

1st Sunday of Lent - Mark 1: 12 – 15

A long line of men stood at one of Heaven's gates, waiting to be admitted. There was a sign over the gate which read, "For men who were dominated by their wives while on earth." The line extended as far as the eye could see. At another of Heaven's gates, only one man was standing. Over this gate there was a sign that read, "For men who were not dominated by their wives." St. Peter approached the lone man standing there and asked, "What are you doing here?" The man replied, "I don't really know. My wife told me to stand here."

One of my favorite religious sayings comes from St. Ignatius of Loyola. You have heard this before, but here it is again. Ignatius says, "We must work as if everything depends on us, but we must pray as if everything depends on God."

What this quotation is trying to straddle is the difficult issue of how God's action and our action connect. It is asking the question: how much of our life is in our hands and how much of our life is in God's hands?

What I love about this quotation is that does not give the most logical or common-sense answer to the question. The logical answer would say: part of my life I must keep in my hands and part of my life I must place in God's hands.

There are some things I should do for myself and other things which I must entrust to God. This common-sense approach divides our life into parts, and however you do the numbers (whether they are 50/50 or 90/10) part of our life is our responsibility and the other part is God's responsibility.

Contrary to this logical, common-sense way of approaching the question, St. Ignatius says that we must take **full** responsibility for our life. We must ask what must, I do to be a good parent, spouse or friend.

How must I learn to listen or compromise? What do I need to do to be effective in my work? What new systems or approaches do I need to put in place? What steps do I need to take to reconcile a broken relationship? What things can I do to assist someone in need?

We must always use our intellect, draw from our experiences and make our best decisions in order to determine how we should live and what we should do.

It is not acceptable to say “This is too much for me. I will just put this in God’s hands”. It is not appropriate for us to say, “I think I’ll just say a prayer and let things fall out as they may.”

No, St. Ignatius says we must work as if **everything** depends on us. But—and this is an important but—at the very same time, we must realize that **everything** depends on God.

We must realize that our ultimate success as a parent or a spouse or a friend is totally dependent on God’s will. We must understand that if our work is really going to be successful and bear fruit, it depends upon God’s guidance and strength.

We must realize that God alone is the one who can reconcile us in our broken relationships and allow our good deeds truly to help others.

Therefore, according to St. Ignatius, we cannot divide our life into parts: this much is my responsibility and this much is God’s responsibility.

Instead, we are 100% responsible for our life and the same time God is 100% responsible. We must always use **all** of our resources to determine the way we should live *and* at the same time realize that our life is totally in God’s hands.

This brings us to today’s gospel on this first Sunday of Lent. On the first Sunday of Lent every year we hear a version of Jesus’ temptation. Today the passage is from Mark.

This is the one version that never tells us the content of Jesus' temptation. It says simply, "Jesus was tempted by Satan." This lack of information allows us to generalize the temptation and realize that Jesus experienced the same temptations in life which we experience.

Certainly, one of the most fundamental temptations is the issue we have been discussing: how to find the right connection between our actions and God's actions.

In finding that connection, there is a temptation for us to reduce either our responsibility or God's responsibility. Which way we move depends on the people we are.

Some of us are tempted to reduce our own responsibility. Because it is too difficult to deal with a particular person or problem, I will let God take care of it. I will say a prayer and drop it into God's hands.

If that is the temptation for you, then Lent asks you to claim **full** responsibility for your life, to realize you are responsible. You must think, decide, and act.

Other people may be tempted to reduce God's responsibility, to say there is an area of life which I can accomplish on my own. There is no need to ask for God's help, because in this area I am self-sufficient.

If you are tempted to see a part of your life where prayer is unnecessary and where you can survive on your own wits and talents, Lent reminds you that God has 100% responsibility for your life. Any success occurs only because God is supporting you. God's rule over your life is complete.

So, take any part of your life, take any problem, any project, any dream. Ask yourself whether you have the connection right? Do you realize that you are completely responsible and at the same time God is completely responsible.

If you feel the temptation to reduce that responsibility on either side of the connection, then this season of Lent calls you to refocus, to adjust, to recover the basic Christian vision: We must work as if everything depends on us, but we must pray as if everything depends on God. Happy Lent! AMEN.