

In his famous book “The Screwtape Letters,” C. S. Lewis writes about temptation from the perspective a senior demon named “Screwtape” giving guidance in how to tempt human beings to his nephew. In one of these letters, “Screwtape” writes, “My Dear Wormwood, plagues are a most effective weapon given to us by our father below... If you can stir up a hysteria by means of a plague so that they cut themselves off from our enemy’s gifts to them, the torment of isolation will drive them to despair... Get them to forget about their usual practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving and encourage them to become gluttons, slanderers, and lose all regard for their neighbor thinking only about themselves and their immediate needs... Yes, Wormwood, a plague is a tried and true method of taking their eyes off our enemy and getting them to worship their own bodies.”

This passage from C. S. Lewis is especially powerful in light of this current world pandemic. Although it might feel like longer, it has barely been a month since we first stepped into the desert of Lent with Jesus to be tempted by Satan. Lent started off ordinarily enough, with us being reminded that we were called to embrace the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving so that we might be strengthened by weapons of self-restraint to embrace God’s grace and resist the temptations of the Evil One. Little did we know that we would soon be facing a world pandemic which Satan would use to try and turn us away from the spiritual disciplines of Lent to instead “become gluttons, slanderers, and lose all regard for [our] neighbor thinking only about [ourselves] and [our] immediate needs.”

As we have reflected on already, this pandemic can become a great source of grace if we choose to turn to God in the midst of our suffering. Our self-isolation can free up time to pray. Our self-rationing can free us up to fast. Our shared suffering can free us for compassion and charity. Satan, however, does not want this and wants to tempt us to pray less... to fast less... to give of ourselves less. Satan

wants to use this threat of physical death to trick us into embracing spiritual death by turning us away from God towards the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, greed, gluttony, lust, anger, and sloth) which bring about death to the soul.

Whether we are tempted to indulge in these sins in ways which are obvious or subtle, a quick reflection on these sins reveals that the temptation towards them is strong during these days. Pride is an excessive belief in one's own abilities to the point that it blinds one to others and to the truth. Perhaps during these days, we only value our own opinion about what is going on and ignore the opinions of others. Perhaps we are disregarding the quarantine orders needlessly and by doing so put others at risk. Perhaps we are rejecting the help of others. If any of this rings true in our lives, then perhaps we are falling prey to the temptation of pride.

Envy is the desire for what someone else has. Perhaps we find ourselves desiring the power to make the decisions being made for us by others. Perhaps we find ourselves envious of those who are able to work from home or envious of those who have work at all. Perhaps we are envious of those who are not alone during this time or conversely are envious of those who don't have to share their space with others. If any of this rings true in our lives, then perhaps we are falling prey to the temptation of envy.

Greed is the desire for material wealth or gain, especially at the expense of others. Perhaps we are obsessed with the economy in unhealthy ways, more worried about how fluctuations in the market are affecting our own personal wealth than the ways that it is affecting the lives of others. Perhaps we find ourselves hoarding more than we need or things that we don't need to the detriment of others. If any of this rings true in our lives, then perhaps we are falling prey to the temptation of greed.

Gluttony is the inordinate desire to consume more than what we need. Perhaps during these days of quarantine we find ourselves eating our feelings, drowning

ourselves in food and drink as a way to cope with the boredom and fear. If this rings true in our lives, then perhaps we are falling prey to the temptation of gluttony.

Lust is the inordinate craving for pleasures of the flesh. Perhaps during these days, we find ourselves coping with the boredom by reading or viewing inappropriate material or doing inappropriate things. If any of this rings true in our lives, then perhaps we are falling prey to the temptation of lust.

Anger is giving in to the emotion of hatred towards others. Perhaps we find ourselves angry towards those we are living with or towards those people who are affecting our livelihood with their decisions. If any of this rings true in our lives, then perhaps we are falling prey to the temptation of anger.

Finally, sloth is the avoidance of physical or spiritual work. Perhaps as the days of quarantine go on, we find ourselves slacking on work we should be doing from home. Perhaps we find ourselves giving up on exercise or on cleaning our homes. Perhaps we find ourselves giving up on prayer or the penances that we chose for Lent. If any of this rings true in our lives, then perhaps we are falling prey to the temptation of sloth.

These seven deadly sins slowly entangle our souls in chains until we wither and die. Luckily for us, however, if we are bound by these sins in any ways, there is hope of freedom. In today's Gospel, we encounter Jesus calling Lazarus back to life from the tomb in which he had been laid. We are told that "the dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands... So Jesus said to them, 'Untie him and let him go.'" While we may not be able to overcome these sins through our own strength, God can call us forth from our tombs and bring us back to life, untying the chains of sin and death which bind us.

This occurs, first and foremost, when we let God into our lives. If we are not yet completely dead due to our sins, then we must cry out loudly in prayer for God

to heal us and set us free. On the other hand, if we see that someone we love is dead due to their sins, then like Martha and Mary we must cry out to God in faith, knowing that God can even raise those who are dead through their sins. Then, with the grace of God dwelling within us, we can be freed from our sins and raised up to life. As we see in today's second reading, "if Christ is in you, although the body is dead due to sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit dwelling in you."

We must then cooperate with this grace so that God might break every single shackle that bind us. We must overcome pride by becoming humble through God's help. We must overcome envy by becoming kind and compassionate through God's help. We must overcome greed by becoming charitable through God's help. We must overcome gluttony by becoming temperate through God's help. We must overcome lust by becoming chaste through God's help. We must overcome anger by becoming patient through God's help. We must overcome sloth by becoming diligent through God's help.

Put more simply, we must turn to God for his grace and ask Him to help us strengthen virtues within us. Virtues, however, are habits and they do not magically appear but only develop through time and effort... through self-restraint and discipline. This is why now is not a time to run away from the spiritual disciplines of Lent but instead to embrace them more fully. Now more than ever, during this time of pandemic we must call upon God in our need and strengthen ourselves through weapons of self-restraint so that we might not wrap ourselves in chains of death but instead be purified and strengthened for eternal life.