

*Sermon for the Third Wednesday in Lent, 2006  
Saint Paul-Lebanon Evangelical Lutheran Church / Felton, Pennsylvania  
[Isaiah 11:2] - Galatians 5:16-23 - [Philippians 4:8] – Matthew 4:1-11  
Chanceford & East Hopewell Township Co-operative Lutheran Lenten Series*

**J. J. !**

[Isaiah 11:2 (New International Version)]

2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—  
the Spirit of **wisdom** and of **understanding**,  
the Spirit of **counsel** and of **power**,  
the Spirit of **knowledge** and of the **fear of the LORD.**]

Galatians 5:16-23 (New International Version)

16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. 18 But if you are led by the

Spirit, you are not under law.

19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage,

selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the

like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness**, 23 **gentleness** and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

[Philippians 4:8 (New International Version)]

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is **true**, whatever is **noble**, whatever is **right**, whatever is **pure**, whatever is **lovely**, whatever is **admirable**— if anything is **excellent** or **praiseworthy**— think about such things.]

Matthew 4:1-11 (New International Version)

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

2 After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. 3 The tempter came to

him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

4Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'[a]"

5Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest

point of the temple. 6"If you are the Son of God," he said, "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.'[b]"

7Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'[c]"

8Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9"All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

10Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'[d]"

11Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.



Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come. ✞ Amen.

‘Practicing the Virtuous Life – the Holiness Tradition’  
is to be the theme for our thought and prayer, for our listening to God’s Word to us and for us this night in the middle of our Lenten fast and pilgrimage. *Virtue* is not a word that comes easily to our lips. We are familiar with it

mostly from caricature. It conjures up for many the vision of someone with no bad habits, in fact with very few habits of any kind. The playwright and satirist, Oscar Wilde, gave voice to our post-Puritan embarrassment over virtue when he said, "Hypocrisy is my only virtue." Yet, being without fault or faults is far from the original meaning of this word which has its origins in the ancient Greek concept of *ARETÉ* which means, literally, 'skill,' 'excellence' in some useful or praiseworthy endeavor. One of the main characters in a popular science fiction series, a hot-shot fighter pilot nicknamed 'Starbuck,' comes closer to the real meaning of 'virtue' in her lightning repartee to a senior officer who says to her, "You know what you're really good at Starbuck? *Screwing up!* That's what!" "Oh yeah?" she winds up for the pitch, "Everybody needs a skill!" Strike! The fictional fact is that Starbuck is outstanding at her job, fearlessly taking risks, so that, when she does make a mistake, it's 'a doozie.'

‘Everybody needs a skill.’ It usually takes some perspective on one’s life, the long view that comes with age, to see that skill and to appreciate it. The 16<sup>th</sup> Century Florentine goldsmith and sculptor, Benvenuto Cellini, thought that this ought not only to be known, but also written about. “No matter what sort he is,” Cellini writes in the beginning of his autobiography, “everyone who has to his credit what are or really seem great achievements, if he cares for truth and goodness, ought to write the story of his own life in his own hand; but no one should venture such a splendid undertaking before he is forty.”

Before one is forty, it seems to me that it may be possible to see what we have done, produced, or achieved with our lives, but, with the passage of another decade, it becomes more clear what sort of person we have become. We may have mastered the art of working in gold, or of cutting wood, or of the many skills that go into farming, or

we may have learned enough of one of the humane or natural sciences to begin to know what we do not know, *but have we mastered the art, the skill, the virtue of actually being and becoming that person God created us to be, that person redeemed by the suffering humanity and the divine power of Christ, in Whom 'virtue,' the fullness of being human, was realized?* What is the consequence if we do not know what that fullness might be? What is the consequence if we do not achieve the greatness of being created in the image of God?

'Virtue' is a non-Biblical word, though the concept behind it is not, as we hear from the words of Scripture in tonight's readings, especially in Saint Paul's wise counsel to the Church at Philippi. 'Virtue' poses a question to the Bible and the Bible's answer is *Holiness*. To treat the creation as God's creation, to treat the Church as God's house and community, to understand our human abilities and complex

human emotions as so many means of expressing our joy at being created for God, and being redeemed by Christ, to treat one another and ourselves as the living temples of God's presence, is to be *holy*, and to be holy is to grow into virtue and away from its opposite, apathy, vice, the desire for great things without any effort—the very temptation Satan offers Our Lord in tonight's Gospel.

The core of the Christian understanding of virtue, the Church's understanding of what a life worth living is, is to be found in those Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit that Isaiah foretold would be the marks of the Spirit of God's Anointed One, Messiah: *wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety* and the *fear of the LORD*, respect for God as God.

When these gifts of the Holy Spirit become our 'skill,' our virtue, they bear that fruit listed by Saint Paul in Galatians, nine in all: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,*

*goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* That is what the Christian looks like in profile, the more s/he grows in God the Holy Spirit. The life skills appropriate to each of these fruits of the Spirit take up more and more space in our lives, pushing out other habits until all those things Saint Paul lists actually become enjoyable. C. S. Lewis has the Big Demon, 'Screwtape,' write to the little subordinate demon, 'Wormwood,' in his fanciful book about Christian life, *The Screwtape Letters*: "You must be very careful to make sure that this does *not* happen, that he does not actually begin to enjoy being good. Make sure that your subject finds love, peace and all the rest of it a terrible bore and a worrisome bother."

When the Holy Spirit, Who is the very Spirit of Holiness, takes root in our lives, we *do* actually enjoy life in the spirit, not just doing good but *being* good. Historic Christian wisdom has laid down that the maturity and

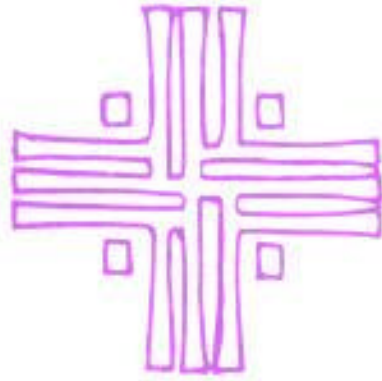
strength and integrity that flowers from this is a spectacular miracle, a miracle of a life that is not being wasted, of a life that is consecrated to God and full of purpose. The perfect Biblical number seven is, not coincidentally, the number of those basic virtues, 'skills' of holiness that we see in the Saints who have gone before us, in Christians around us and which we should expect to see in ourselves. They are *chastity* (courage and boldness in the moral life as it pertains to our sexuality), *generosity*, *moderation*, *zeal*, *meekness*, *charity and humility*. It stands to reason that these virtues are not developed to the same degree in all Christians everywhere, and it is also to be expected that that will be the case with each one of us.

Expect the Tempter to offer you a shortcut to happiness *without learning the skill of how to live, life without virtue, without holiness*. Remember that, if sin were not our starting point, we would not have needed a

Redeemer and a Mediator to present us to the Father as spotless and forgiven for *His* sake, because of *His* righteousness, and we also would not need to grow into God's image because we would already reflect that image. That has been true of only one, or perhaps two people since our first parents *screwed up*, so to speak, and when the Tempter accuses you of that, just give it right back to him as Martin Luther would when he wrote, "Sin boldly, but believe more boldly still!" or, in the immortal words of Captain Kara Thrace, the inimitable 'Starbuck,' "Oh yeah? Well, everybody needs a skill!" ✍ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✍ Amen.



***S. D. G. !***