

I’m guessing you wouldn’t think that drinking a bottle of poison is a good idea, yet when you indulge yourself in sinful behavior, that’s exactly what you’re doing to your heart and soul. Worse yet, as a Christian, when you deliberately choose to sin, you’re saying the death of Jesus on the cross was no big deal. Ever thought of it that way?

Now, the Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted, and that is huge. As a man, He was targeted by Satan. Just like you and me, he had choices to make every single day and the wrong choice, just one, would destroy everything.

What I mean is, the temptation of Jesus is directly related to his baptism. A number of weeks ago, we looked at a passage in which Jesus said that He must be baptized by John to fulfill all righteousness. Simply put, Jesus came to create a perfect record that He could share with us. We are covered by Jesus’ perfect record through baptism. But, you see, that’s the pressure Jesus was under. One wrong choice, one temptation accepted, and there’s no righteousness for anyone. The stakes could not be higher. By the way, that’s why this showdown is placed immediately after Jesus’ baptism in the gospel accounts—so that we connect the theme of Jesus’ quest for perfect righteousness and the attacks of the devil. Our spiritual well-being is riding on Jesus’ ability to choose what’s right.

Now. A sermon about temptation has the potential to make each one of us squirm in our seats. It might even make some feel anger or embarrassment. That’s because we know how bad things are inside. We know the thoughts we would never share with another soul. We know the things we’ve done or left undone that if people found out it would totally change the way they think of us. We know the differences between the public persona and the private self. We would rather do anything else than be candid about this stuff. However, there’s no way around it, we must be brought to the place where we agree with that truly radical statement, “I confess that I am by nature sinful and unclean...and deserve temporal and eternal punishment.”

Thanks be to God that you have Someone who values you so much that He would come alongside you and say to you: “I know that you bought the devil’s lies and you’ve got to pay for it with your life. But let me. Let me pay for it with my life. My life for yours. I want you to stay with me.” That’s what Jesus has done for you, for me, and for everyone. That’s why he allowed himself to be brutally beaten and nailed to a cross—to make the payment that would erase your sins. And that’s why we see him resisting temptation perfectly—his sacrifice on the cross had to be perfect, and it was. He had to respond to temptation perfectly, because you and I could never do that. He did, and the majesty of the gospel is that it counts for you. Your account has been credited as “paid in full” in Jesus’ name. Trust that Jesus has, in fact, made this payment on your behalf. Be baptized into His perfection. Then forgiveness and new life is yours.

Part of that new life in Jesus is a new perspective on temptation and sin. The Holy Spirit will work to change the way you think and feel about drinking the poison of sin. In Paul's letter to Titus, he writes, "...the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age..." (2: 11—12) A self-controlled, upright and godly life is something that a Christian will want to pursue if he or she truly understands the gift of grace they have received in Jesus.

Did you notice, in each case in today's gospel, when the devil tempts Jesus, Jesus responds with words from Holy Scripture? He is able to draw on his knowledge of Holy Scripture to combat the lies of the devil and stand for what is true. Forgive me for stating the obvious, but this is one critical reason all of us need to get into God's Word and study God's Word and know what it says— for the purpose of discerning the devil's tempting lies and saying no to them! The stronger we are in the knowledge of God's Word, the more conscious we will be of sin's high price. The stronger we are in the knowledge of God's Word, the better we will be at living in the pattern of repentance and faith. And the stronger we are in the knowledge of God's Word, the more plugged in we will be to the power of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to make godly choices in the heat of the moment.

There is a space between the moment something happens and how we respond. Maybe we ought to work to make that space larger so that we can choose better responses. Trusting in Jesus and animated by His Spirit, we can choose to not continue in a conversation that is engaged in gossip; we can choose not to let our temper out of the stall; we can choose to not stab someone in the back; we can choose to not lie or fudge to truth. We really can say no to the devil's lies. Holy Scripture says so.

Through baptism and temptation, death and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. He did not do that to keep the prize for himself, but to share it. Baptized believer, that is exactly what He has done to you. By faith, put on this beautiful garment and fight the good fight.