

Grace mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. I've said it before, and I will say it again, the problem with temptation is that temptation is so... tempting. Something tempting is truly something you want or desire, like: lots of money; A delicious hot fudge, chocolate, brownie Sunday, that is death by chocolate; a single pound burger, with bacon, and cheddar and Swiss cheese, with grilled cheese sandwiches for buns; a game that promises endless time to play and guarantees victory. These things we want, we desire, these things we yearn.

Jesus says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." What you desire, what you so want, that which you value, that which settles your fears at night, that is your god. Gods can be so ... tempting.

When Satan or his minions come at you, they will not come with horns and ugliness, but rather as that which you so, so want.

We begin Lent with testing or temptation.

I can relate to something a brother of the cloth shared, that "Most Christians and pastors that I know, have progressed much further in their piety (piety being more religious and faithful and reverent) and sanctification than I have. I envy people like that: Those who can simply walk away from any kind of temptation, or mutter some kind of bible verse, and BAM...temptation gone. In my own case, I have never met a temptation that I couldn't embrace. The harder that I fight against temptation, the more I want it, and I have never been able to mutter a bible verse and have temptation cease, or the devil flee.

No pain, no gain is a phrase that gets thrown around a lot, especially in the realm of physical fitness. No pain, no gain. Perhaps those two words just rhyme so well together. No pain, no gain. This phrase refers to the soreness felt in muscles after being exerted. This pain is actually the feeling of muscle fibers being torn from exertion. The idea is that since the muscles had been exposed to more severe weight, they will rebuild themselves to be stronger than before. The process of weight lifting won't really have noticeable results for some 3 to 4 months. Unfortunately some take the phrase "No pain, no gain," too far and work themselves up to serious injury while working out.

What about our spiritual muscles? We do end up experiencing pain as we are tested and our spiritual muscles become stronger. It is one thing to be obedient when times are easy, when our values and beliefs are not assaulted. But what about when they are put to the test, as it were? A teacher will give tests to gauge how students are doing, to see if they are digesting the material. They are strenuous and difficult, but help the person learning to see where they need to grow. They encourage development. God tests Abraham in our Old Testament lesson. His obedience is tested. He is in faith training.

How could Abraham have done it? He waited ninety-nine years for Isaac, and then, when the Lord called to him, Abraham was ready and willing to sacrifice his only son. I would like to imagine that I would make the same choice if God came to me with the same command, but I doubt it. I make no illusions about myself. I would have great difficulty in believing such a command came from God. I would wonder what on earth had I been eating or drinking to hear such a command. And even if I was so certain it came from God, I do not think I could do it. I am not that strong. I struggle daily with temptation, as do all of us. I could not imagine sacrificing one or all of my kids?

Many of you are uncomfortable with telling your family members or your neighbors that they should come to church more often. We hesitate from being gently honest with them for their good. I find it difficult to imagine that we could be brutally honest, honest enough with them. When we consider how little time and energy and money we each devote to God and the things of God, it is not realistic to think that we would surrender the lives of those we love most to God willingly.

But Abraham did. He wasn't exactly willing and eager, but he was obedient. In Hebrews, God tells us that Abraham could do it only because he trusted that God would raise Isaac from the dead after the sacrifice. When he told Isaac that the Lord Himself would provide the lamb for the burnt offering, he was being simplistic. He made a easy and convenient explanation. He figured that the lamb was to be Isaac. When the angel called to him to stop the sacrifice, no one was more surprised than Abraham. And when he saw the ram caught in the thicket, no one was more amazed or delighted with the providence of God.

God did provide the lamb for the sacrifice. He provided Abraham with a substitute for his son. Our account foretells the wonderful Gospel. Each of us stands in Isaac's place. We are dressed for the sacrifice in the poor clothing of our sins. We are bound by the chains of our guilt and over our heads is poised the knife of the justice of God. We deserve to die. We deserve the wrath of God to fall upon us and choke the life out of us. We have sinned!

We have earned judgment by the hammer of God. But it has been stopped. He has found the Lamb for the sacrifice in His only begotten Son. He has laid upon Him the guilt of us all. He has poured out His wrath on Him. His own Son has been caught in

our place, and killed for our offenses, and punished for our misdeeds. God didn't use a knife, however, He used a cross.

We see two things this morning. First, we see the mercy of God. God will provide the lamb for Himself for the sacrifice. His love for us and His goodness work together to comfort us. See what a love the Father has for us! If God will give us His Son, what will He withhold? The answer? Nothing - at least, nothing good or necessary!

God looks to our needs, and plans ahead of us to meet them. He plans our days, not in terms of making us do specific things, but in terms of our needs. He plans to meet them. He also plans things that we may do to please Him - but there is no compulsion, God doesn't make us do things like puppets. We have same opportunity as Abraham. We can show our faith and our love for God by living out that faith in the chances God provides, or we can reveal that we are faithless and unloving by rejecting those good things which God planned in advance for us to do. But when we make that choice, we are walking through life without trust, doing what seems best to us or for us, rather than doing what God has revealed to us as right and God pleasing!

God is testing us. We are strengthened and trained in faith. We each face Abraham's choice all of the time. When we face a choice between being expedient or being faithful, we face the test of Abraham. When being faithful will cost us personally, we face the choice: be honest, or be smart, stand in our values or compromise for the sake of approval, spend our free time on ourselves or spend our free time on God, buy that new toy or increase our offering to the Lord. God has so worked our lives that we daily face the choice between doing what we know clearly that God would have us to do, or do what serves or saves or comforts or protects or prospers ourselves. Facing these choices

daily makes us grow in faith and love towards God. It is exercise and it is a daily regimen. But of course, knowing this does not make the time of trial any easier. We need God.

When we do what is right and God pleasing, then we share in the praise of Abraham; “Now I know that you fear God since you have not withheld your son, your only son from Me.” God has worked something great in us. The only difference is that we would replace the word “son” with “time,” or “money,” or “reputation,” or “popularity,” or “convenience,” or “comfort,” or “personal dreams and desires,” or whatever. In every case of such faithfulness, we place God first, and self second, trusting that God will make it all work out right. And He will.

Despair is an easy temptation. It is easy to give up. When we get knocked down, its easy to stay down. God is with us in our desperate times. He provides so that we do not despair of ourselves, and works in us giving to us his strength.

Our second point is simply that God provides. We may trust God to provide, no matter what the need. If God can provide a ram for the sacrifice on the top of mountain, how hard can it be for Him to provide what you need, right where you need it? We can utterly depend on God. God who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think. He will provide. That is the lesson Abraham took home from this experience, for that is the name that Abraham gave to the mountain, The Lord will Provide.

The lesson we need, this first morning of Lent, is to remain faithful and obedient to God’s will in the face of temptation and testing. But what God does is all the more important than what we do when we are tempted. Far more important is Jesus’

obedience to the Cross. Far more important is God's forgiveness for us despite the countless times we may fail or flounder during tests. May you live in Him as you face your temptations and be strengthened in your faith. You are in faith training. In the name of Jesus. Amen.