

“The Grammar of Grace”

Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1).

Today is the First Sunday in Lent, and many of us marked the start of this penitential season on Wednesday by receiving ashes. This ancient tradition reminds us of our mortality, and also of the sin we bring with us into our Lenten journey. Ashes provide a visible sign of our humble standing before a holy God, and these ashes also ground us in the reality of our rejection and rebellion, and of the Old Adam who does not want God to be God. And that’s why Lent can be such a gift. You see, the goal of Lent is to let the Law speak so that we will stop acting like people who can rescue themselves. And this is critical, because, at its core, Lent not only reveals what the Law says about *us*, it also tells us what the Gospel says about *Christ*. And that brings us to the grammar of grace.

As some of you know, I used to teach high school English at Concordia, but I never liked grammar. I loved poems and stories, and I enjoyed helping kids discover their voice through writing, and I saw grammar as a necessary evil. Yet, even for an English teacher who didn’t like grammar, there are certain rules you need to know for language to make sense. And one of the most fundamental rules of grammar is understanding the part of speech known as the subject. The subject of a sentence tells us who or what the actor is. It establishes the one who makes things happen. You can’t have a sentence without a subject, and this basic grammar lesson matters for us today, because the subject of Lent makes all the difference.

Have you ever given something up for Lent? Maybe you’ve abstained from coffee or from chocolate. Maybe your Lenten fast included scrolling or swearing. It doesn’t really matter what you may have chosen to lay down for Lent, but I want you to notice how we talk about Lent. Our sentences often sound like this: “I’ve given up drinking Lent,” or “I will try harder,” or “I just need to be more disciplined.” Before you know it, the whole season can become one long self-improvement project – a 40-day attempt to become the person you think God actually wants. And when the subject of Lent becomes “I” or “me” or “my,” the Law has quietly taken over.

The Gospel features a different grammar. It employs the grammar of grace, and in the grammar of grace, the subject of the sentence is always God. In the grammar of grace, He is always the subject, He is always the actor, and it sounds something like this, “Christ Jesus died for our sins. Christ Jesus was raised for our justification. Christ Jesus is coming again.” This is the syntax of salvation, and it is the only way assurance is possible. You see, if the story of salvation begins with “I,” you will always wonder if you’ve done enough, or meant it enough, or felt it enough, or repented enough, or improved enough. But when the sentence begins with “Christ,” you can breathe, because grace is not an achievement. Grace is a gift. Christ is the one doing the decisive work. It always starts with Him, and today, that’s exactly what we see in our Gospel reading.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was baptized, and then immediately, “Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” This opening line matters more than we might think. Jesus didn’t take a wrong turn and stumble into the desert. He wasn’t ambushed. This was

no accident. No, *God led God* into the wilderness. The Spirit leads the Son. The Father wills it. And the Son goes. This is not just a story about temptation. This is a story about obedience. About active obedience—Christ doing, actively for us, what we have failed to do. And here, the grammar of grace is unmistakable.

We often think Lent is about *our* wilderness: our trials, our hunger, our suffering, our struggles. But before it's about our wilderness, Lent is first about His. Because there, in the wilderness, He did for you what you could not do for yourself. The Bible has a memory, and just as God's children were in the wilderness for 40 years, God's true Son also comes out of Egypt, and He passes through the waters of baptism, and goes into the wilderness for 40 days. This is not random. This is fulfillment.

Jesus is stepping into Israel's story and rewriting it. He is entering the place of failure and becoming faithful. He is going where God's people fell—so that He can stand. And it's then and there that the devil attacks. That's always how it goes. The devil attacks sonship. He attacks identity. He attacks trust. But Jesus answers in a way that Adam didn't. In a way that Israel didn't. In a way that we don't either. Jesus doesn't merely *resist* temptation as an example. Jesus resists temptation as a substitute. And this is critical to recognize because the first great temptation was not in a desert. It was in a garden. It was in a world without death, a world without shame, and a world where God walked with man. And there, in paradise, Adam fell.

So now, in the wilderness—in this dry, hungry, thorny place—Jesus stands, and in the wilderness, we hear God's commands: "You shall..." and "You shall not..." Yet, underneath those commands, there is a promise, and because Jesus kept God's Word where you have not, His obedience counts for you. And because He resisted the tempter, His victory is credited to you. And because He went into the wilderness led by the Spirit, you are not abandoned in yours. And this is so important to hear, because some of you are in a wilderness right now, and you are feeling hungry, tired, tempted, alone, and afraid. And, today, you are joined by a Savior who has been tempted in every way, yet without sin. A Savior who knows the taste of weakness and the sound of the devil's voice and the ache of hunger. And yet, He didn't just *feel* what you feel. He fought where you've fallen, and He won.

This victory changes everything, and it starts with our grammar. Now we can speak correctly, saying not "I will..." but "He has..." He has entered the fight. He has obeyed. He has resisted. He has stood firm. He has done for you what you could not, and now—because of this life-saving syntax—Lent becomes something different. Not a ladder you climb to God, but a season where God comes down into our dust, so that He can raise us by His grace.

We may fast, and we may forgive; we may pray, and we may give, but we do these things as people who are already being carried by Christ. We do them as a response, not as a rescue plan, because when the subject changes, we're in trouble. But when Christ is the subject, we are safe, we are sure, and we are saved. So, hear the grammar of grace again, and let it settle your heart: Christ Jesus died. Christ Jesus was raised. Christ Jesus is coming back. And in between—right here and right now—Christ Jesus stands for you in the wilderness and in the fight, with the voice of God, He proclaims, "Be gone, Satan. It is written..." and it is finished for you. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

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