

This earthly life is a dangerous life. The devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for people to devour. If there is anything that can be used to strip faith in Jesus out of your heart, the devil will use it. That foe, with hidden snares, may seize me unawares if ever I fail to watch a pray. I walk in danger all the way. We need to recognize this danger. We need to recognize our need for God's grace in Jesus Christ. And it is most crucial to recognize that when we are being tempted, this is the precise time when God desires to help us and give us a way to escape. God calls it the favorable time and the day of salvation. And Paul tells us that this time is now. Now, as the good news of Jesus Christ is being proclaimed, as faithful Christians are still confessing the truth, while there is still time for sinners to repent and trust in the mercy of God – now is the favorable time. Now is the day of salvation. Don't ignore it. Don't treat it as a little thing that the atoning death of Christ is being proclaimed from this pulpit and sung from these pews. Don't take lightly that the body and blood of Jesus are being distributed from this altar and that sinners are baptized into Christ from this font. Life is dangerous. And God's Word is the only thing that can save you from the devil's grip.

St. Paul says that he and his fellow ministers of the gospel are not giving people a reason to turn away. They are not laying any stumbling blocks before the people. They are doing their duty with patience, proclaiming the truth of God's Word in the face of hostility and all kinds of suffering. Paul is being faithful. And he's suffering for being faithful. People are rejecting him. Those who call themselves believers in Jesus have turned away from him, and some even lie about him. In his previous letter to the Corinthians, Paul had to be very harsh with them. They had a man who was committing adultery with his step mother, and Paul rebuked them for putting up with this. He told them not to have anything to do with those who call themselves Christians but practice fornication, love their money, get drunk, and tell lies about people (1 Cor 5:11). He told them to stop suing each other, and he warned them that such people, along with thieves, perverts, and others who live in their sin will not inherit the kingdom of heaven (1 Cor 6). Such people, Paul said, take the Lord's Supper to their own condemnation, because they don't examine themselves and repent. Paul doesn't mince any words with them. He writes forcefully and directly against their sin.

And what do people do when they hear such blunt warnings? They do one of two things. Either they repent and take refuge in the gospel Paul was preaching. Or they get offended and stop listening to Paul. They turn instead to those who will affirm them and tell them that they are just fine. They question whether Paul has the authority to say what he says. They criticize him for being harsh in his letters and gentle in person. They put him down. They distract people from what he's actually saying by focusing on his weaknesses.

Paul was writing again to the faithful who repented of their sins. Unlike those who got offended and left, these faithful Christians listened to Paul's warning. But they are surrounded by people who are putting Paul down and trying to discredit his ministry among them. This is a dangerous spot to be in. They can easily be tempted to lose faith in what Paul is teaching them. The devil is using disgruntled people to intimidate the faithful Christians. Paul calls his opponents super apostles, because they look at themselves very highly, stealing the sheep of Jesus over to their own cause. Christ's precious lambs are in danger.

This happens even today. A pastor rebukes someone for living in unrepentant sin. That person gets upset. He claims the pastor is unloving or out of line. Perhaps he gets other people on his side. The congregation may. Or it just gets a lot smaller. And those who have been offended by God's Word look

down on the little flock. That's the strict church with an uptight preacher. The ministry in that place is failing. The church is dying. Because the people there are out of touch. It's a dangerous situation to be in. The temptation to listen to these attacks is very heavy. After all, there are pastors who are too uptight, too legalistic, harsh, impatient, pushing their own opinions as if they are God's Word. The devil is gas-lighting them, trying to make them feel like fools or crazy for staying in that church.

This is why Paul says what he says. He pleads with his faithful parishioners in Corinth: Don't let God's grace be wasted on you! He reminds them that now – right now when the devil is so active and temptations are so heavy – now is the time of God's favor. Now is the day of salvation. Now the gospel is being proclaimed among you. So even though they see that Paul's ministry looks weak, they should not determine the truth by what their eyes can see. Listen to what Paul is preaching! It lines up with what the Scriptures say. Paul isn't pandering to them or trying to smooth talk them. He's being honest with them about the wickedness of sin and the terror of God's wrath. And at the heart of everything Paul is preaching to them is what he explained right before this. It is that God has reconciled the sinful world to himself in his Son Jesus Christ. God was in Christ, restoring poor sinners to God, not counting their sins against them. This is the pure gospel. It is the only thing that will save them while they are being tempted by the devil.

