

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
You cheated!

¹²The Spirit immediately sent Jesus out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels were serving him. ¹⁴After John was put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God. ¹⁵"The time is fulfilled," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near! Repent, and believe in the gospel."

–Mark 1:12-15

Who misses taking tests in school? No one! Taking tests is the worst. You have to cram and study a lot. You have a ton of nerves that build up before the test. Then, you have to rush through the test as fast as you can. Test-taking is a nerve-racking ordeal. Test-taking is not fun. No wonder many do not miss it.

Did you ever fail a test? Maybe for one reason or another, you came into a test knowing that you had no shot. Then, when you turned it in, you knew you were toast. Maybe you took the test and you were so oblivious that you didn't know that you failed until you received the test back. That can be a crushing blow, right?

If you never failed a test in your life, I am envious of you. I did well in school, but I had a few failed tests throughout my over twenty years of schooling.

One fun aspect that I have experienced in reviewing tests was that sometimes teachers and professors would not notice that an answer was wrong and fail to take those points off. When this happened, I would take the test to the teacher. Show them the mistake. Often, they would then allow the mistake to stand. So, I would gain an extra point that I did not deserve.

God has given us a "test" of sorts. You can see the "questions" through the Ten Commandments and other aspects of God's law. Question 1, did you always love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind? Ehh... wrong. Question 2, did you ever misuse God's name either with your words or your failure to represent him properly? Ehh... wrong. Question 3, did you ever fail to respect God's Word and Sacraments, the means through which he gives people rest? Ehh... wrong. Question 4, have you ever failed to love your neighbor as you loved yourself? Ehh... wrong. God's "test" is tough. We see failure when we examine ourselves.

In many schools below 60 percent is a failed test. For God's "test," a failure is below 100 percent. Also, God does not curve his grades. This "test" is based purely on merit.

This approach to God's "test" should be a reason to fret. A failed test does not just lead to an inability to get into the school of your choice. A failed test doesn't just mean that you are ineligible to play basketball. A failed test means condemnation.

In today's gospel, we hear Jesus' message to repent and believe. As Jesus calls people to repent and believe, he calls them to turn from sin and look to him. There, they see a wonderful message from God. This is a message of forgiveness and peace. This is a message of a perfect score given to them. Today, we see that Jesus took the test for you. Jesus scored perfectly. Then, Jesus' perfect score was given to you. In a strange but beautiful way regarding God's "test," I can say **"You cheated!"**

In my preparation for this sermon, I ran into the study of the question of which Gospel was written first, second, and third among the synoptic Gospels. These are Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are called synoptic Gospels as they follow the same synopsis or outline. On commentator that I read followed the thought tradition of the church father, Clement of Alexandria, who was born in 150 A.D. This is the thought that Matthew and Luke were written before Mark. Based on the content of today's gospel, this makes a lot of sense. The section that we look at today seems to presuppose previous knowledge of this account.

Today, we follow Jesus after his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River as he goes into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. All Mark shares with us about this account is that Jesus was tempted by Satan as he was in the wilderness for forty days. We also know that he was there with the animals. He was also attended to by the angels.

So, it would be proper for us to go to Luke for more information today. In the gospel according to St. Luke, we receive much more information about this occasion. When Jesus was in the wilderness, he was fasting. So, the devil began with a temptation to attack him in this potential area of "weakness." Satan told Jesus to turn stones into bread. This would be to demonstrate he is the Son of God and to feed himself. Jesus defeated this first temptation by proclaiming to the devil the word of God. Next, the devil took Jesus to a high place and showed him all the kingdoms of the world. Satan offered to give them to Jesus if he would bow down to the devil. This was a foolish offer because Jesus already had power over all the kingdoms. Again, Jesus defeated Satan's temptation by wielding the sword of the Spirit, God's

Word. The third temptation of the devil was for Jesus to test God by jumping off of the highest point of the temple to see if the angels really would protect him. Once again, Jesus defeated the devil's temptation by going to God's Word.

As Mark shares this occurrence, he does not give many details. He presupposes the knowledge of these details that were shared by Luke and Matthew. As we consider the account from Mark today, we should ask what is the point behind the way that Mark shares it. Mark keeps it short and simple. Luke's account shows us how Jesus defeated the temptations of the devil. Mark simply shares with us that Jesus faced these temptations of the devil. Therefore, our question in studying this text does not need to be how Jesus overcame the temptations of the devil. Instead, we can simply consider that Jesus overcame the temptations of the devil.

