

LIVING WITH TEMPTATION - Part 1

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Matt. 4:1-11; Heb. 4:14-16

One of the really surprising insights which has come to me as I talk with people is discovering that a rather significant number of them do not believe in hell. The reason this is surprising is that there is so much evidence of hell all around us. And naturally, because they do not believe in hell, these people do not believe in the devil.

They are sort of like the little girl who was walking home from Sunday School with one of her friends. In the course of their conversation her chum said: *Do you believe in the devil?* And the little girl answered: *Now, it's just like Santa Claus. He's your father!*

Now, this idea that there is no devil is exactly as the devil would have it. One of Satan's biggest jobs is circulating the news that he does not exist.

But even though we are afraid to talk about him *even though* we stick our heads in the sand and pretend he isn't there *he is* there. As James Garfield said,

Men ought to dare to look the devil in the face and name him devil.

I suppose one reason for the general reluctance to admit his reality is a rather natural reaction against the kind of devil which was pictured for us in the past: A hideous creature complete with:

cloven hooves,
pointed horns,
and forked tail.

Because it is perfectly obvious *that* kind of undisguised evil could never exert any real influence over us, folks have gradually come to the conclusion that the devil does not exist at all.

But we need to recognize the subtle disguises he wears. In the Wiertz Gallery in Brussels there is a painting entitled The Devil. He is not pictured as the kind of devil who generally appears in art, decked out in a red suit with a wicked, malignant leer upon his countenance. He is portrayed as a cultivated, attractive and charming gentleman decked out in black tie and tails.

The artist wisely understood that temptation rarely comes dressed up in a red suit. When Satan would capture our souls, he comes as one feigning interest in our rights, our happiness, our success. But, whatever his garb, he is the devil none the less.

I can't help thinking about that little bit of verse written many years ago by Vernon Charlesworth. It is still pertinent, for it contains a touch of satire which makes one pause and think. He wrote:

AMen don't believe in the devil now,
As their fathers used to do;
They reject one creed because it's old
For another because it's new.

AThere's not a print of his cloven foot,
Nor a fiery dart from his bow
To be found in the air of earth today:
At leastCthey declare it is so!

ABut who mixes the fatal drought,
That palsies heart and brain,
And loads the bier of each passing year,
With its hundred-thousand slain?

AAnd who blights the bloom of the land today,
With the fiery breath of hell?
If it isn't the devil that does the work,

Who does? Won't somebody tell?

AWho dogs the steps of the toiling saint?

Who spreads the net for his feet?

Who sows the tears in the world's broad field?

Where the Savior sows His wheat?

AIf the devil is voted not to be,

Is the verdict therefore true?

Somebody is surely doing the work

The devil was thought to do.

AThey may say the devil has never lived,

They may say the devil is gone,

But simple people would like to know

Who carries the business on?@

Doggerel? Perhaps. But in its own way, it is a very profound poem. For the fact of the matter is that the devil is not dead. He is alive and very much in business. The only difference is that he has grown more adept at using temptation as a snare with which to capture the souls of people.

Now that doesn't mean temptation itself is evil. Our Lord was tempted and we know He was without sin. Temptation is a common experience for all people. It is a universal fact in human life.

Dr. Frank Bateman Stanger points out that:

AAdam the perfect,

Noah the righteous,

Joseph the pure,

Moses the meek,
Sampson the strong,
David the man after God=s own heart,
Daniel the brave,
Jesus the sinless,
Paul the noble,

All were tempted!@

This is a moral universe. If people are to have the power of choice, then there must be alternatives for them to choose. If it is possible for someone to be good, then it also must be possible for that person to be bad.

There can be no morality unless there is also its oppositeCimmorality.

There can be no heaven unless there is a hell.

