

If you have to pick a theme for this pre-Lent season that we entered today, the one with the green paraments and the weird Latin “-gesima” names, it would be grace. For three weeks before we enter into Lent, we focus on grace – the undeserved good that God shows to us.

In addition to grace being undeserved, it is also often not readily apparent to us, showing up in surprising ways. Consider our Old Testament reading. Grace shows up there, and in somewhere we wouldn’t expect, namely, in testing. We might not realize it, but testing is itself given to us by God’s grace.

Maybe that seems a little odd, that testing is a gracious thing from God. And maybe part of that confusion is that, in the Bible, testing is often a bad, sinful thing. Consider our text. As Moses is recapping this event, writing down the book of Exodus, he tells us that the place was given the name Massah and Meribah, which means “testing and quarreling.” There, the people “tested the Lord by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” From the context, this was obviously a bad thing the people did, testing the Lord.

But if we rewind just a little bit, two chapters earlier, we find another instance of the Israelites needing water, and there the Holy Scriptures tell us that the Lord tested the people. Not the people testing the Lord; the Lord testing the people. Or in the next chapter, 16, where we first hear of the manna from heaven, God gives them a command about only collecting enough for one day, except for a double portion before the Sabbath. Why? God Himself says, “that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.”

So twice before our reading today, God tests the people. And that’s obviously a good thing, because God only does what is good and right. But, when the people do it to God, it’s bad. Why is that? Is this some sort of double-standard? Is God playing the “rules for thee but not for me” card?

To answer that, we need to know what it means to “test” something or someone. A simple definition might just be that a test is something done to determine the truth or identity of something, especially something that might not be readily apparent.

A teacher gives a student a test to evaluate what the student knows. He can’t just look in the student’s ears and see the knowledge floating around in there. And you can’t always take the student’s word for it. “Oh sure, I know that.” That’s what the test is for.

Or consider things like the quality of a product or the purity of a precious metal. You can’t tell the octane rating of gasoline watching it come out of the nozzle, or the percentage of gold in jewelry by how it looks in the display case. You have to put such things to the test, so you can know what’s really there.

This understanding of what a test is helps us understand why it’s a bad thing to test the Lord. Throughout history, the Lord is telling His people exactly who He is. The Scriptures are absolutely full of God revealing Himself to man. Consider as one example these words which pop up repeatedly:

“The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” God tells us who He is.

Testing Him, then, means doubting those words. It’s telling God that His word isn’t good enough, that He needs to prove Himself, meet some standard that we decide, in order for us to trust in Him. God had promised that He would bring the people out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. He’d made that promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He’d made that promise to the people while they were in slavery in Egypt. And now, in our Old Testament reading, they are literally on the way. But the moment things seem to go bad, what do the people do? They grumble and complain. They put God to the test, asking “Is the Lord among us or not?” “He’s said He with us, but is He really? If He were here, why is there no water?”

In fact, they accuse God of abandoning them, having Moses bring them up out of Egypt “to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst.” God has promised to bless them, but they demand proof to their satisfaction, and if they don’t get it, they’ll accuse God of wickedly desiring to murder them all. That is blasphemy of the highest order.

This isn’t anything unique to that generation Israelites, of course. The people will be putting God to the test over and over again. They’ll worship idols and then say God is unfaithful when He delivers them over into the hands of other nations – like He said He would. Or much later, the Pharisees will hear Jesus teach perfectly – and do incredible miracles as well – but then refuse to believe in Him, demanding still more signs, putting Him to the test.

This is, of course, where we can and often do fall into this temptation as well. The Lord has revealed Himself to us in His Word, telling us all about His character, His nature, His will. He has given us all manner of promises, both warnings and prohibitions as well as assurances and blessings. He has told us, and Christians of every time and place, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the very end of the age.” But when things get hard or don’t go how we think they should, how often do we ask, or at least think in our hearts, the same question the Israelites asked: “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Such testing is sinful and harms our souls, because it attacks faith and wants to replace trust with “proof.” Testing says to God, “Your ways are questionable and possibly wrong; we need to go with mine instead.” Thus the Lord is actually protecting us from this harm when He gives the command, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” If Jesus tells the devil not to do it, then we shouldn’t do it, either.

