

“Obstacles to Faith”

Matthew 16:21-28

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Satan is a cunning and bold adversary, isn't he? Not only is he so bold as to seek out the demise of God's people, but willing to confront even the Son of God Himself through the weakness of faith that comes out of the Apostle Peter. He uses those closest to you as obstacles to faith, in order to work with all of his might to try and derail the plan God has in mind for you. I've told this story to a few of you before, and I'm always hesitant to bring personal stories into the sermon, but in the case of our text today, I find it too relevant to ignore. Prior to going to seminary, I was working for a major telecommunications company and was on a trajectory that was quickly advancing up the corporate ladder. During my last couple of years, I was receiving mentorship from someone I consider a dear friend and brother in the faith, a Vice President of the company who was guiding me on my career journey. We would meet once a month to discuss opportunities, goals, and just make sure we were keeping in touch. The meeting after I knew I was being called into the ministry and that we were going to be moving to Illinois for seminary, I told him first thing how thankful I was for his mentorship and time, but there wouldn't be any need to continue, since the Lord has pointed me in a different direction. Being the man of faith that he was, He understood and wished me the best.

He then proceeded to tell me that during our call that day, it was his intention to make me a job offer, one that would have been absolutely life-changing in terms of career and salary, and was exactly what I had been working toward. With the best intentions, he went ahead and made the offer, so that I would know what options were available to me. As I said at the beginning, the devil is cunning and bold, isn't he? In the moment I was committing myself to the call the Lord had made to me, Satan used one close to me to tempt me away from the work of that calling. I graciously declined (obviously), and upon hanging up, the words of Christ in our text were the first thing that came to mind, “Get behind me Satan.” I did call him a few months later after we moved just to say hello, and I told him about my reaction. I wasn't calling him Satan, but the devil sure was using him through that offer to try and pull me away from what I knew the Lord was bringing me to do.

I had no power to resist that temptation on my own. Only Christ has the power to withstand the devil, and by His indwelling in baptism, I was able to resist the temptation to abandon what I knew was a long and hard road for the easy and profitable one. Each and every one of you face similar problems in your lives. And every single one of those

problems, dilemmas, and temptations are used by the evil one to make you abandon your baptismal identity in Christ. Jesus stands before one of his most beloved friends in this world and proclaims his words trying to get him to turn away from the cross to be the words of Satan. Peter's faith was temporarily overcome by His sinful flesh, allowing the thoughts of fear and doubt to cloud the mission of Christ to atone for the sins of the world by His death. The devil's goal is a simple one: make you abandon your faith. Because without faith, you are "fair game," easy pickings for him as he seeks to bring you down to the depths of sin and hell.

Peter must have been utterly shocked to hear such words from his Lord and Savior. He just confessed Him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, and now following that confession, he is called Satan, and rebuked for his faithlessness. In his solid confession upon which the Church is built, Peter's faith was on full display, but in his seeking to redirect the Lord and trying to prevent His death, his faith is weak and that weakness is a tool to be used by the devil. The things of God are the things which lead to the salvation of His people.

The things of man are the things which would seek to undo that salvation. Because the things of man are the things of the sinful nature, one which all bear and have no power in themselves to overcome it. Salvation for the sinful nature means destruction and its desires never being fulfilled. So, it will always seek to turn you away from the things that bring that salvation to you. The things of man are the things that entice you away from the joy of Christ and His vicarious atonement—things like promotions, money, nicer cars, bigger televisions, bigger homes, a closer family, and the list goes on and on. If it can make you want those things more than anything else, the things of God will take a backseat. The things of God will cease to be a part of your life, and what follows is the weakening and ultimate destruction of your faith in Jesus.

The things of man are the things of death, but the things of God are the things of life. Jesus tells the disciples, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Saving this life in the world at the expense of the true life in Christ that all believers have is ultimately not life at all. It is death. Because without faith in Christ, and seeking the things of this world above all else, the sinful flesh wins you for the evil one. And make no mistake, it is always seeking to do just that, because the evil one grants all of the desires of the flesh and turns you inward to yourself instead of to the One who bought you back from sin and condemnation. And the death of faith is far worse than the death of the body. The death of faith is a judgment of eternal death and eternal separation from God who created all things.

