

1 March 2020 – Lent 1

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 · Romans 5:12-19 · Matthew 4:1-11

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In the secular world, January is the season of asceticism. Every year we see resolutions to eat less, exercise more, watch less television, read the right books. We are encouraged to do all the “right” things, whatever they are this year, and thus to become the best versions of ourselves.

And it’s easy to apply the same logic for the rest of the year. Surely if we can just do everything right, in our careers, in our relationships, in our spiritual lives, we will be safe and successful and good.

This is a seductive line of thinking. It makes sense. It’s encouraged by the culture we live in. It’s also dangerous idolatry that worships this imaginary ideal self instead of God. And it will lead us straight into heresy.

Specifically, Pelagianism, which is a set of ideas that boil down to denial of original sin and the claim that we can live without sin under our own human power; that is, we can, and therefore must, make *ourselves* perfect. Now, this is attractive. It gained ground among reformers in the fifth century against Roman aristocrats who paid lip service to Christian theology while profiting from an exploitative and cruel imperial system. And Pelagianism does a good job at combating that kind of hypocrisy, by demanding that we live dedicated and responsible Christian lives. It also appeals to our 21st-century ideals of self-reliance, logical consistency, and fairness.

But in trying to encourage a healthy independence, it denies our dependence on God. This is dangerous for at least three reasons. First, the need to maintain our own perfection can lead to an obsession with *purity* that becomes judgmental and exclusionary of anything – and anyone – that doesn’t meet our standards. Second, it means we live in fear, because our salvation is always conditional on perfect performance. Third, and worst of all, it leaves us alone with our fear, and utterly alone when we fall.

And we will fall, because *we can never make ourselves good enough*. We can never make ourselves perfect because our humanity begins with a fall. And we can never make ourselves good enough to deserve salvation because none of this is about what we deserve. If we insist on playing the deserving game, we will always lose in the end to hellfire and condemnation. Good thing God doesn’t want to play that game.

Grace is justification and life for *all*, not “for those who have done all the right things.” Salvation is a free gift, not a paycheck or a reward. It does not keep accounts. It does not rank. It does not compare. It passes everyone with the same mark, no matter how well each of us did on the exam. In short, it’s completely unfair.

So in that case, why do we try to be good, to resist temptation and overcome evil? Not out of fear that we’re not good enough, not in service to the idol of a “perfect self”, but out of love for our unfairly loving God. God doesn’t want us to fix ourselves. God wants us to grow. God wants the best for us – for us to be strong and virtuous and loving and free. Once we’ve accepted the gift of grace, we’re bound to demand all that from ourselves as well – that is, to will it, as God does.

Of course, that doesn’t mean waiting until we feel like it to do the right thing. Will is deeper and more basic than our feelings: it’s an intent, a choice. Aligning our will with the will of God means embracing our power to be good, when sin has made us bad, and to do good, when we are tempted to do otherwise. To accept that power is to accept the gift of grace.

Now there are two sides to our human will: willpower is self-control, responsibility, strength that stands fast against temptation; willingness is self-abnegation, humility, obedience to the will of God. Willpower asserts what is good; willingness yields to what is good. Willpower takes responsibility; willingness gives up control.

Some of us are better at one than the other. Of course, we need both, and we even find that more we conform our wills to the will of God, the more the distinction disappears. Somehow self-realization and self-abnegation become the same thing.

Jesus shows us how in the desert. His response to the devil isn’t to assert his own power, meeting force with force, although he could have, but to bow instead to the authority of God, expressed in Scripture. He acts here not as God but as a human being. Not as the Son of God, but as the son of Eve, and her mirror. He shows us how to make the other choice. For Eve’s trespass, he shows us obedience; for her trust in the serpent, he shows us trust in God; for her sin, he shows us grace. And at the end, it is this same willingness that saves the world: his willingness to give everything to say “not my will but yours be done”.

We don’t need to be stronger than our temptations on our own. We’re not stronger than sin. God is. And when we are weak, we are not alone. We can always rely on a higher authority.

So as we go together into the desert for forty days, keep alert to what you hear there. We may hear that we are flawed, that we are weak, that we are sinners. That is all uncomfortable and frustrating and true. Even Jesus, albeit without sin, became weak and tempted for our sake. But the moment we hear a voice telling us we're not enough for God, that we have something to prove before we can be good – that is the devil, and that is a lie. He wants to undermine the power of grace in us by making it conditional on the next hurdle, the next improvement, the next success, but they never stop coming and his race never ends.

The truth is, we already have as much grace and spiritual power as we are willing to receive. Grace will give us love without fear, confidence without arrogance, truth without shame. This is salvation and liberation. It is also overwhelming, and uncompromising, and it will eventually demand everything from us, because it is everything. Sin comes from us, and it is as small as we are; grace comes from God, and it is as big as God is. When we live in sin, we make ourselves small; when God's will becomes our will, we become great beyond any imagined ideal.

As Catherine of Siena says, the soul surrendered to God “understands and sees herself only as non-being, and the goodness of God within herself. She sees that infinite goodness wants nothing but her good. Then her love towards God has become perfect; since she has nothing within herself, she cannot hold to the rapid race of desire, but runs without any weight or chain.”¹

1 Letter 189, quoted in Richard Woods, O.P., *Mysticism and Prophecy: The Dominican Tradition*