But temptation is neither moral or immoral. It is amoral. It is neutral. It only becomes an effective tool for Satan when we submit to it. As the old gospel hymn succinctly says:

A Yield not to temptation for *yielding* is sin.@

The troubling thing about all this is that the more closely one walks to God, the more subtle and vicious temptation becomes. It is not trite to say that Satan never bothers those who do not believe in him. They are already his. But he stations a thousand demons around that saint who is sincerely trying to live a Christian life.

When I was a small boy, I used to spend part of each summer on a ranch of a friend of ours. Even though they were willing to supply all the fresh fruit any growing boy could want, I=m afraid I=ve found the forbidden fruit which hung on the trees belonging to their neighbor to be much more alluring.

I remember most vividly how the boys who lived on the surrounding farms always knew which

trees contained the good fruit. They never raided an orchard where the apples were green and sour, but always made a bee line for the fruit which was ripe and juicy.

It is something like that with you and temptation. Whenever you are sour and mean, the old devil never gives you a second thought. You just aren't worth the effort!

But when you have begun to ripen in the love of Christ and some of His sweetness and allure begins to shine out through you, then believe me you will suffer temptation night and day, for then you will be worth going after.

But while it is your close proximity to Christ which makes you a favorite target of temptation, it is also His closeness which can be your shield against it.

There is a lovely story about St. Catherine of Siena who was attacked one day by a very violent temptation against the virtue of purity. When the storm had finally passed, our Lord appeared to her as if in a dream. She said to Him, ALord, where were you when my heart was filled with such impure thoughts?@ The Lord answered: AI was in your heart.@

ABut, how can that be true when my heart was so filled with such detestable thoughts?@ she asked. And God answered, ATThose thoughts, those temptations, did they cause you joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain?@ She responded, ATerrible sorrow. Terrible pain!@ Then our Lord replied,

AMy child, you suffered because I was hidden in the midst of your heart. Had I been absent, the thoughts which penetrated there would have given you pleasure.

It was my presence which made them repugnant to you. I was acting in you. I was defending you against the enemy. In that moment when you were more sorely tempted, I was closer to you than I have ever been before.@

That certainly was true in the life of our Lord. It was immediately following His baptism and that holy moment when a voice out of heaven said:

AThis is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased@C
that temptation came. After he had spent 40 days alone with God, and in a special way had been
brought near to His heavenly Father, it was then He was sorely tempted.

I don't think we will ever find a time in the story of His life when He was more closely identified
with us than those hours of struggle He spent in the wilderness of temptation.

Because He was tempted, He became our neighbor and draws us close to Him. We begin to feel
that we can learn something from Him, for we see Him as really human. Struggling with real
temptations. Gaining real victories. There in the rough, rugged, awful, lonely hour of temptation
we see not only HimCbut ourselves!Cand we somehow seem to know that through Him we, too,
can conquer.

Well, how did Jesus conquer Satan? To understand His victory, we must first see the nature of
His temptation. There are many things which could be said about the experiences of Jesus in the
wilderness. There is something unique about each of the three crises He faced. But there is also
one thing they all had in common:

In each case, Satan tried to get Jesus to do the right
thing in the wrong way.

The First Temptation of Jesus

The first temptation came after 40 days of fasting when, in an understatement typical of scripture,
we are told: AHe was hungry.@ There was nothing Asinful@ about that. It was perfectly natural for
Him to be hungry after a forty day fast. But Satan took that normal desire and tempted Christ to
satisfy it in the wrong way. He asked Him to turn the stones of the wilderness into bread.

What was wrong in that? Well, in the first place, if Jesus were to turn stones into bread, it would
mean He would have to leave the ranks of humanity which He had willingly joined in order to
redeem humanity. In so doing, He would have lost the right to deal with men as the Son of man.

You see, a normal person cannot work a miracle whenever he or she comes to a moment of desperate hunger. And, as the *Son* of man, Jesus was perfectly normal. But Satan suggested He reject His humanity and presume upon His privilege as the Son of God and use that power for selfish gratification.

The subtlety of the temptation lay in the fact that Christ was asked to satisfy a perfectly legitimate craving but to do it in an illegitimate way a way that would undermine His usefulness to God.