So, as those who have been regenerated in Baptism, made new as those who have died with Christ in those blessed waters, turn not to the things of man, but to the things of God for all that you need in this life. You are a sinner in need of forgiveness. You were a lost and condemned person in need of reconciliation with God. And as Paul says in Colossians 1:21-22, “You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless before Him.” There is not a “laundry list” of things for you to do in order to make sure you are keeping your mind on the things of God and not the things of man. The reality of living in this sinful world is that you will continually fall victim to your sinful flesh. You will constantly find yourself slipping into evil deeds and things that are contrary to God’s will. But you don’t have to run around with a to-do list of good deeds to make yourself feel better and “find your way back to God.”

“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” The things of this world bring temporary joy, but making them a god above the one true God brings death to the soul. But as Paul said in Colossians, He has not left you alone to deal with the fear that comes from that proclamation. Christ has been sacrificed in the flesh, in order that your flesh would no longer have power over you, so that you would stand before your Father in heaven as holy and blameless in His sight. And the things of God in this world are not hard to find, at least they ought not be made so difficult to find. He has told you where you can find the things that bring you strength of faith and forgiveness. He has given them to you as a gracious gift and exhorted you to partake of them often for the benefit of your souls. Partaking of these gifts is a guarantee, a concrete assurance that your soul will never be forfeit, despite the failures you have in this life. The things of God are His means of grace, given to His Church as His means of imparting pardon and peace to His people.

In the proclamation of His Holy Gospel, you hear the truth of the work Jesus has done for you. He has done the work of saving your soul, meaning that there is no work that you must do in order to get to heaven. He has already given you His inheritance when He claimed you as His own dear child in the waters of Baptism. You and Christ are brothers, equal to one another as regards His human nature, and that is the comfort of the believer in this life. Jesus’ flesh is the same flesh you bear, and yours will one day be perfectly sinless just like His. Not because you worked hard enough or were good enough to earn your stripes, but because of the stripes He bore as He suffered and died to make you holy and blameless. The holy and blameless Lamb of God shed His blood and gave up His flesh upon the cross only because of His great love for you. In the washing of water and the Word, you lost your life as your Old Adam was killed, and you received

your life as the new man rose out of those waters—the new man who is Christ that dwells in you.

That blood that has cleansed you and made you righteous is present here before you today. In the Supper of His very body and blood, you have received forgiveness, life, and salvation. You have been declared righteous for the sake of the One who bled and died and was pierced for your transgressions thus giving you pardon and peace in this Sacrament. The blood and water which flowed from the side of Christ were His gifts to bring grace to His people. And as John says in 1 John 5:7-8, “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree.” He has done it all for His Church, given it all to His people so that salvation would belong to His elect. No matter the obstacles to faith that the evil one throws in front of you as you walk this life, Christ has carried the cross of salvation for you so that you would not have to bear the burden of your sin in this life, and that you would receive His righteousness in its place.

In Peter’s weakness, He tried to convince Jesus to walk away from the path that would lead Him to certain death. He loved his Savior, and the thought of Him dying brought fear and despair as obstacles to his faith which the evil one saw as a clear opening to twist and tempt the Lord Himself. I said the devil is cunning and bold, but he also isn’t very bright, is he? Jesus rebukes him and sends him crawling away just as the Creator did in Genesis. Jesus Christ will go to Calvary and crush the head of that evil serpent. He has redeemed the world by His blood, and He will come again with His angels in the glory of His Father to finally defeat that liar and bring His people to the home of their true citizenship. The glory of heaven is not a thing of man, but it is the thing of God that all those with faith in Christ look toward in hope and joy. Because of Christ and Him crucified and risen from the dead, you too have the hope and joy of dwelling in the presence of all the saints and your Heavenly Father, perfectly covered in the righteousness of Christ forevermore. Amen.