

Do not be mastered by evil, but overcome evil with love.

How tempting it is to be mean to those who are thoughtless towards us. How easy it is to want to get even with those who have hurt us. You hit me, my inclination is to retaliate, to strike back; you insult me, I try to think of something to say that will sting you.

Do not be mastered by evil, but overcome evil with love. I wonder, as I hear the various wanna-be-president candidates hurl accusations and labels at each other, whether any of them ever consider the counsel by Paul to the early church about how to follow Jesus? I guess they are so caught up in trying to beat each other and so immersed in our culture’s “okay-ness” with political mud-slinging that the way of Jesus - love others, love God - may not be a top priority on the way to primaries and caucuses. Surely there is a huge temptation for a candidate to simply strike back when challenged.

But today we have been reminded how Jesus handled very tough times in his life. Just baptized and about to start his public ministry, full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus at the same time was led by the Spirit to a place where he would be profoundly tempted. For forty days he was in the wilderness, famished. The temptations were tailor-made for him: *If* you really are the Son of God – and of course, he was – the evil one taunted him, “Prove it, use your power and your position as I tell you to use it.” But Jesus would not.

The temptations came: You can make bread out of these stones, no need to be hungry....“I’ll give you everything you see, all the kingdoms of the earth, if you will simply claim me, the devil, as a good guy, worthy of being worshiped.” You can jump off the highest part of the Temple in Jerusalem, because the scriptures promise (Psalm 91?) that God will take care of you... where’s your faith?

Jesus faced seductive temptations. We can understand, because we also face tailor-made temptations that seduce us every day: “Get this, and your life will be better. Spend your money on that, and you’ll feel good about yourself. It’s okay to cheat a little on your hours or your schoolwork or on your taxes... It really won’t matter if you say something negative about this person, or if you can’t forgive someone. No big deal.”

Temptation. Since the very beginning, the Bible tells us, human beings have had trouble with temptation. To be tempted is to have a choice, like being at a fork in a road. In relation to God, temptation translates into: Will I honor God by my choice, or will I do what God has asked me **not** to do?

Adam and Eve chose to do what God had asked them not to do. As soon as they did so, they discovered something else incredibly human: they learned to pass the blame along to someone else. That woman you gave me offered me the fruit; that serpent talked me into it. It’s not MY fault, somebody else pushed me into it. That first temptation story plays out over and over in our lives today.

In the face of his temptations, Jesus would not worship anything but God. Later, when he was tortured, totally forsaken by his disciples, and crucified, he would not be mastered by his pain or by all the wrongs done to him; he refused to fight back and even offered forgiveness to those who hurt him.

Do not be mastered by evil, but overcome evil with love. So here we are, beginning Lent. Lent is a period of approximately forty days, plus Sundays. The first Christians did not observe Lent; it was developed later. Years had passed and Jesus had not returned as the early Christians had expected. Once the persecutions had pretty much stopped, it became a fairly comfortable thing for people to be Christian. Former Episcopal priest, now professor Barbara Brown Taylor describes how Lent developed: “Christians hung a wooden cross on the wall and settled back into their more or less comfortable routines, remembering their once passionate devotion to God the way they remembered the other enthusiasms of their youth... Little by little, Christians became devoted to their comforts instead of God: the soft couch, the flannel sheets, the leg of lamb roasted with rosemary. These things made them feel safe and well cared for – if not by God, then by themselves. They decided there was no contradiction between being comfortable and being Christian, and before long it was very hard to pick Christians out from the population at large. They no longer distinguished themselves by their bold love for one another. They did not get arrested for standing up for the poor. They blended in, they avoided extremes... So someone suggested that it was time to call Christians back to their senses, and the Bible offered some clues about how to do that.” (*Home By Another Way*, pp. 65-66) Moses and Elijah had spent forty days on their mountains with God. The people of God spent had wandered forty years in the wilderness. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness.

So the church announced a forty-day period which they called “Lent,” from the old English word meaning “spring,” as a season of preparation for Easter and also an invitation to a “springtime for the soul.” As Rev. Taylor put it: “Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by grace alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves.” (*Home By Another Way*, pp. 65-66)

The mathematician/theologian Pascal once said that inside each of us there is a God-shaped vacuum. And Saint Augustine prayed, “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” Both men knew the hollowness we feel when we try to stuff God’s special place with lesser things, like food, or drugs, or things we can buy. Most of us know this sense of emptiness, too.

When Jesus was in the wilderness, the devil was not tempting Jesus to misbehave. He wasn’t tempting him to steal a wallet, or to sneak a peek at a Playboy centerfold, or to cheat on his taxes. It was deeper than that. The devil was tempting Jesus to use the identity and gifts God had given him in ways that would put a wedge between him and God.

Preacher/prof Tom Long once told about a high school play that had rehearsals every afternoon for a few months. The director was a young woman who poured herself into helping the students develop their lines and presentation. Finally the night came when the curtain opened to a packed auditorium. Everything went well until, in the last act, one of the players was silent when he should have spoken his line. He could not remember it. All the actors tensed up, nobody knowing what to do. Suddenly, the forgetful actor spoke a line, not the right one, but one which broke the tension and actually prompted a laugh from the audience. Delighted, the offending actor came up with another line that was not part of the play, and then another... The cast was horrified, because nobody knew what was coming or how to respond. Soon the audience realized what was happening, and there were no more laughs, only uneasy responses. The young director saw all her hard work go out the window, and she was devastated.

In this context, think of Jesus in the wilderness. He was cast into the lead role in the drama of God's redemption of the world, and the devil tempted him to change the script, to improvise on the character, to deny who he was called to be. But Jesus knew who he was and he trusted his Father and he never changed the script. (Above illustration by Rev. Thomas Long, original source uncertain)

We have begun the season of Lent. Lent reminds us, "Pay attention to your life. Make sure that you are worshiping God and not something else. Remember that you belong to God."

When you find yourself tempted to ignore God, to fill your life with other things, think of Luke 4. The answer of Jesus to the tempter is our answer too. "Worship the Lord your God and serve no one else." Do not be mastered by evil, but overcome evil with love.

Over the next forty days we will watch Jesus walk toward the hard choices of Jerusalem. Along the way we will see how the disciples could not let themselves hear or see what Jesus was trying to have them understand about the kind of Messiah he had come to be. Along the way we will be challenged to assess our own understanding as to what kind of Lord we will let Jesus be in our lives.

We are called to follow Jesus in the small and large things in our lives. If someone in your family hurts you, you have to decide how to follow Jesus through it. When there's an opportunity to take something that's not yours, you have to choose whether to trust and obey God or not. It could be that you're in school and there's a way to cheat and everybody else is doing it; or maybe at your job some of the folks have figured out how to claim more hours than have actually been worked. Right then you stand in the wilderness with Jesus and the devil is trying to pull you off the path that will lead you to real and everlasting life.

Do not be mastered by evil, but overcome evil with love. Jesus did just that. When temptation threatens us and our emptiness scares us, we are at our best opportunity to ask God for help, to ask Jesus to come into our place of weakness and help us find fulfilling life. As Rev. Taylor defined Lent, so may this Lent be for us: "Forty days to cleanse the system and open the eyes to what remains when all comfort is gone. Forty days to remember what it is like to live by grace alone and not by what we can supply for ourselves." (*Home By Another Way*, pp. 65-66) This is the hope, challenge and promise of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus. Receive it for yourself, share it with others, and give thanks to God! Amen.