

## **OVERCOMING TEMPTATION'S TRINITY**

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

This sermon was [first] preached on February 13, 2005, in Mosul, Iraq, in the middle of a combat zone. It begins: Who are your greatest enemies?

For we who live and work in a combat zone, the answers to that question may appear to be very simple. You might have considered that your greatest enemies are evil men who randomly drop mortar rounds into our FOB [forward operating base]. Perhaps your mind flashed to the "Hadji" who set out IEDs [improvised explosive devices] and VBIEDs [vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices].

While those are true enemies, they aren't your greatest enemies. They are humans. They can be countered by force-of-arms in the short run. In the long run, our human enemies might be countered by the Iraqi "man-on-the-street" learning about the benefits and responsibilities of freedom from tyranny.

The insurgents, the terrorists, are genuine enemies. Yet, with all the evil they may try, they still have no eternal power. They can take our mortal lives, goods and earthly security, but they cannot send our souls to Hell.

In the span of forever, evil men and the troubles they bring into our world only last an instant. Theirs is a limited power to maim or destroy the body. But they have no power to destroy your immortal, everlasting soul. Evil people, no matter what terror they might wield, are not gods. Nor are their gods the true God.

The only True God has already saved you from true destruction. Eternal punishment is the reward of those who remain evil and continue to reject the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Evil men are not your greatest enemies. Jesus knows that.

He knows what it means to be persecuted and brutally terrorized unto death. God faced your greatest enemies, and He conquered them in His death. In the death of Jesus, victory over your greatest enemy, the unholy trinity who attacks you day and

night, has been won.

What is this unholy trinity?

In St. Matthew's Gospel, we heard of the threefold temptation of Jesus. In His conquering all temptation, Jesus blunts and demolishes each point of the trinity of evil. He uses the weapons which are available to all those who follow in His way.

Thus, when you name the unholy trinity that seeks to destroy your eternal hope, peace, joy and love, you can rest secure in the truth that your named enemies have been conquered. The unholy trinity's name is:

- The Flesh
- The Devil
- The World

Your three greatest enemies, though defeated by Jesus, still conspire as one to tempt you daily to turn from the grace, mercy and love of the One True God. In your mortal war against temptation to turn from God, you have been given very powerful weapons. These instruments of spiritual warfare are always at hand, weapons status red. The holy weapons you have through faith always fire true; they never jam, and they always come with an unending supply of ammo.

St. Matthew records how your Savior uses the divine weapons that He made available to all Christians. Jesus uses the full armament of God to defeat the temptations of the unholy trinity. Hear again how Jesus conquers the first temptation, that of the flesh.

*Then Jesus was led up into the wilderness by the Spirit. He was tempted by the devil.*

*And, having fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He hungered.*

*And coming alongside Him, the Tempter said to Him, "If You remain Son of God, You must say that these stones become bread."*

*And answering, He said, "It remains written, 'Not from bread alone lives man,*

*but by all the words proceeding through (the) Mouth of God.”<sup>1</sup>*

Jesus, all the while remaining fully God, is also fully human. Those people who have attempted to follow in Jesus’ full fast for almost six consecutive weeks have recorded the sharp incessant hunger pain and mental anguish that strikes around the 40<sup>th</sup> day. All at once, the fasting person yearns for food. Every thought becomes consumed with breaking the fast, with getting some nutrition into a depleted body.

Therefore, at the moment of Jesus’ greatest bodily weakness, when His very cells were in anguish for want of food, the devil appears. He comes at the Man’s weakest moment, and tries to pierce Jesus with the first point of the unholy trinity’s triangle. The Tempter tests Jesus with His flesh’s needs. Gnawed physically by hunger’s pangs, Jesus finds Himself presented with the truth that He can use His re-creative power to change inedible rocks into hunger-satisfying bread.

Yet Jesus does not fall to this temptation to re-create the elements to serve His own needs. He knows His mission is not to re-create things to make His life easier. Rather, He is steadfast in the knowledge that His mission is to re-create people into the image of God. He knows that this will not be done if He misuses His divine power.

So Jesus trusts in the first fully loaded weapon in the Divine Arsenal against the unholy trinity. Jesus counters fleshly temptation with the Word of God. He says,

*“Not from bread alone lives man, but by all the words proceeding through (the) Mouth of God.”<sup>2</sup>*

Jesus bests the Tempter with the Word of God used in its proper context. He resists temptation of the flesh through the right use of the Word. You have the same weapon in your arsenal. You have learned to pray,

*“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 4:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Matt 4:4

<sup>3</sup> Matt 9:13

When you pray those words, you are to know that:

*“God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.”<sup>4</sup>*

If you have faced and failed any temptation of the flesh, turn and believe Jesus conquered all temptations of the flesh for you. His victory over temptation became yours in the Water and Word of Holy Baptism. There you spiritually died with Christ to all fleshly lusts. Washed clean, you were set free to arise daily, in Christ freed from the Tempter’s power. God has given you victory and forgiveness over temptations of the flesh by Christ Jesus’ perfect obedience to all the words proceeding from the Mouth of God. This means that you are to know that you are free to turn from sin and walk anew.

