

Have you ever experienced temptation in your life? Of course you have! Perhaps you are experiencing temptation right now, thinking about how much you want to eat that chocolate which you gave up for Lent as soon as you get out of mass. Unfortunately, temptation seems to be a universal human experience which we cannot escape. Perhaps it is appropriate then that today's readings are focused on this theme of temptation as we enter into this season of Lent.

In our first reading, we are reminded of the temptation faced by Adam and Eve. God created them and placed them in a garden where they had everything that they could ever need. All God asked them to do was to abstain eating, to fast if you will, from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Satan came into the garden, however, and tempted them to eat from this tree. We are told that they "saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom" so they took some of the fruit and ate it. Then, they were filled with shame and hid from God in the garden.

The setting for our Gospel is starkly different. We are told that Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert where He fasted for forty days and forty nights, at the end of which time He was hungry. I always want to chuckle when I hear Scripture's comment that He was hungry. And yet, I think it is there to remind us that Jesus was fully human. After 40 days of fasting, He was just as hungry as any of us would be. Fasting is not meant to be easy! And at the end of forty days when He is hungry, in a desert with no food, Satan appears to tempt Him. Unlike Adam and Eve, however, Jesus resists Satan's temptation.

As I reflected on these two scenes, I couldn't help but wonder about the role of fasting in overcoming temptation. In our first reading, Adam and Eve refused to fast and fell into temptation. In our Gospel, Jesus fasted and overcame Satan. Obviously, fasting plays a role in this, but what exactly is it? The opening prayer for

Ash Wednesday proclaims, “Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint.” It is clear from this prayer that fasting strengthens our self-restraint by teaching us how to tame our passions so that we are better able to overcome the attacks and temptations of the evil one.

As true as this is, taken too far it would seem to imply that all we have to do to be holy and overcome Satan is fast. This of course, cannot be true because if that was all it took, God could have taught us to fast without sending His Son to die for our sins. If this was true, then we could achieve salvation on our own without God’s grace. We can clearly see this is not true, however, by the many people in the world who live extremely disciplined lives and fast from all sorts of things but are far from holy.

As I continued to reflect on this, I kept wondering about the role of fasting in our salvific journey. It strengthens our self-restraint, but towards what end? This question can be answered by a seemingly arbitrary detail that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights in the desert before facing Satan’s temptations. In the book of Exodus, we are told that Moses fasted on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights before God revealed His presence to Moses and gave Him the ten commandments. In the first book of Kings, Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights as he walked through the desert to Mount Horeb where God eventually revealed His presence.

When Scripture tells us that Jesus fasted forty days and forty nights, it is evoking these other great scenes from the Old Testament where fasting brought about an encounter with God. While Jesus in His divinity did not need to fast to strengthen His self-restraint or bring about an encounter with His Father, we needed Him to do this within His humanity so that we ourselves might be taught to do as He did. We needed Christ to show us how to fast so that we might begin stripping away

the distractions in our lives so that we might encounter God in the silence and have the strength to act on His commands.

In the end, there are two reasons why Adam and Eve fell victim to the temptations of Satan. The first is that they had not tamed their human passions through self-restraint, and the second is that they did not invite God into the battle. So, when Satan tempted them, they had no ability or reason to resist. They had no will power to say no to Satan, and they did not ask God to help them overcome Satan. Conversely, Jesus strengthened His human self-restraint and then invited His Father into the battle. Notice that every time that Satan tempted Jesus, He responded with self-restraint illuminated and tempered by grace, always aimed towards the end of salvation with God.

As I reflected on this, I realized that every single time that I have fallen victim to temptation in my life, I was trying to face it like Adam and Eve, by my own strength without God. I will never be able to overcome my temptations unless I learn to both tame my interior human passions through self-discipline and also invite God into the battle. When I hide from God like Adam and Eve and don't call upon Him in my need, then I will always lack the power and wisdom needed to overcome Satan. Conversely, when I call upon God and lack interior self-restraint, then I won't have the ability to use the power and wisdom which God gives me.

In the end, we are called by Christ to strengthen ourselves by fasting throughout these forty days of Lent so that we might be stripped of everything that will keep us from encountering Him when He rises in our hearts this Easter. Then, armed by weapons of self-restraint we will be able to walk more confidently into battle with Him by our side to overcome all the temptations of our adversary.