

**A Sermon for the Second Sunday in Lent, March 1, 2026**  
*The Epistle, 1 Thess. 4:1-8 - The Gospel, St. Matthew 15:21-28*  
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Then Jesus answered and said to her, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire." And her daughter was healed from that very hour (from the gospel, Matt. 15:28).

**The unrealistic moral teaching of the NT**

On the Second Sunday in Lent many years ago, I gave a sermon on the epistle that set forth the New Testament teaching about sexual morality. I got an email later in the day from a person who attended occasionally asking to meet and talk about it. The questions this person asked were, "Did I really mean what I said?" And, "Did I really expect people to live by that standard?"

While the Bible's teaching about sexual morality produces a strong reaction in some, the same root issue is present in all challenging Bible teachings. For example, Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and do good to those who treat us spitefully and persecute us (Matt 5:44). How are we doing with that one? Jesus teaches us to forgive our brother or sister in Christ for an unlimited number of offenses (Matt 18:21-22, 25). And he made this a condition of our own forgiveness. Is that easy for you?

Last Monday at Morning Prayer we read 1 Corinthians 3, where St. Paul addressed the Corinthians "carnal behavior." But he wasn't talking about sex. He wrote, "You are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?" (1 Cor. 3:3). As we examine our lives in Lent, will we discover any envy or jealousy? Any strife or arguing? Any divisions or separations?

**Conviction as the foundation for the true gospel**

The truth is that we struggle with all the above—and that is precisely the point. The full articulation of God's will and word reveals that we fall short of perfect obedience (See Rom. 3:23). This experience that we call "conviction" is the foundation for repentance and change.

The Holy Spirit does not convict us of sin just to make us feel guilty. Feelings of perpetual guilt and shame come from the evil one. The Holy Spirit reveals our disorder so that we will turn to Christ with faith and be forgiven, healed, and changed. God knows that in our natural state, what the New Testament refers to as being "in the flesh," we do not and cannot live by the lofty moral ideals of the New Testament. As St. Paul writes in Romans 7:18, "I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out." God gives us the power to do "in the Spirit" what we cannot do by our own power. As Romans 8:4 says, "That the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

The liturgy leads us through this process of change. We begin by asking God to cleanse our hearts. The law sets forth the ideal of love and convicts us of our failure to live up to it. We ask for mercy. The liturgy then leads through God's word and the confession of our sins into the grace of forgiveness in Christ and the power to live in a new way.

However, real change does not come quickly or easily. It is a progressive process. We must be willing to be convicted by the Holy Spirit again, receive forgiveness again, and practice new

behavior again. Perseverance is essential to real change. The main demonic temptation is to get us to feel despair and give up. Some people give up at the beginning because they are overwhelmed by the challenge and do not believe in the power of God. Like the seed by the wayside in the parable, their faith is gobbled up before it can take any root (Matt. 13:4, 19).

The alternative to the gospel of change through conviction, forgiveness, and perseverance is what Dallas Willard referred to as “the gospel of sin management.” In this fake gospel, we accept the lie that we can never do what Jesus wants us to do. Then we manage our guilt by occasional and measured confessions, by pharisaical justifications of our compromises, and by a religion that maintains an appearance of being “good.”

### **What do we want?**

Progress in the true faith is a matter of the will. What do we really want? We can understand our desire on two levels. There is our surface desire: What our physical appetites tell us we want—and what the world, the flesh, and the devil tempt us to pursue as the goals of life. However, there is a deeper desire in our hearts that is not satisfied by the appeasement of our appetites. This is why slavery to surface desires leads people to despair. We get stuck doing things that feel good in the moment, but never provide enduring satisfaction or peace. Instead, they produce guilt, shame, and fear.

Real progress in holiness and virtue begins when we realize that what we want on the surface does not satisfy our deepest desire. This epiphany is the foundation for the discipline of fasting. We say no to surface desires to make room for God, whose growing presence in our hearts is the true source of fulfillment, joy, and peace.

Spiritual growth involves a progressive surrender to God that is illustrated by the woman of Canaan in the gospel. The woman asked Jesus for mercy. But Jesus did not respond to her, and his disciples told Jesus to get rid of her because she was annoying. Then she asked for help again. Jesus told her that she wasn’t qualified for help. She acknowledged as much, but asked again for mercy in the form of undeserved crumbs from the table.

These events took place over a few minutes, but they illustrate our prayer over longer seasons. We ask for something and get no apparent response, maybe for a year or more. Then people discourage us. Then God himself seems to discourage us. But then, after we’ve wrestled with an issue in prayer for years, the answer comes. Perseverance in seeking God leads us to the complete surrender of faith, through which God answers us.

The woman of Canaan began yelling her prayer at Jesus from a distance. She ended up prostrate at Jesus' feet. As we persevere in prayer, we are led to a position of full prostration, to a full surrender of our will to God. At the point when it seems like all is lost by our surrender, we discover that this is the very point at which God can give us what we really want.

We have a problem with the difficult teachings of the Bible because we try to fit God’s word into our conceptions of happiness. But God leads us into his peace and joy in the exact opposite way. He changes our disordered lives by conforming them to his word. We often resist his word for extended seasons of time, but God is patient. His word does not change, but it will change us—if we believe and persevere.

Lent is a short course in perseverance. We surrender our wills to God in a new way in order to receive a new answer from God in the joy of the Easter feast. As Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-11: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." If we persevere in faith and in our progressive surrender to God's word, we will hear glorious words from Jesus on Easter and in the resurrection on the Last Day: "Great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire."