

Real Victory Over A Real Enemy

In the 1973 blockbuster movie, *The Exorcist*, there is a scene at the beginning of the movie where the exorcist, a priest by the name of Father Marin, arrives at the home of a little girl who is demon-possessed. As he walks into the house, a cacophony of demonic voices spews forth upstairs from the little girl's mouth. The girl's mother assumes that there must be a psychological explanation for her daughter's bizarre behavior, and she asks the priest if he thinks the voices come from multiple personalities which have developed within the girl. The priest grimly responds, "No. *The voices all come from one personality.*"

Now I don't usually go to pop culture—let alone Hollywood—for religious quotations, but in this case I'm making an exception because the point the priest was making is dead on: evil is not a psychological illness.

Evil is a living being with a distinct personality who opposes everything that God is for. His name is satan and his goal is to enslave you and make your life a living hell—now and forever. Ever since eve tried and failed to match wits with satan in the Garden of Eden, people have tried to devise ways to get rid of him. Some bury their heads in the sand like ostriches and claim that since they can't see him, he doesn't exist. Others say that he's a fictional character God made up to explain the origin of evil. Still others say that he's a boogeyman—a Christianized version of the big bad wolf—cooked up to frighten people into not sinning. All of them say the devil is a myth out of a fairy tale and we've outgrown the need to believe in fairy tales. So we have to choose whether we're going to believe God's word or human opinions. Is satan real or not? He certainly was real to job. He made job's life a living hell. He was certainly real to St. John, who describes him in the *Book of Revelation* as "...that ancient serpent called the devil, or satan, who leads the whole world astray." Most important, he was real to Jesus, who speaks of him in many places and calls him, "...a murderer from the beginning, a liar and the father of lies."

C. S. Lewis, one of the greatest literary scholars and intellectuals of the 20th century, was once asked if in these days he still believed in a personal devil. He responded that while he didn't know what the time of day had to do with it and he wasn't particular about hoofs and horns, he believed the devil was real because Jesus said so. We would be wise to do the same.

Today's gospel lesson describes the first encounter that took place here on earth between Jesus and satan. Jesus had been led around in the wilderness by the Holy Spirit for forty days and during the entire time he was being tempted by satan. He had fasted for the entire forty days so he was very hungry. So it's not surprising that satan's first attack on him sought to exploit his hunger: "*if you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.*" Now just stop and consider how diabolically clever this suggestion is. It presents Jesus with not one but three powerful temptations.

First of all, "*if you are the Son of God...*" tempts Jesus to prove that he is. Then, "*...tell this stone to become bread,*" suggests a simple means of proof: a small miracle Jesus could easily do which would prove that he was the Son of God. Finally, of course, it would allow Jesus to satisfy his hunger. Three birds, you might say, with one little stone. It's a one-two-three gut-punch that attacks Jesus at the level of vanity, spiritual pride and physical need. How do you suppose you and I would have fared under a triple temptation like that? Jesus disposes of all three temptations by wielding the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Quoting *Deuteronomy 8:3* he says: "man does not live on bread alone—but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In other words, food is not the most important thing in life: God is. And God will supply us with what we need, when we need it. Our problem is that God's timing is not always our timing; he doesn't always satisfy our needs when we think he should. Then it becomes tempting for us to start looking to other sources than God to find the things he alone can give us—things like love and dignity and security and fulfillment. And those other sources are three places: the world, the flesh and the devil.

When we begin to look to the world, the flesh and the devil for ways to satisfy our spiritual needs, we have started down a path toward idolatry. And that path always leads to disillusion, despair, and death because idols always turn on those who worship them and devour them. How many people have you known—or known of—who made themselves miserable by obsessing over wealth or fame or beauty or perpetual youth as ways of finding love and dignity and security and fulfillment? The cemeteries where they bury Hollywood stars are full of people like that. But if we trust God to meet our real needs when he chooses to meet them, we will receive a triple blessing: we will grow stronger in our faith, we will be kept humble, and we will be fed on bread from heaven rather than on the yeast of satan.