This is why Paul talks about all the hardships he is going through. He isn't trying to get them to feel sorry for him. No, he talks about enduring suffering with patience, being in great need, being beaten and put in prison, facing riotous mobs, being overworked, and going without sleep or food, because he wants to show them how he finds his strength in the midst of his trials. How does he remain pure in the midst of all this temptation and affliction? It is by the knowledge of the gospel, by the patience of his gentle and kind Savior. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit who has poured God's love into his heart. By telling the truth about this gospel, which is God's saving power to all who believe, Paul stands against the threats, attacks, and slanderous words of Satan. He knows that no matter how much people point out his weaknesses, God does not count his sins against him. Christ has become sin for Paul so that Paul may stand clothed in the very righteousness of God. So he uses this righteousness of his Savior to fight every attack the devil throws at him, whether these attacks are coming from the left or from the right.

When you know why you confess the truth, then you don't need to be ashamed of confessing it. Why do you take God's warnings seriously against lying, theft, sexual sins, greed, and false doctrine? Because you know that all of these things attack the heart of the gospel. Jesus came to save sinners. Those who don't think they need to repent have no time for this salvation. But you know you need it. That's why you listen to the words of God, whether they show you your sin or they comfort you with God's favor in Jesus.

When you speak the truth in love, relying on the righteousness of Jesus who took your sin away and defeated the power of the devil, then you don't need to worry about how people react. Whether you are honored or dishonored, blamed or praised, you can stand on the Word of God. And let the devil's attacks come as they may. He can call you dishonest and deceitful, yet, as Paul says, you remain honest, because you do not hide your sins from God, and you find refuge in the pure life, death, and resurrection of your Savior. The devil can get people to write you off as an insignificant sect or cult, out of the mainstream, only a small little speck that nobody should pay attention to, and unknown to anyone important. Yet, you remain well known by your Good Shepherd as you hear his voice in the preaching of his gospel. When you are facing death, the devil will tempt you to give up and lose hope.

But as you rely on the promise given to you in your baptism in Christ, you go on living in him. In the meantime, you can receive correction and discipline from God, knowing that he will not forsake you. When you are overwhelmed with grief over these temptations, your joy remains in Christ.

In this earthly life, surrounded by so much danger from the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature, we remain beggars. Our hands remain empty, waiting for God to show us mercy. And yet, we have a treasure worth more than anything, free salvation in Christ lasting for eternity. We contribute nothing to our salvation, nothing against the power of the devil. Yet, by God's grace, trusting in his gospel, we have everything we need to get through the dangers of this life.

When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, he was bearing those temptations for us. He didn't satisfy his own appetite, using his powers for his own good. No, he deprived himself of comfort so that we would be comforted by his Holy Spirit and supported by his holy angels. He didn't test God's love for him. No, he remained faithful to what the Father sent him to fulfill. And he didn't run after the approval of the world. No, he loved the world, spoke the truth to the world, was rejected and crucified by the world, and took away the sin of the world.

God calls us to speak his law. The law hurts. It reveals sin. It kills our pride. When we hear it, it humbles us. And when we speak it, it gets others upset with us. The devil takes advantage of this. He asks, "Who are you to judge? Who are you to speak God's law?" We can't defeat Satan by the law. But Jesus did. When the devil tempted him, Jesus spoke the law. He fulfilled the law perfectly with pure innocence. And in exchange, Jesus gives us his precious gospel. This gospel is the deathblow to the devil's threats and temptations. It is the power of Christ's death and resurrection, the power of God's favor toward poor sinners, and the power of his salvation for those who believe.

So resist the devil by faith in this! You are walking in danger, but you aren't walking without Christ. When you resist the urge to numb your pain with booze, to open up that dirty webpage, to stew in anger against your brother, or to skip out on church, then you are resisting the devil's temptations. And it hurts. But don't be overwhelmed! Pray the prayer your Lord taught you. Read one of the Gospel accounts. Or listen to it. Listen to what Christ has done for you. Rely on his work, on his fasting, on his obedience, on his suffering. Because he did it all for you. When temptation's hour comes upon you, then look and pay attention. Now is the favorable time. Now is the day of salvation. Now is when God desires to help you, to hear you, and to comfort you, just as he has promised. Let us pray:

Jesus, grant that balm and healing
In Thy holy wounds I find,
Ev'ry hour that I am feeling
Pains of body and of mind.
Should some evil tho't within
Tempt my treach'rous heart to sin,
Show the peril, and from sinning
Keep me from its first beginning.

Should some lust or sharp temptation
Prove too strong for flesh and blood,
Let me think upon Thy Passion,
And the breach is soon made good.
Or should Satan press me hard,
Let me then be on my guard,
Saying, "Christ for me was wounded,"
That the Tempter flee confounded. Amen.