

“How To Understand Temptation”

St. James 1.12-18

The First Sunday in Lent 2006

The Word of God for our sermon meditation on this First Sunday in Lent was written down for our faith and instruction in the Epistle of St. James, the 1st chapter, verses 12-18 as read earlier.

One of the more difficult topics to understand is the place and role of temptation in the Christian life. We read and we hear about Jesus being tempted in our stead as the Second Adam and Savior of the world and wonder why. We hear and read about believers like Abraham in our Old Testament reading for today being tested and tried and wonder just how does God relate to temptation and trial in our lives. Thankfully, God does not leave us guessing on this as we hear Him speak through St. James in our Epistle reading on how to understand temptation.

St. James first tells us that temptation to evil never comes from God and is, in fact, impossible for God to do because of who He is. James does say that we are only to expect good from God, even in the midst of trial and temptation. He writes, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.” In other words, since God is good and holy, since He is righteous and totally devoid of any evil and wickedness, the temptations to do evil and to sin do not and cannot arise or originate with God.

But, wait a second, Pastor. What about the Old Testament reading where God tells Abraham to go and sacrifice Isaac, his only son? Isn't God tempting and enticing Abraham to do evil there? Isn't murder evil? It is true, murder is evil and wicked just as the 5th Commandment teaches. But, is God really tempting Abraham to sin or is there something else going on behind the scenes that we do not see in the words of Genesis chapter 22?

For you see, we learn from the rest of the Scriptures, especially in the books of Romans and Hebrews that Abraham did not see this command of God as temptation. Abraham saw it as an exercise of faith, of believing and trusting that he would receive only good from His good and gracious God. For Abraham, we learn, believed that if he slayed his only son, God would give him back to him from the dead. In other words, Abraham was completely

motivated by faith to obey God's command because He knew God meant this trial for his good.

So teaches the Spirit of God when He states in the Epistle to the Hebrews "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten *son*, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense." St. Paul writes in the Epistle to the Romans "[Abraham] did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform."

In other words, Abraham did not see and understand that God was tempting him to sin but God was testing Abraham in order to purge away any idolatrous love he might have toward his son Isaac. For such idolatrous love of Isaac would give birth to sin and bring forth death. Abraham saw and believed that God would only give him good even in the midst of his trials and temptations, even as he made that journey with Isaac to Mt. Moriah. He knew that God was merely testing him to reveal that his love for his Lord was greater than that for his only son Isaac.

In the same way, when we are enduring trials and temptations, when sinful desires and passions erupt in our hearts and minds, we cannot assign blame for sin and wrongdoing to God in our lives. It is completely contrary to God's nature and His good will for us as His people. The temptation to evil and to wickedness must then arise from somewhere else. Indeed it does as St. James states. It comes from the enemies of our faith. It comes from our sinful self, from the Devil, and from this wicked world.

But, even then, St. James lays the entire blame for sin and evil on each and everyone of us. True, the world and the Devil may tempt us to wickedness, but we and we alone are the ones who act on those temptations. In other words, St. James says that you and I cannot even make the claim that "The Devil Made Me Do It!" because we are the sinners who gave in to the desire that was already in our hearts.

So teaches the Spirit as St. James writes these words. "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death." The irony here is unmistakable. James uses the picture of conception, growth in the womb, and birth which normally brings forth life, to demonstrate how temptation, evil desire, and sin bring forth death in the lives of the sinner.

See where the responsibility lies? It lies completely and totally on each one of us. When we sin and fall short of God's holy and good will, St. James says we have no one to blame but ourselves. We cannot say God did it because it is impossible for God to tempt us to evil and wickedness for it is contrary to His nature. We cannot even assign guilt to the Devil because he merely tempted us and we alone acted on the desires already existing in our sinful hearts.

When we understand temptation wrongly, including God's relation to it, we sin and we fall into sin's snare. For it is even part of our sinful desires to want to assign responsibility and blame for our own wicked and evil acts to another. This is the snare of sin and a temptation to avoid accountability. Do not go down this path! Resist the Devil and drown that Old Adam within you! Look unto the Second Adam who gives you strength to resist and turn away temptation, lest you be dragged into death, into the death from which not one can rise again!

Look unto Christ your Lord for forgiveness and salvation for God in His goodness sent us His Son who has atoned for our sins and grant to us that most wonderful pronouncement that we are the blessed of God who will endure and receive the crown of life. For in Christ Jesus our beloved Savior we have the One who is our Champion over the Devil. In Jesus we have the One whose holy living, whose vicarious living and sacrifice on our behalf has rescued us from the death of sin.

In fact, if we stop and think on Jesus a moment, we learn from the Spirit that Jesus is the Father's best and most perfect gift from above. For though our bodies are filled with only sin and death, Jesus comes having taken to Himself a human body and through the sacrifice of that body on Calvary's cross gives us forgiveness

and life. Though our hearts are filled with evil and wicked desires, though only corruption and iniquity course in our blood by nature, Jesus comes and pours out His blood to cleanse us and make us whole.

For in Jesus we find that the Father's desires for us are only good and He willingly sends His only-begotten Son into the world as the sacrifice for the sins of all. Here in Jesus Christ, the Second Adam who takes on the Devil and is our Sin-Substitute, we have the Lamb whose blood has set us free from sin, from Satan, and from eternal damnation. Here in the Son of God, the very Word of truth from the Father on high, we find God is willing to suffer and die, even be tempted, for His creations so that we may have life with Him in heaven.

And in His love God forgives us through faith in Jesus. Every time we have succumbed to temptation, every time we have acted on our wicked and evil desires, has been pardoned us for the sake of Christ since He laid down His life unto death on Calvary's altar. Bound to that cross and fastened with nails, Jesus willingly sacrificed His perfect life so that we through faith in Him may be born of God and receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to all who love Him.

In fact, we learn from St. James that God makes a most wonderful pronouncement about you and me and all who believe on Christ as their vicarious sacrifice and Savior for sin. God says we are blessed, even when we are enduring trial and temptation. How can that be so, you might ask? It is so because God has said so, because no trial and no temptation that we might possibly undergo can change our status and standing before God through faith in Jesus. We have been forgiven for the sake of Jesus' atoning sufferings and death, because the Lamb of God takes away the sins of all, including you and me.

On account of the washing and renewal we have received through faith in Christ by the Holy Spirit we, by faith in Jesus, are now and always shall be the blessed of God, the ones to whom Jesus will announce on the Last Day, having endured to the end, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world." We are assured that we will endure temptation and that we will enter eternal life. For this is

the good that God brings about through His best and most perfect gift, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Since God the Father has done all this for us in Christ Jesus His Son, since Jesus came and laid down His life as our Sin-Sacrifice, since the Spirit has announced this to us through His holy and inspired word, we can now understand temptation rightly knowing that God tempts no one to sin and evil and that, even in the time of temptation, God is working all things for the good of those who love Him. He did this for Abraham. He did this for St. James. He has done this and will continue to do this for you and me and all His people for sake of Jesus Christ His Son for He is, indeed, the One from whom we have received every good gift and perfect gift for this life and for life everlasting. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+