But what about when God tests us? How is that a good thing? Because, again, God only does good things, so it must be good when He does it. Well, let’s go back to what it means to test something. Testing is done to find out what a thing truly is, what a person truly is like.

Now that might raise another question: Why would the God who knows everything need to test anyone? He knows the hearts and minds of all people. He knows us better than we know ourselves. To go back to the teacher/student analogy, God would never need to give a test – He already knows what we know. This means He can’t be testing us for His own benefit. So then, why does He do it?

God isn't testing us to reveal anything to Himself. He's testing us so that the truth can be revealed to us. There's a similarity here with the times that God asks questions of people. God doesn't ask Adam "Where are you?" because He doesn't know where in the Garden Adam is. He's asking to get Adam to reflect, to think about the answer and realize what he's done, to come out from the bushes next to the serpent and ask for forgiveness.

Likewise, when God puts us to the test, He's doing it so that the testing would bring the truth before our eyes. Because remember, a test is often revealing something that isn't visible right away, on the surface. The Israelites profess to be the chosen people of God. Yet when they are tested, they claim that God desires to destroy them.

Or if I ask you, "Do you trust in God?", you'd probably say "Of course!" That's the First Commandment, after all! We all learned in confirmation that "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." And when things are going well, it's easy to just say that without thinking about it. But when things get difficult, when we are put to the test, that's when we see what's in our hearts.

So let's say, for example, I lose my health insurance. I would be tempted to get really upset at God. "God, don't you know that if I don't have health insurance, I can't be sure that I can take care of my wife and kids. And they're young boys; we're almost guaranteed to have an ER visit at some point. And don't you know how expensive ER visits are, Lord? How could you do this to me?"

Yet as my sinful flesh is raging, God the Holy Spirit would be raising red flags and setting off alarms, calling on me to see all those places I'm doubting the Lord and pridefully insisting on my own way. Could I lose health insurance if the Lord didn't want me to? No. So if I were to lose it, would that be His plan? Yes. Is God aware of how young boys are prone to accidents, and how expensive medical care is? Yes. And is God able to preserve young boys from accidents, and to provide resources and help from the most unlikely of places? Yes!

This would all be God asking me, "Do you really believe who I am, and that I love you, and that I will keep my promises to you?" This would be the Lord exposing an idol in my heart, something that my sinful flesh was trusting in above Him. And that is a good thing. Hard to endure? Sure, but so is every good and worthwhile test.

The Scriptures use the example of precious metals, which are tested by heating them up to incredible temperatures, and yet, never so high that the metal itself is destroyed. Rather, the impurities are what burn away, and the metal is left shining brighter than it was before. When God tests us and exposes our idols, He does so so that we may repent of them. It may be hard for us – in fact, our sinful flesh hates having its idols stripped away – but every idol that is taken away brings us closer to our Lord and strengthens our faith in Him.

This is what makes such testing from the Lord a gracious thing. If the Lord were a wicked, uncaring god, He could just leave us in our self-deception. "You say you trust in me above all things? Fine, whatever." But then when attacks from the devil come, or even worse, when we face eternal judgment, our faith could very well be proven to be insufficient, our repentance, insincere and therefore meaningless.

God loves us and obviously doesn't desire that for us, and so He graciously sends us tests now, that we might find those hard places in our hearts and ask for Him to restore them. His tests point out weaknesses in our faith so that we can cry out alongside another who struggled with this, "I believe; help my unbelief!" He sends earthquakes and storms so that we might realize where we have built our lives on the shifting sands of the world and move instead to the solid rock which is Christ and His Word. He leads us to repentance so that we might rejoice in the richness of His mercy and forgiveness.

The Israelites may not have realized it at the time, but God was doing a gracious thing by testing them and leading them to that place where there wasn't any water. He was exposing their idols and leading them toward repentance and faith. When God tests us, He is graciously calling us to repentance and providing an opportunity for our faith to be strengthened and our hearts purified.

Remember the words of Proverbs: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reprobates him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights." The Lord delights in you, graciously giving even the life His own Son for you. And that is proof beyond any testing.

In the name of Jesus, amen.