The Second Temptation of Jesus

The same thing is true of the second temptation. Here the devil even quoted scripture as He suggested to Jesus that He should cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and trust God to save Him because:

¶It is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee, lest thou dash Thy foot against a stone.®

Again, it's a good thing to trust in God! Let there be no doubt about that. The bible is full of assurance that

¶They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall walk and not grow weary. They shall run and not faint.®

But that kind of trust is a totally different thing from that which the devil suggested. He said to Jesus: ¶If you truly trust in God, if you are the Son of God, if you are so sure of His protection, then do something adventurous. Do something magnificent! Do something spectacular! Prove your faith and trust!®

But you see, for Jesus to cast Himself from the pinnacle of the temple into the abyss that yawned below would not have demonstrated trust, but its direct opposite *lack* of trust. As G. Campbell

Morgan points out:

It is only when we *doubt* a person that we make an experiment to discover how far he or she can be trusted. To make an experiment of any kind with God, is to reveal the fact we are not quite sure of Him. @

Real faith, real trust never tempts, or tests, or trifles. Rather it calmly, quietly rests in the sheer confidence that God's will is best.

To trust God is good and needful. But, the temptation for Jesus was to do that good thing in the wrong way.

The Third Temptation of Jesus

The same principle holds true in the third temptation when the tempter took Christ to a high mountain and, in a moment of time, flashed before Him all the glory and power of the kingdoms of this earth. Not just the small, scattered kingdoms of Palestine, or even the great Roman Empire, but all that was and all that was yet to be.

Then, with this dazzling spectacle upon the mind of the Master, the enemy uttered the words of temptation:

All these things will I give to You, if You will but fall down and worship me. @

Remember: the world was the very thing Jesus had come to save!

His great purpose was to redeem the kingdoms of this earth.

Perhaps, in the endless eons of time past, God had given Him a similar vision and had spread before Christ the matchless glory that *could be* if all people were released from sin. Perhaps it was the sight of *that heavenly vision* which caused Christ to come into the world of people to seek and to save the lost so that the vision could become reality. Then suddenly, all that *God* had

promised him was flashed before His eyes in one moment of dazzling splendor and He was told His goal could be realizedCnot through the agony of a crossCbut by the single act of bending His knee. It was the lure of the easy road. And we can never fully understand the fierceness of this third temptation apart from some grasp of the unutterable agony and immeasurable darkness which is crucifixion.

Jesus knew the terrible nature of suffering through which He was yet to pass. He did not want to die! Nobody wants to die unless they are already dead inside, and Jesus was wonderfully and fully *alive*! Those anguished moments in the garden of Gethsemane when He wept great drops of blood and cried:

A Would that this cup could pass from My hands@
are ample proof that Jesus did not want to die.

The object Satan dangled before Him was the very thing He had come to claim: The world and the souls of all mankind. It was a good goal. The highest goal of all.

But He was asked to achieve it in a wrong way.

Satan said: A Worship me and all this can be yours.@

But you see, to worship is to serve. To pay homage is to recognize an obligation. Of course, the devil didn't mention service in his temptation. He never does. He simply asked for worship. But Jesus knew that to worship Him would be to serve Him. And to serve Him would mean that final authority would rest with Satan and not with God. Heaven would lose its Royal Scepter to the hands of hell.

Thus, in each of the three appeals by Satan, the temptation for Jesus lay in the subtle request that He do a good thing in the wrong way. And that, of course, is

The Very Nature of Temptation.

There is no desire within you that was not placed there by God. You were made by Him, and in

His providence there is a natural and proper way for every need of your life to be satisfied.

But Satan is forever saying ALet me show you a short cut.@ And believe me! Satan holds the original patent on short cuts. He slyly says:

AYou want companionship, pleasure, love, peace, success and satisfaction. These are all normal demands of life. Why wait? Get them now! The end justifies the means! If God has not given you what you need, then take it! After all, you have as much right to happiness as anyone else.@

That may be true, but to satisfy a good need in a wrong way can only lead to tragedy and despair.

