



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Tenth Sunday After Trinity, July 27th, 2008

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son  
And of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

Today's lessons and prayers address the consequences of sin. Sin not only destroys us in a spiritual sense. But as the Bible readings point out, if society as a whole goes astray the consequences of its collective sins can lead to total destruction.

This happened no less than three times in the history of the children of Israel. First, Samaria, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed and its people carried away captive by the Assyrians. Then, Judah, the southern kingdom, was destroyed and its people carried away captive by the Babylonians. Finally, the post-exilic Jewish state was overthrown by the Romans; Jerusalem utterly destroyed and its people slaughtered.

This is why we need to study Satan's strategy for luring us into sin. One thing worth noting is Satan invariably tries to lull us into mistaking his victims – people he has waylaid with materialistic and secular ambitions – for the real enemy.

The real enemy, of course, is Satan and the spiritual forces he commands. He also tries to exploit our sense of pride (our spiritual Achilles' heel) to distract us from God and focus our minds on our own selfish desires. He also tries to persuade us to fight with his weapons: hatred, lies and deceit. But if we stoop to this, he'll have beaten us. We will, unwittingly, be working for him instead of rallying his demoralized and defeated victims for Christ.

The strategies that God has given us to defend ourselves from Satan's attacks are

largely defensive in nature. This should tell us something about how vulnerable we are. Perhaps our most important defense of all is to conquer our pride. That means we need to cultivate humility, the primary Christian virtue. Humility ought not to be mistaken for insincere self-deprecation. Humility is the total subjugation of our own natural self-centeredness, which explains why it is so hard to achieve.

A fundamental precaution for keeping faith intact is to draw a line beyond which we will not compromise with an increasingly anti-Christian secular world. This doesn't mean that we should withdraw from the world completely – far from it. It is hard to be a witness for Christ if you withdraw from non-Christian society.

Drawing a line involves doing something that serves as a constant reminder about who one is. Daniel (of lions' den fame) became a vegetarian. A better option is to be rigorous about your prayer life. For example, try to say your prayers three times a day – morning, noon and evening – and always at the same time.

Also don't rely on your own memory or sense of reason to keep you abreast of what is sinful and what is not. Satan is an absolute master at exploiting our inclination to rationalize our way into the deepest trouble. The best way to find out if something is sinful or not is to consult the Bible.

And don't imagine even the Bible is entirely immune from Satan's attentions. Often, he tries to persuade us God doesn't mean what he is saying or to interpret what we read in a way God never intended. These days, one of his favorite ways of doing this is to persuade us that God's ideas are old fashioned or out of date.

God is eternal and everlasting. This means his ideas never get old fashioned or out of date. The only folks who get old fashioned and out of date are human beings – never more so than when we apply our own transient interpretations to God's word.

If we believe God is eternal, omnipotent, perfectly wise and perfectly good – all the things about himself that he has revealed to us in The Bible – we should surely

do him the credit of assuming that he doesn't make mistakes. Thus, we would be wise to assume when he tells us something he knows what he's talking about.

Certainly, there are things in the Bible that stick in our craws. Personally, I'm none too thrilled about the "Blessed are the Meek" stuff. I'd prefer it to read: "Blessed are the proud in heart." Nor am I particularly fond of being likened to sheep or a goat. I'd much rather be compared with a lion or a tiger or a grizzly bear – a creature with courage, fortitude and a modicum dignity.

Equally, I can understand women being quite put out by God's constant references to himself in the male form. We know that he is neither male nor female, so why all this "Lord and King" stuff? Why does he refer to himself as "Our Father"?

Some folks try to deal with these conundrums by ignoring them; by pretending they don't exist. This is what people are doing when they rewrite the Bible to do away with the things that puzzle or offend them. Some folks, for example, have de-sexed the Bible – blue penciled all the "Hes" and "Lords" and "Kings" and "Fathers" and substituted neutral similes or, in extreme instances, feminine ones. Others have cut out what they consider to be "unenlightened" condemnations of certain activities.

Pretending, however, doesn't make such irritating or offensive references go away. Folks who pretend the Bible doesn't say things it quite plainly says are merely throwing down the gauntlet to Christians who disagree with them. And there's nothing Satan likes better than for Christians to do his fighting for him.

A rather better way to deal with such problems, I would suggest, is to try to figure out what God is actually trying to tell us in the light of what he tells us about himself. Among the things he has told us about himself is that he is love – not that he admires love, and practices it as often as possible can, but that he actually IS love.

Thus it's highly unlikely he would approve of us doing anything unkind, cruel or

hurtful. Similarly, if he tells us to do something, or not to do it, it is unlikely that he is being capricious, but rather that doing (or not doing) such things will somehow or other harm us.

Not least, we need to remember that God didn't sacrifice his only begotten Son just to save us from our own personal failings. Jesus died to save everybody else from their sins, too. Nobody has a monopoly on besetting sins.

As God's is our Creator and ultimate judge, the safest course is to try to abide by all of his commandments – admittedly an impossible task. And it is not made any easier by the fact that the most important commandment of all – “thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind” – means “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” When it comes down to it, this is a commandment that really sticks in the craw. *AMEN.*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***