

+ Mark 1:12-15 + Christ Calls Us to a Struggle + 1st Sunday in Lent + 1 March 2009 +

What do you think of when you hear the word “struggle”? Perhaps the word “difficulty” comes to mind. Perhaps you think of a job that’s very challenging. Perhaps you think of a conflict between two opposing sides. Maybe you think of the difficulty of dealing with a certain problem or issue or challenge.

Whatever comes to mind, when we think of the word “struggle”, we usually think of something very negative. Now sometimes “struggle” can have blessed results. Maybe it’s the struggle of a parent to provide a good living for his or her family or a student’s years of struggle through school to earn a degree or the struggles soldiers endure to secure our freedoms as a nation. Whatever the results, “struggle” is still always difficult.

For that reason, it takes us by surprise when with all seriousness Christ calls us to a struggle in our text. He’s not kidding around when he shows how much of a struggle he endured to win the victory for us. He’s not kidding around when he calls us to repent, to face the struggle of turning back from our wicked ways and our love of self. He’s not kidding around when he gladly shares the good news our guilty souls need to hear, which then enables us to face more struggles ahead. He’s not kidding around about the blessed results that follow all that either. So today we get some straight talk from the Savior as **CHRIST CALLS US TO A STRUGGLE.**

To understand that struggle, we need to understand the struggle it took to bring us the good news. The lesson before us takes us back to the earliest days of Jesus’ public ministry. He had just left his childhood home in Nazareth to be baptized by John the Baptizer and anointed by the Holy Spirit. Both events would publicly begin his ministry. Mark then tells us what happened next. **“At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan.”** Basically, from day one Jesus willingly took on the struggle for our souls.

Mark doesn’t provide much in the way of details about Jesus’ temptation. For that, we have to go back to Matthew and Luke. Out in the wilderness during those forty days, Jesus fasted, living on water without eating any food during that time. He was wracked with hunger. So Satan offered a crafty temptation. **“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”** It seemed rather harmless. All Jesus had to do was use his almighty power to end his hunger. By giving in, Jesus would’ve expressed doubt in his Father’s ability to deliver him—a temptation that’s all too familiar for us during tough times. Jesus quickly responded with Scripture, **“It is written, ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”** He countered Satan’s temptation with confidence in God’s ability to deliver and supply his need.

Later Satan tried again. This time he took Jesus to the highest point of the temple, high above the high hill on which Jerusalem sat. The devil made Jesus another offer by trying to use Scripture against its Author. **“If you are the Son of God...throw yourself down. For it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”** At first it sounded proper. Surely God will protect his people! Yet Satan was pitting Scripture against Scripture—a temptation we often face ourselves when we’re tempted to put one part of Scripture into practice because it’s convenient, while ignoring another that’s inconvenient or even difficult for us. Again Jesus responded with Scripture, **“It is also written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”** Satan had appeared as an angel of light, but Jesus unmasked him as a demon of darkness.

Then Satan took Jesus to the peak of a high mountain to show him all the wealth and grandeur of the kingdoms of the world. This time Satan didn’t beat around the bush, but gave Jesus an offer that tempts every one of us. **“All this I will give you...if you bow down and worship me.”** So often we’re tempted with that promise of “the world” if we only give in to that teeny, tiny temptation. In reality, “the world” is not Satan’s to give, so we end up giving in for the tinsel and junk of this world. In response, Jesus pulled no punches, but laid out a knock-out blow. **“Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”** With this command, Jesus defeated his foe for a time, but the struggle would continue until the final showdown on Calvary.

As we read this account, it’s easy to think, “Well, Jesus was the holy and almighty Son of God. Fending off Satan must’ve been easy, because he did it so perfectly.” We might fail to realize how much of a struggle it was. Remember Jesus was all alone for forty days out in the barren wilderness. Mark tells us, **“He was with the wild animals...”**, but what help were they? Jesus willingly endured a “full fast”—no food, just water for 40 days and 40 nights. His hunger pangs wracked his body the longer he fasted. We’re also told that when it was all over, **“angels attended him”**. There is only one other time in Scripture that we’re told the angels did this—after Jesus prayed in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. They didn’t come to lessen his struggle, but to help him endure and continue that struggle which eventually took him to the cross.