Success is a worthy goal. I get tired of those people who suggest Christians should not be concerned with worldly success. I believe with all my heart that Christians ought to dream dreams, have vision, make plans, progress and grow. God made us with certain potentialities and we have a holy obligation to measure up to them. But when we seek this good goal in a wrong way, when we gain success through:

compromise,

misrepresentation

and shoddy dealing,

to defeat the very thing for which we are striving.

Peace of mindContentmentRelaxationCare all worthy objectives. But when we take the easy way and lean on an after-work cocktail to give us an artificial let-down from the rigors of a hard day instead of learning the spiritual disciplines through which we can gain a truly lasting peace, then once again we are seeking a good thing in the wrong way. And, in many cases, the final result is not even an artificial peace of mind, but the tragedy of a broken mind, a broken heart, a broken body.

PleasureFunChappinessCall have their place. But when we gain them at the expense of our moral code, then we are not richer, we are poorer. We are striving to gain a good thing in the

wrong way and in the end we have to pay the piper for his tune.

Put this down as a basic law of life:

Whenever there comes the siren call to satisfy your desires *at any cost* Ceven though it means selling your God, your faith, your character below par Cthen know that *that* is the voice of evil. For the principle appeal of temptation is always the same: The doing of a right thing in the wrong way. @

When Jesus met temptation, he faced it squarely. He didn't win by running. That's what I was getting at when I entitled this sermon

ALiving With Temptation@.

As Christians we cannot escape from this world and the temptations which it offers. We are in the world and we are not immune from the consequences of that association.

That does not mean we must be so foolish as to deliberately expose ourselves to temptation. Right now I'm thinking of one of the men whom my father ministered to in the Open Door Mission in Oakland, California. This particular chap had been a wino on skid row and, after he had been dry for about two weeks, decided to prove to himself and everyone that he had licked his habit.

He got himself a job in a winery! You can imagine the results. With the smell of that Satanic stuff in his nostrils, it was only a matter of time until his willpower broke and he was off on the biggest binge of his life. You see, he was *flirting* with temptation and that is idiotic.

When I say we must learn to live *with* temptation, I am not suggesting that you go around looking for trouble as a kind of test to see how close you can come to evil without being snared. Neither do I want you to become a sanctified hermitCa kind of religious recluseCwho disassociates yourself from the world.

Jesus did not call us to a life of monasticismCa life of total withdrawal from the worldChis challenge was to be *in* the world but not *of* the world.

It is no victory to practice abstinence in a monastery. But it *is* a victory to graciously refuse a cocktail from a business associate. Or better yet, make it your practice not to buy him one even though it might cost you a sale. And yet, knowing the kind of temptations we would have to face, Jesus said: *¶Go ye into the highways and byways of life.*@ And then He added: *¶I will be with you.*@

He never once suggested we retreat into a comfortable hot house and thereby avoid being tempted. He didn't live that way and neither can we. He did not seek temptation, but when it came, he met it head on. He lived *with* it and so must we *if we're going to grow*.

Well, my time is gone and I haven't even begun to finish. The most important part is yet to come. For Jesus=method of overcoming temptation is simply sublime and if we can get a hold of it, we too can win. So, with your permission, next Sunday I=ll preach *ALiving With Temptation - Part II*@ and in it, I will give you Jesus= secret of victorious living.

For the present, let me say this:

¶The weakest person who leans wholly upon God is mightier than the strongest person who stands alone.@

Remembering that, let=s make it a habit this week to learn and frequently pray the little prayer printed in your Order of Worship. Join me, please, as we pray aloud:

*¶Make me a captive, Lord,
And then I shall be free;
Force me to render up my sword,
And I shall conqueror be.
I sink in life=s alarms*

When by myself I stand;
Imprison me within thine arms,
And strong shall be my hand.®