This is truly Good News. Jesus has conquered the flesh’s temptation for you! You are free to daily read, hear and learn the Word of God. You are free to taste the Word, to take the Word into your mouth under the elements of bread and wine. How wonderful it is to put every Word proceeding from the Mouth of God into your mouth. With Him in you, you have forgiveness, life and salvation.

The first of your greatest enemies has been conquered by the Word of God. What of the second? How did Jesus blunt the devil’s point of the unholy trinity?

Hear our text again,

*Then the devil, taking Him into the Holy City, stood Him also upon the pinnacle of the Temple. He says to Him, “If You remain Son of God, You must cast Yourself down. For it remains written, ‘He will command His angels concerning You, and they will lift You up by hands, lest You might strike Your foot against stone.’*

*Jesus spoke to him, “Again it remains written, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’”<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Luther’s Small Catechism

<sup>5</sup> Matt 4:5-7

There, the old wily foe takes Jesus' answer from the first temptation and tries to use it against Him. It is as if he had said, "OK, You who want to live by all the words coming from the Mouth of God, chew on this!" The Deceiver takes the Word of God out of its context and bends it to his own purposes.

But Jesus does not fall into this temptation. He doesn't jump from the Temple in order to test the Father's promises. If He jumped, He would have shown doubt in the very Word He just said one needs to cling to for life. Jesus was not deceived by the devil. Rather, He showed that the Word of God is to be used in God's intended context. Jesus responds by quoting the Word to be used in the situation at hand. He said,

*"You shall not tempt the LORD your God."<sup>6</sup>*

What of you? Have you tempted the LORD your God? Perhaps you've purposely placed yourself in an unsafe position in order to have God prove His love. Maybe you've fallen to the "if God does this, then I'll believe" temptation.

You have heard you are not to tempt God in anything, including His grace, mercy, forgiveness and love. If you have fallen to the Tempter's tricks, if you have placed your trust in seeing God prove Himself over hearing His Word, then sorrow over your sin and return to the LORD your God.

In this season of repentance, receive the forgiveness Christ won for you. Return to His Word in its context. Read it daily. You are free to do these things and much more. Jesus' victory is yours. To help you remember that truth, it is bestowed on you every time you hear Jesus say, *"I forgive you all of your sins."*

The second peak of the unholy trinity is defeated. What then of the final point of the triangle of evil? Has Jesus conquered the temptation of the world? Hear again the Good News for today.

*Again, the devil, taking Him onto (a) very high mountain, and continuing to show Him all the kingdoms of the cosmos and their glory, said to Him, "All these I will*

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<sup>6</sup> Matt 4:7

*give to You, if You, falling down, will (give) worship to me."*

*Then Jesus says to him, "You must go Satan. For it remains written, 'The LORD your God you will continue to worship, and to Him alone will you give religious service.'"*<sup>7</sup>

The third temptation is defeated by the Word of God. The "Prince of the power of the air" offered to Jesus ultimate worldly power, riches and glory. Humans want to sit in ruler's seats and be honored by all whom they meet. No human at the core of being is truly willing to be least in the world. Do you know any soldier who wants to remain a Private, E-1, for his or her entire military career? How many officers always put their soldiers first, remaining unconcerned about their own careers?

The nature of man is to be sorely tempted by personal power, riches and glory in this creation. Jesus, owning nothing but the clothes on his hunger-weakened body, was tempted to take the world and have it all for Himself. Jesus could have it all, and not have to suffer the coming years of trial, want, persecution, and, at the end, a horrible death. He could have the gold crown and not the woody crown of thorns!

Had Jesus taken the world's kingdoms and glory in any way other than the Father's, He would have named God a liar. Sin would have retained its dominion over man. Death would have continued its reign. The world would have remained forever in envy, violence, injustice, terror, and pride, with no hope of any salvation.

If Jesus had fallen down and worshipped at the feet of the devil, the world and its glory would have been His. All would have remained under the curse laid upon Adam. Jesus however, as the New Adam, chose the more excellent way, the difficult way, the way of the cross. He resisted the temptation of the world by clinging to the Word, and trusting in God's promises. He did this for you in all your weaknesses.

What then, have you been doing to fend off the third point of the unholy trinity? Have you remembered to pray God's blessings daily, saying His words,

*"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil?"*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Matt 4: 8-10

<sup>8</sup> Matt 9: 13

If not, sorrow over what you have done, and receive the victory over the world that is yours in Christ Jesus. He won over temptation for all we who repeatedly fall into the wiles of the flesh, the devil and the world. Because of Jesus' perfect human obedience to the Word of the Lord, to the will of the divine Holy Trinity, the unholy trinity can have no lasting power over the baptized in Christ. Your greatest enemies remain defeated. The unholy trinity cannot prevail eternally against you.

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Lent I

Genesis 3:1-21; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

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*Soli Deo Gloria*