

On this first Sunday in Lent, we are working on our perspective on probation.

- As a new employee, he will be on probation for three months.
- He hoped that the judge would grant him probation.
- He was sentenced to one year's probation.
- He was sent back to prison for violating his probation.

Probation. By its definition, probation is the process or period of testing or observing the character or abilities of a person in a certain role. Probation is a temporal time, testing who we are.

Often, we are placed on probation by force or by others. Somewhat, we, church people, regardless of how serious we are about our faith or not, are placed on the 40-day testing time of probation each year. We call this 40-day probation "Lent." Jesus was on the 40-day probation in the wilderness led by the Spirit before beginning His public ministry. So, we will learn from Jesus today about how to go about our 40-day probation of Lent.

After being baptized, Jesus was on probation in the wilderness for 40 days and tested His character as God's son, the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus was still wet from His baptism in the Jordan. The affirmation of God was still ringing in His ears, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with You, I am well pleased." Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for 40 days before beginning His public ministry. Jesus, full of the Spirit, chose to fast and pray during this 40-day probation in the wilderness.

Like Jesus, we see many church people choosing to fast and pray as a spiritual practice during the 40-day probation of Lent. We often hear them saying they go without television or movies, and they call these "fasting" times. I'm not opposed to that definition of fasting because fasting does imply that we are giving up one thing to replace it with something else.

In the Bible sense, however, fasting specifically replaces food with prayer. The noun translated as "fast" or "a fasting" is *tsom* (צום) in Hebrew and *nesteia* (νηστεία) in Greek. It means voluntary abstinence from food. The literal Hebrew translation of *tsom* (צום) would be "not to eat." The literal Greek of *nesteia* (νηστεία) means "no food."

Another popular fasting we often hear about is "I'm giving up chocolate, pops, desserts, or...for my hubby's case, fresh fruits." 😊 They regard this as a type of fasting. I think they are somewhat correct to say that it is fasting as they abstain from that particular food. I also think it is a good gesture that they are giving up something for the Lord during Lent. I respect them for doing something rather than doing nothing during Lent.

However, I think that is a rather frivolous approach. The first and foremost purpose of a biblical or spiritual fast is to get a breakthrough on a particular matter that one lifts up to the Lord in prayer. A spiritual fast involves our hearts and the way in which we relate to and trust God. It relates to discerning and receiving strength to follow through on what God might reveal to us about circumstances in our lives or a direction we are to take. Fasting is a means of bringing the flesh into submission to the Lord so God can strengthen us in our mastery over our own selves. Fasting in the flesh strengthens us to stand against the temptations of the flesh. So, Jesus chose to fast and pray during this 40-day probation in the wilderness. Likewise, we are trying to do it in our 40-day probation of Lent.

Let me move on the next point. Luke 4:3 states that the devil said to him [Jesus], 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.'

*If you are the Son of God...* the devil slides in and questions Jesus' identity. The devil does the same to us. *If you are a good parent... a good friend... a good spouse... a good child... If you are a good church member... a good pastor... a good Christian... If you are a beloved child of God...* These are questions of the tempters, the accusers, who seek to confuse and destroy us. This is not the voice of God. Let's not be confused by these "ifs." God has already claimed that we are God's beloved children. Amen? No matter what others say, we are God's beloved children. Have no doubt about who we are. Jesus has no doubt who He is. He is the Son of God.

The devil, the tempter, the accuser who seeks to confuse and destroy us knows who Jesus is but dares Jesus to prove it—Prove who you are with a display of your power. Command. Fix. Force the situation. Turn a stone into bread. You're hungry. Serve yourself. Satisfy your appetite. Who's going to know? Imagine the devil turning to us. Ok, so you're a beloved child of God. Then use your power to command, fix and force. Serve yourself. Satisfy your appetite. Be the god of your needs and your wants. But it doesn't stop there.

Use your power to command, fix, force, and satisfy by turning a good gift of God into something it was never meant to be. A stone was never meant to be bread. Work was never meant to be identity and security. Love was never meant to be lust, abuse, pornography, prostitution, or enmeshment. Excellence was never meant to be perfectionism. Food was never meant to be gluttony and over-processed junk. Church was never meant to be shaming, segregation, and nationalism. This is the heart of temptation—questioning our identity, misusing our power, taking God's good gift, and turning it into something it was never meant to be.

Jesus responded to this temptation in verse 4— It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." Here Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus responds to the accusations of the evil one with scripture. Jesus, the Word made flesh, responds with the Word of God. Jesus fully relies on the Word of God while He was on the probation of the wilderness. Likewise, today's scripture message challenges us to trust the Word of God, promising us that He will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6; Deuteronomy 31:6-8).

Temptation! Probation! We all face it, and we all have to learn how to resist and overcome it. Jesus was tempted in every way, just like we are, yet He did not sin. He set an example for us by overcoming and resisting every temptation. So, let us follow Jesus' example to overcome all temptations in life, especially on our 40-day probation of the Lenten journey today and in the days to come. Amen.