Seen on Social Media this week: If God graded on a curve, Jesus would be really annoying.

In one way, I can see where that writer is coming from. Jesus was tested by the evil one and he made an A+. He withstood all the temptations that we face – materialism, sensation seeking and the desire for power – but Jesus didn’t sin. Just like Adam and Eve, we do sin.

Jesus’s experience in the wilderness with the evil one offers us a model for dealing with temptations – to trust in God as we know Him through prayer and Scripture. Jesus also provides us a way to ultimately conquer sin forever.

Jesus had come to the wilderness to fast and pray just after his baptism. Jesus, who was fully human just like you and me, must have been on a spiritual high after that glorious event. Scholars differ as to how fully they believe Jesus understood his ministry at the time of that baptism. Jesus, also fully divine, likely knew He was God’s Son and probably knew that He was there to save humanity and to usher in a new Kingdom in which God and God’s goodness would prevail. But Jesus gave up something in taking on human form and some scholars believe that included fully understanding how this mission was to be accomplished. If this is true, then Jesus was using his wilderness experience to pray about what came next – how was He to continue to obey God? What did it mean to be God’s beloved Son walking the earth to save humanity?

Into this moment, the tempter comes. Culture often depicts Satan as a cartoonish character carrying a pitchfork. In reality, Satan is the power of evil that opposes God and God’s Plan. It shows itself in different ways to us – it may be that little voice in our head, the voice of our friends, or that ad on TV or in the magazine that tells us we must have something we can’t afford. Evil often looks good to us; in fact, we have to look carefully to tell the difference between evil and good.

Take Jesus’s experience, for example. He’s the all-powerful God. Why not change stones into bread when he’s hungry? On the face of it, that seems OK. The problem is that the task requires Jesus to use his Spirit-given power to perform a miracle that God hasn’t sanctioned. The temptation, as it represents a metaphor for us, is toward using our God-given talents only for ourselves – toward materialistic gains rather than for the healing of society.

The second temptation is toward thrill seeking – almost to demand that God come to save us. It represents for us the temptation toward sensation seeking – doing what feels good or excites us. Again, the evil one makes this look attractive. Jesus could have rationalized that jumping and having angels make a dramatic rescue represented a shortcut toward folks confessing Jesus as Lord, God and Messiah. But Jesus recognized that giving into sensations wasn’t the way to reconcile the world to God and each other. Thrill seeking just tested God and not in a good way.

Finally, the third temptation is toward power – having dominion over the whole world, but at the cost of worshipping the devil. For us, the metaphor is clear – we sometimes gain incredible power in the secular world, but at the cost of leading us away from putting God in the center of our lives.

In all these temptations Jesus uses His relationship with God – all that strength gathered through days of prayer and all the knowledge of God gained through Scripture – to help Him recognize the temptations for what they were and to not yield to them. The stronger the relationship we build with God, the greater will be our ability to withstand temptation. That relationship is built through prayer and through reading God’s Word. As we draw closer to God in prayer and as we get to know God through Scripture, we gain an ability to recognize the evil one even if he tries to disguise himself behind something that seems harmless or even beautiful. We also gain the power to fight that evil. Jesus helps us to avoid yielding to temptation – to pass the tests of life.

But we are unable to resist all the time because our human selves are descendants of Adam and Eve and we inherit from them many of the same weaknesses. We just can’t seem to give Jesus enough of ourselves or to read and digest enough Scripture to triumph over sin all the time. Sin is the red lizard around the neck of one of the Ghosts who just got off the bus in front of heaven in C.S. Lewis’s book the Great Divorce. In this book, which I especially recommend in Lent to those who haven’t read it, an Angel approaches the Ghost seeking to kill that lizard, but the Ghost struggles and procrastinates about the decision to be rid of this sin forever; finally, giving his consent. We struggle to give up sin and sometimes we let sin win – we are too materialistic, we seek the easy way rather than the right way, we have times when we put God aside for worldly power.

We’ve come now to the part where I disagree with the posting on social media. Because Jesus didn’t give in to these temptations, which would have represented the easy way, we always pass the tests of life – we ultimately conquer those temptations. We pass the test and ultimately end up reconciled to God because Jesus chose to exercise his kingship by suffering and dying on the cross and rising again.

You see, actually God does grade on a curve. Jesus isn’t the annoyance because he performs perfectly. Instead, Jesus is the curve. Without him, we’d all fail miserably. With him, we succeed eternally.

Amen