You see, these three temptations recorded for us weren’t the only times Satan sought to bring Jesus down. Satan turned the religious leaders against Jesus to trip him on the way. Satan tried to use Jesus’ own disciples to lead him to abandon the struggle. Satan relentlessly attacked the Son of God with the struggle growing fiercer and more

painful the closer Jesus got to the cross. Even the crucified robbers on either side of him were used to stop the Savior, but yet the struggle ended on the cross when Jesus with his final breath responded with confidence, **“It is finished”**. With the struggle complete, the blessed results of forgiveness and life and salvation flowed forth from the crucified Christ to us.

Really all along that way of struggle, there were blessed results. Jesus had good news to declare even right after he was first tempted in the wilderness. We're told, **“Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said, ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”** What was that **“good news”**? It was the good news that Christ had come to face sin and Satan and the sinful world. He had come to take on that struggle and he would be victorious, not just for himself, not just for us, but for the world. So now he calls us to the struggle.

To understand that struggle, we need to understand the struggle it takes to receive the good news. At the heart of Jesus' message was the call to **“Repent and believe the good news!”** Sounds easy, doesn't it? You might think, “Well, I repent nearly every Sunday when I take part in the confession of sins and receive forgiveness.” Yet do we really realize what repentance means? Do we realize what we're really saying when we confess, **“Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful, and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good. For this I deserve your punishment both now and in eternity. But I am truly sorry for my sins, and trusting in my Savior Jesus Christ, I pray: Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**? Do we realize how totally offensive such a confession is to our sinful natures or have we let it become mindless repetition?

During this Lenten season, Christ calls us to repent, but passing through that gate of repentance to the good news of Christ involves a difficult struggle. Our sinful natures want nothing more than to be in control, to do our own saving, to ignore how serious it is when we fall victim to temptation. Our sinful natures want us to be content with knowing what Jesus did for us, while ignoring what that means for our lives. Our sinful natures don't want to admit we can't save ourselves, can't be in control and can't get to heaven with mere head knowledge of Christ and making occasional appearances in Sunday worship. To leave the sinful nature in control only takes us down the highway to hell. Our sinful natures don't want us to admit how wretched and guilty we are before God and how desperately we need a Savior.

Yet the Lord has good news for us on the other side of that struggle of repentance. There are blessed results for us who follow him through faith in him. Forgiveness is ours only through that merciful Lord and Savior who endured the struggle that took him to the cross. Every one of our sins is fully and freely forgiven because Christ endured the struggles of temptation and suffering and death as our Substitute. He became our sin so we would become righteous in God's sight. When we gather for worship around the Word and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, we again and again humbly fall before our holy God in repentance and Christ declares the good news of our forgiveness. Through those gifts of grace, he strengthens us to then go out and live that good news still struggling all the way.

You see, out there and in here, there are enemies that want us dead. I'm not talking about terrorists or criminals, but the devil, the wicked world, and the sinful nature, who want nothing else than for us to abandon the struggle and blindly follow them to hell. For that reason, we don't want to go back out into that struggle alone or powerless, so where do we find help?

Remember what Jesus accomplished for us! He defeated Satan's every attack with the Word of God. He gives us the same sword of the Spirit. Plus Jesus goes out there with us to provide strength and support. He sends his holy angels as our companions. Jesus' struggle for our souls ended on the cross in victory and we reap all the benefits. So we can be confident that the struggles we face for him on the way to heaven will also come to a blessed end!

In a little while, it'll be time go back out into the fray. Let's heed Christ's call and willingly follow him into the struggle. He who was abandoned for us will not abandon us, so we face that struggle with confidence in our Lord Jesus Christ! **“Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us, we tremble not, we fear no ill; They shall not overpower us. This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will, he can harm us none. He's judged; the deed is done! One little word can fell him.”** Amen.