conform yourself to Christ, seeking to follow in His footsteps. As all that He did and said was shaped by His Father's will, let Him shape all that you do and say according to His good and gracious will.

Heed Scripture's admonition: "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." Don't try to divide your life, your house against itself, but repeat those words of Scripture, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." When Satan and the world bring temptations, don't try to find a middle ground, but respond with the words of Scripture and trust in the One who spoke them.

You may not be the President or a Supreme Court justice, but God has given you your particular place in life and surrounded you with certain people. In that place, among those people, strive to gather with Christ, not scatter.

Will this be easy? No! It will be a cross you will bear. But in the midst of it all, remember that you belong to God. He has called you by name; you are His.

The Lord of the Universe is your loving Father, who sent His Son to die for you. The Son loved you so much that He gave up heaven to suffer the cross and the pangs of hell for you. He has sent His Spirit, the Finger of God, to drive evil from you and to dwell within you.

The Kingdom of God has come upon you, not because you earned it, but because the King brought you in and made you His child. There is no middle ground, because the Lord Jesus in love has won you, body and soul, all you are, for Himself, and He has given you every good gift.

He upholds the whole universe, all of it, and He guides all things, from the greatest to the smallest, for the sake of His beloved people. Christ rules and reigns over all things, and He does so for the sake of His bride, the Church. Blessed are you, for you belong to Christ.

In His name, amen.