

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Some have said that today the Lord’s Prayer is often revised and adapted, and one such modern adaptation is this: ‘Lord, lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is, and we’ll find it on our own.’”

Whether that statement has caused you to think, or chuckle, or both, dealing with temptation is no laughing matter. The apostle Paul stated “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

No one needs to remind us that we have been tempted, on occasion have made wrong choices, and may even have paid or will pay the consequences for our actions.

Today’s Gospel suggests that our focus be first upon one who made the right choices: Jesus. We find him in the wilderness. He is thinking. He is pondering the direction of his life.

And Jesus is being tempted in a major way. One temptation was to turn a stone into bread. The Tempter said: “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread” (Luke 4:3).

That was a challenge. Why? Well, if he could do it, wouldn’t he have gained a large following as a provider of food for the masses?

But Jesus spurned this temptation by saying, “One does not live by bread alone” (Luke 4:4). That was strike one for the Tempter.

Satan then tried to toy with Jesus’ mind. “See all the kingdoms of the world. You could have power over all of them. They would all give you glory and authority if you would follow my leadership, and worship me” (see Luke 4:5-7).

Now that was a true mind-dazzler. Power, wealth, glory – what else might one desire? But Jesus said, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’” (Luke 4:8). That was strike two for the Tempter.

Then Satan started quoting scripture. “It is written, ‘[God] will command his angels ... to protect you and on their hands they will bear you up so that you will not dash your foot against a stone’” (see Luke 4:9-11). He told Jesus that if that was so, he could hurl himself down from the top of the great temple and not be hurt.

This temptation was to do the miraculous, to use magic and entertainment to win the admiration of the masses. Wouldn’t that cause the people to flock to Jesus? But Jesus refused this temptation, too.

It would have compelled God to go against the laws of nature, the law of gravity. It would have been putting God to the test and Jesus was not about to do that.

With Christ's refusal to give in to that third temptation, the Tempter struck out. Indeed he went on his way until another time. But what was the end result of those temptations which Christ refused? In Matthew's version of this incident, he writes, "suddenly angels came and waited on him" (Matthew 4:11).

Whatever else the words "angels came and waited on him" mean, they tell us that resisting temptation has its rewards.

But before we consider this reality, we should realize that salvation comes by faith, that is, through reconciliation with God involving our complete trust in God our Creator through Christ our Lord. Our reconciliation with God comes through our faith in Christ.

This is how we are assured that we are the children of God and receive the manifold gifts of grace. This is how we know "God's love has been poured into our hearts" (Romans 5:5). Such blessings are the rewards of fully receiving Christ as Lord and as Savior.

Today, however, let us consider some other rewards of God's grace, namely, the rewards that come from spurning temptation. Isn't it true that when we stop succumbing to the lures of temptation, we feel an inner sense of accomplishment? It feels good to be good, and that doesn't have to be prideful!

Some years ago, I read the story of a pastor who was called to start a new congregation in an area of a large city. After knocking on numerous doors one day, he stopped at a "mom-and-pop" store for some refreshments.

He bought a couple of small items, gave a \$50 bill to the woman at the register, chatted with her for awhile, then returned to his car. He then noticed that he still had his change from the transaction in his hand – and he suddenly he realized that she had given him too much money in return.

To be honest, the thought immediately came to him that perhaps he should just keep the surplus because, he rationalized, he had been short-changed in other transactions down through the years, and this unexpected gain then would have helped even things out.

But then his conscience got the better of him. He got out of the car, went in, and told the woman that she had made a mistake and given him too much change. "I know," she said.

"You know?" he answered in surprise, "You gave me back \$20 too much! Why?" "Well," she smiled, "I know who you are, and I know what you are doing in this area, and I just wanted to see what you would do if I gave you too much change."

Some years later, when his congregation was established, the pastor told that story in a sermon. And he said he was incredibly happy that he had done the right thing, had made the right choice, and had resisted the temptation which had come to him.

I believe, in a certain sense, the angels had come and ministered to him when he remembered the satisfaction he felt, and the victory he had achieved over temptation. Have you not also had blessings that have come from resisting temptation?

You may have found a purse, or a wallet, or a watch, or whatever, and sought to find the owner so the item or items could be returned. You felt some joy in your action, did you not?

You may have been invited to participate in an evening of questionable moral value. You thought about it, but you resisted the temptation. And when you then heard of even greater temptations which were not resisted by those who had invited you, you felt relief and even a sense of blessing for not going, isn't that so?

Or think of what goes on in the workplace so often: temptation to take what is not yours to take; temptation to work a little and extend your breaks beyond what is fair; temptation to arrive late and to leave early; temptation to play games or conduct personal business on the company's computer or time;

temptation to lie in terms of work achieved, or the deliberate breaking of the rules of the business.

What rewards have been justifiably gained? If they have not come to us rightfully, we should examine our spiritual life. Perhaps our spiritual life is in disrepair.

And if so, how can we expect to recognize, much less receive, blessings from God? Be sure of this: When you and I resist temptations we do know we have pleased God and have found a certain inner satisfaction in ourselves. God blesses us when we do his will. And when we don't, we have to live with the consequences.

I must admit that, to some extent, this hasn't been a very Lutheran sermon (though I believe it has been true to scripture). Lutheran pastors in their preaching, present company included, tend to emphasize God's unmerited grace, and rightfully so, over human efforts to maintain morality by resisting temptation.

But shouldn't we also, in response to God's love for us, strive to uphold Christian values? Can't we feel and experience God's love for us when we resist temptation and do the right thing? The Apostle Paul was correct when he wrote that "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't affirm righteousness and stress avoiding temptation.

Righteousness is a valued Christian attribute and a worthy goal. The book of Proverbs proclaims: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people” (Proverbs 14:34).

Tomorrow is President’s Day. So consider what our first President, George Washington, once wrote:

“Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail to the exclusion of religious principle. ... The smiles of heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which heaven itself ordained.”

Proper conduct, good behavior, and the practice of morality must be paramount in our lives, and in our nation, if we are to expect favorable consequences for our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Do the right thing. Follow the lead of Jesus and resist temptation. This will not earn you citizenship in God’s kingdom, or entrance into heaven; these come by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, but you will be blessed – and God will be pleased. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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