

**Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent | 2026**  
**By Fr. Hayden A. Butler**

Lent tends to reveal our attitudes toward testing. However, this often has little to do with testing as such. We all expect that anything we regard as real and important, especially those things to which we will entrust our well-being or safety in some way, will be rigorously tested. From brake pads to neurosurgeons—the more significant, intricate, and consequential the role is, the higher the standards we will require and the greater the proof that they have been met. At the same time, we often balk at the expectation that *we* should be tested, with protests that are inconsistent, though often revealing. The teacher who once critiqued our grammar was undeniably sadistic, but the coach who mandated a certain sprint time for varsity was admirably pursuing excellence. We expect our doctors and lawyers to be held to high professional standards, but we will often settle for far less when it comes to politicians and pastors. Tests, and our reactions to them, reveal what things we consider important enough to ensure their substance and quality.

If our tolerance for testing is indicative of how consequential we think something is, then very often, our reactions to testing in the Christian life reveal how little we expect our Christian commitments to mean. Yet this could not be more opposite to how the Lord treats testing in His own life. The Gospel Lesson makes clear that the testing of Christ was no accident, but a calculated campaign against the tempter. It follows immediately in the wake of Christ's Baptism, where the Father declared Him to be the beloved Son, anointing Him with the descending Spirit. It was that same Spirit who led Him into the trial of the wilderness. After the Biblical motif, the Lord's forty days of fasting were preparatory; enduring the miseries of hunger and loneliness, Christ practiced a trust in His Father's words to Him by a willful adoption of those conditions that had always inclined humanity to sin. The forty days prepared Him for His combat with the devil, whom the Lord overcame without once turning His face away from His Father or breaking their communion in the Spirit. His rejection of the devil's offers reveals His will to seek nothing outside of that communion, that there is nothing to Him but that communion. The Lord reveals His constant abiding in the Father's love through His faithfulness in the desolate place, temporarily removed from the felt consolations of that love. The moment it was over, however, the appearance of the angels to minister to Him reveals that He was never truly alone, that He freely embraced the tests of hunger and loneliness to shame the tempter and to prepare for the greater trials awaiting Him in Gethsemane and Calvary. He thus embarks on His ministry as the declared and approved Son of God.

In the Scriptures, testing and temptation are different experiences that often coincide. God uses tests to reveal the glory of what He has made, to confirm its calling and purpose. The devil, one of our spiritual enemies, capitalizes on our frailties and enticements to turn God's formative tests into temptations, opportunities for us to abdicate our calling and obscure the glory God means

for us. Sometimes, our susceptibility to temptation can feel so overwhelming that we come to believe God is the one tempting us to sin. But St. James makes clear in his Epistle that this is never the case: “Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.” It is rather the shrewd strategy of our spiritual enemies to strike us at precisely those times when we might be most encouraged by the joy and maturity of proven faithfulness. Strangely, it can also be right on the heels of a powerfully formative spiritual experience that we experience the most brutal temptations to regress. Just ask any kid who made bold commitments at Christian camp, only to return home to his old habits and find that maturity is about much more than intention, no matter how well-meant.

Yet even though the tempter tries to steal and kill and destroy the opportunities of testing, God’s power prevails as He robs the enemy of his victories by using them to cultivate humility and an even greater reliance on His love. Even our struggle through testing and temptation, even in our failure and shame, can be how our Lord frustrates our spiritual enemies and makes us glorious, if we let Him. The very temptations that come to harass us are co-opted as part of the test; our success in them reveals how the Spirit is forming us to be like Christ. And even our failure can be the opportunity for renewal if we mourn our sins and repent, turn our face back toward God, and carry a little shame with hope. Even our failures can lead to growth if we do not give up.

Testing is not just part of Christ’s story; it is also part of every Christian’s. As Jesus said to the Twelve: “But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me.” And as St. James writes in his epistle: “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” We begin our lives in Baptism. We are declared to be the beloved children of the Father. This is no small detail. Growth in Christian virtue is never a self-improvement project. It is always, at best, the offering of our small efforts into the grand work of God to bring about the good through all things. We cannot stand before the enemies of our souls under our own strength, but we can stand fast if we abide in the delight of our Father through the redemption of Christ in the fellowship of the Spirit, attended by the angels and prayed for by the saints. The regularity of our daily prayer is not merely a religious observance. It is a realistic response to our constant need for a renewed vision of what is real, to know again that wherever we are, and no matter how daunting the trial or savage the temptation, we never face it alone. And we would not believe how much is possible when we are willing to give up our illusions of separation and the sins they rationalize for us.

Still, testing frightens us because it reveals who we really are. It is very easy to imagine our boldness in a crisis, for example, but it is only through experience that we discover our courage or cowardice. We should expect that as we pass from immaturity to maturity, we will meet our

challenges imperfectly. Trials bring us to the end of ourselves. And as much as we think that reaching the end of ourselves is also the end of the world, it is only through getting to the end of ourselves that we become capable of receiving grace. The humbling knowledge of where we end is, at the same time, the hopeful knowledge of where Christ has come to build something new, to clear out the dead things and bestow new life. There, at the end of our unfounded delusions of grandeur, is the same Jesus to meet us in the test, to attend us through the test, to share His victory with us and make us glorious in battle with Him over the enemy.

Today, Christ reveals that the invisible world of spiritual enemies is very real. His faithfulness puts the spotlight on all the little justifications we entertain for our fear and failure. His victory reveals all that is possible when we do not depart from communion with God in the grace of our Baptism. The test may be uncomfortable, but Lent gives us the opportunity to freely take up the conditions of discomfort that bring us to the end of ourselves so that we can finally find what is beneath our growling stomachs, our preening vanity, and our thirst for control. It lets us experience the longing again for nothing else but God's love, which Christ has come among us to bring. So right now, whether you are passing the test or have already failed, rise up again and keep going. As St. James writes: "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."