In the second temptation, satan employs one of his favorite devices: mixing up the truth with lies. "The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.' "Now that there is a sense in which what the devil says is true. Jesus himself calls satan, "the prince of this world" and it is true that God allows satan to use the "authority and splendor" of this world to tempt people to worship him. The lie that is mixed in with this truth, however, is the suggestion that Jesus can only possess this authority and splendor by worshipping satan. That's not only a lie, it may be the whopper of all time.

Everything in the world already belongs to Jesus because he created it himself!

In *John 1:3* we read: "through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made." Why would Jesus need to worship satan to receive what he made and already owns? Let's be clear about something, folks: satan has created nothing; satan owns nothing; and satan can give you nothing—except lies. And lies are exactly what he wants to give you—lies in exchange for your worship. Given the absurdity of the proposition, the fact that a huge number of people fall for his lies is a good indicator of just how much humanity has been blinded by sin. As the old western cowboy and con man Brett Maverick used to say, "you can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time—and those are pretty good odds." Millions of human beings end up with worthless deeds to the Brooklyn Bridge and the devil ends up with their souls. Jesus answers satan by quoting once again from *Deuteronomy*: "worship the Lord your God and serve Him only." This isn't rocket science, folks. There is one God; He has created and redeemed all things—including you and me; He wants what is best for us and He will give it to us at the perfect time. Trust Him! Having failed to tempt Jesus to sin at the level of physical need or human pride, satan now attacks him at the spiritual level: "The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the son of God,'" he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: 'He will command His angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.' "

(I always knew that the devil invented bungee-jumping.)

In other words, since you worship this God and trust him completely and serve him only—why not let him prove himself? Surely he will prove as good as his word—and that would glorify both him and you!

This may be the most insidious temptation of all.

First of all, it seems to be based on God's own word; yes, the devil can quote scripture. Second, given the suggested location of the miracle—the temple in Jerusalem—what better way could there be for Jesus to furnish indisputable evidence to the Jews that he was the Son of God? Jews demand signs—so why not give them one? Wouldn't that validate his ministry among God's chosen people and bring many of them to salvation? Isn't that the very first thing Jesus came to do?" This is the subtlest and most lethal temptation Jesus faced—and that we face—because it introduces a doubt into our thinking which can contaminate our faith: why doesn't God just go ahead and do the things that he has said he wants done? Why doesn't he save my unbelieving brother? Why doesn't he stop bad things from happening to good people? Why does he allow the enemy to poison people's minds against him? Why did he allow Adolf Hitler to even exist?! Why does he allow the wicked to prosper and the faithful to suffer? Why? Why?

Jesus' answer is one we must never forget: he says: "*do not put the Lord your God to the test.*" What does this mean? *It means that we must never, never imagine that we are in a position to offer advice to God or to judge what He does.* We are not privy to his counsel and we do not know what is best for us. When we begin to imagine that our wisdom is on a par with God's—we put him to the test. And when we put God to the test, we are the ones who fail because God doeth all things well and we doeth them very poorly. Why would we imagine that he ought to heed our advice? So pray your prayer, even as Jesus himself prayed, and leave the results to God. He will use your prayer in better ways than you can imagine. Jesus resisted the temptations of satan by turning to the Word of God. In that fact alone, there is wisdom for the living of our Christian lives. "Blessed is the man...whose delight is in the instruction of the Lord and on his instruction he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water: he yields his fruit in season, his leaf does not wither, and in all that he does, he prospers." Make no mistake: the devil is real and he "*...prowls about like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*" He wants your soul and he wants it now and you and I are no match for him. As we sing in "a mighty fortress": "and still our ancient foe, doth seek to work us woe; his craft and power are great; and armed with cruel fate; no one on earth his equal." But you have at your disposal something far more powerful than satan; **you have the Word of God!** If Jesus needed it; you and I need it. For as Luther wrote in the next verse of his hymn: "*this world's prince may still, scowl fierce as he will; he can harm us none; he's judged, the deed is done; one little word can fell him.*"

“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Amen.

Father in heaven, you know that we experience many temptations in life. The world tempts us with its promises of glory and a false sense of security; the devil tempts us with spiritual doubts and fears; and our own flesh lusts after carnal things. By ourselves we are powerless before these temptations, Lord, but with your help we can resist them and conquer them. Keep us ever mindful of your Word, that with it we may resist the devil and force him to flee from us.