Jesus came into the world to live under the law. As he lived under the law, he underwent God's "test." The standard for him was absolute perfection as well. Jesus needed to score 100% to be the perfect substitute for the world. Jesus passed that test with flying colors. He upheld every single law of our God.

Now, just because Jesus passed the "test" doesn't mean it wasn't real and difficult. Jesus is truly human in every way. The temptations that he faced were real. Jesus truly faced temptation. He needed to overcome these temptations. Hebrews talks about Jesus overcoming these real temptations, "*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.*" (Hebrews 4:15)

Jesus overcame every temptation of the devil. Now, this is important because Jesus wasn't just an example for others. Jesus didn't simply show the way to overcome temptation. Instead, Jesus lived perfectly in the place of others. Just as Jesus' forty in the wilderness connects to Israel's forty, Jesus came to be the substitute. Jesus' perfect score was credited to others. This is as it is written the Apostle Paul wrote, "*God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.*" (2 Corinthians 5:21) This is the Great exchange Jesus' perfect score was given to those who failed. Then Jesus took on the consequence of the failure of others.

While Jesus lived this perfect life... while Jesus was taking this "test" perfectly, he also proclaimed the message of this wonderful news. After Jesus left the wilderness, he went out proclaiming the thesis of his ministry, "*The kingdom of God has come near! Repent, and believe in the gospel.*" Jesus was calling people to see that they had failed the test of God's law. Then, look to the good news that he had come to take the test for them. This means forgiveness, life, and salvation. Although someone may look at the results and think, "**You cheated!**", this is the wonderful gospel of Christ Jesus. Jesus took the punishment for sinners. Jesus gave his perfection to people who didn't earn it.

If you have ever failed a test, think of the worst one that you have ever had. Maybe it was an exam that you just didn't understand. There was red writing all over the test. Imagine that on the top of that test, it said "100% A+." That would be shocking, right? Jesus did something far greater than that for you. Jesus lived as your substitute. Although you failed the test, he did it perfectly for you. His perfection is given to you. Maybe you failed... but **you cheated!**

During this Lent, we are going through a series called "Rethinking Religion." Many people look at God as some sort of divine quiz master. He places people in this world and wants to find out how they will fare. Then, he will reward them based on the merit of their scores. Although their perception of God as the divine quiz master might be different. Some may think that his passing mark is closer to 0% than it is 100%. Others might think he has a high standard, but they can reach it. Neither of these thoughts is what God truly has revealed about himself.

God's law isn't simply an arbitrary test to find out how good of a person you are. Sin isn't just getting a question wrong. The truth is that sin separated people from God. Sinners cannot come into God's presence. Sin brought hostility. So, God is just, right, and sovereign in his declaration that perfection is the absolute standard. The Lord says, "*You shall be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*" (Leviticus 19:2)

So, maybe Mom and Dad's donation can get you into USC. Maybe, family lineage can get you into Harvard. Maybe South Mountain Community College will accept pretty much anyone who applies. Yet the entry requirement for heaven is absolute perfection... greater than a 36 on the ACT... greater than a 1600 on the SAT... greater than a 4.0 GPA... greater than all the extracurricular and volunteer involvement.

Brothers and sisters, you cannot pass this one on your own. So, "Repent!" Drop the excuses. Drop the claims to greatness. Drop the thoughts that you can get better and better. With this knowledge, Jesus simply calls you to repent. Allow God's law to expose every one of your sins. Confess your sins to the Lord. Stop hiding the sins you don't want him to know about. Confess, repent, and rend your hearts.

Then, believe the gospel. God the Father sent his son to be your substitute. Jesus Christ lived perfectly in your place. He overcame every temptation for you. Then, he took your place on the cross. He suffered the anguish of death and hell. In Christ Jesus, you are justified. In Christ Jesus, God sees you as perfect. Your sins are forgiven. You are at peace with God.

So, when you face trials, temptations, and tests of many kinds, God uses these for your benefit. You can despair of yourself. You can't get through this on your own. You need God. You need Jesus. Jesus passed the test for you. "You cheated" but that is good news. Amen.