

Temptation

Mark 1:9-15

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Perhaps you heard the news story this past August that Pope Francis wants to change the English version of the Lord's Prayer. He expressed his dislike of the line "lead us not into temptation" to an Italian television news station. In an interview, the Pontiff disagreed with the implication that God is pushing us towards temptation. He said, "It is I who fall into temptation . . . a father is one who helps me up. It's Satan who leads people into temptation."¹ Pope Francis suggested English speaking Catholics adopt the phrase "do not let us fall into temptation," as French Catholics do. I wonder if it is going to actually change the way people use the language when praying the Lord's Prayer. He has a point, at least according to the text in Mark's Gospel. It says quite explicitly, "tempted by Satan." Where do you think temptation comes from? And how do we protect ourselves from it?

Temptation! Even Jesus had to face it. Temptation is a part of life. No one is immune – at any age. Temptation is present wherever there is a choice to be made, not only between good and evil, but also between a higher and a lower good. Sometimes we are simply tempted to allow the ends to justify the means.

The first Sunday of Lent usually begins with the self-examination when we confront temptation. The other Gospels tell the story of Jesus' temptation in greater detail; the three temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness. Mark simply and uniquely claims, "And the Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness." He didn't just wander across the border because his compass was broken. Jesus didn't go camping over the holiday weekend. He was driven into the wilderness for hand-to-hand spiritual and physical combat with evil at the very beginning of this spiritual journey. And lest you think he is in trouble out there. The wilderness will prove to be the least of his problems. We too are driven by that same Spirit to confront temptation.

In *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo's novel and the musical by that same name, Jean Valjean is a hardened criminal who spent 19 years in prison. Upon his release, he sought lodging for four days but no innkeeper would let the "dangerous" felon in. Finally a kindly Bishop had mercy upon him. Jean Valjean waited until the Bishop and his sister drifted off to sleep. Treated as a criminal, he was tempted to act as one. Giving into temptation, he rifled through the Bishop's

¹ www.dw.com/en/pope-francis-calls-for-change-to-english-translation-of-the-lords-prayer

belongings, taking the family silver with him into the darkness as he made his escape.

Captured and brought back to the scene of the crime by the police, the bishop responds in a way no one expects. "So you are here! I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them?" Valjean was no thief the Bishop assured them. "This silver was my gift to him." Forgiveness, mercy, grace. It transformed Valjean's life. But first it caused a crisis of identity. Was he the man that the policeman, Javer, knew him to be? Or was he the man the Bishop claimed him to be? In the musical, this is where Valjean sings "Who Am I?" After deep soul searching, he comes to the conclusion there is a different way to live and he is a different person than the one he had become. Temptation has a way of clarifying that important question, "Who am I?"

These days we often think of temptation in terms of the big three: money, sex, and power. "Follow the money" is an expression in the newsroom for finding the real story behind the story. This past year there have been countless people in entertainment and politics who have had checkered pasts when it comes to sexual harassment. "#metoo" has unearthed surprising stories, revealing things about some of our admired and successful actors, business people, and politicians. Temptation is often understood in terms of money, sex, and power.

According to the story of the temptation of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, we must first renounce some of the things of this world to be able to enter the pilgrimage towards the things of God. Often we are tempted not by evil things, but by good things. Jesus was tempted by good things like bread for his hunger, and security, and glorification. He had to be willing to give up many pearls for the one pearl of great value. You see the spiritual world is sometimes unattractive at first, especially compared to all the glitter that the world offers. Temptation forces us to renounce good things for the sake of better things.

Peter Marshall, the former Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, used to say, "But it's no sin to be tempted. It isn't the fact of having temptations that should cause us shame, but what we do with them. Temptation is an opportunity to conquer. When we eventually reach the goal to which we are all striving, God will look us over, not for diplomas, but for scars."²

People don't just compromise their principals all at once. It begins with the small compromises in behavior that seem innocent enough but lead to bigger compromises. To succeed, temptation must have our consent. Therefore, we must avoid the very beginning of temptation. When temptation comes knocking, lock the door. Don't be suggestible. Instead, go with your life's storyline that God has chosen you – and you can trust in Him. It will give you the freedom to reject enticing alternatives and to be persistent in resistance.

In the Garden of Eden, the tempter creates a wedge in Adam and Eve's understanding of the boundaries which God has established for their well-being. Here is the power of suggestion at work! "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?' The woman replied, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden . . .'"³ The temptation is to broaden the limitation and then decide how unfair the misrepresented prohibition is. And the man and the woman cave to the temptation because they were suggestible.

It takes time to overcome initial impressions and to penetrate the disguises of evil and to see the attractiveness of good. It takes the experience of being fooled, of finding out that what we thought was to be rejected was actually good, and what we desired so passionately was destructive. We prefer to win the lottery all at once, rather than daily work towards our goals through service and sacrifice.

Evil attracts us because there appear to be no limits on us. We are free to do as we please. We are able to do something we want to do, and nothing is more attractive than getting our own way. We move forward smoothly without a hitch and enjoy our unfettered freedom at first. It is only later that we find ourselves in bondage to evil and then recognize its ugliness. Whether drugs, or sexual perversion, or compromises in our moral standards, sooner or later we discover that we are trapped by our own choices. We find in life we are not only the victims of evil but its perpetrators as well. We often do evil because we do not recognize it as evil and fail to do good because we do not recognize it as good. Evil often glitters and attracts. Evil has the paradoxical quality of being in fact hideous yet appearing attractive. Thus it has the power to deceive us.

2 <https://www.guideposts.org> "Positive Living" March 16, 2013

3 Genesis 3:1-2

You may be familiar with C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, a book about how evil subverts and trips up those seeking to live the Christian life. Screwtape is the head devil writing to little devils, all of whom are trying to trip up their charges and entice young Christians toward the dark side. He writes, "Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."⁴ The obvious sins can be resisted. It is the inconspicuous ones, the subtle ones that snare us and bring us down.

Jesus, by contrast, is not suggestible. He is the new Adam — a new man who lives within the constraints God has established and lives in the world on God's terms. And so the assault begins in the wilderness. "Sure, you're the Son of God, the chosen one, the beloved, only begotten son. That was established at your baptism. But what does that mean really? Doesn't that mean you should take things into your own hands? Make a name for yourself? What better way to get people to do what God wants them to do? Use your power." says the tempter.

First Jesus is tempted to use his power for satisfying his own appetite, turning from the path of service to the path of selfishness. Satisfy your temporary needs, what you hunger for in the moment. The problem is it never satisfies. Then he is tempted to use his powers for his own security. But he is willing to go to the cross in confidence that God will not leave or forsake him. Finally he is tempted to seek an easier way to glorification, to take things into his own hands, rather than live in the world on God's terms.

Temptation means being asked to renounce something that is good, or at least needed. Food is a good thing. Security is a good thing. The shooting this week in Parkland, Florida reminds us of just how vulnerable our children are, and how vulnerable human life can be. But when feeding our appetites becomes more important than our spiritual lives, we will have to learn the hard way that we "do not live by bread alone." When our desire for security directs our every thought and move in life, we become prisoners. Accepting limitations and living within them is sometimes learned the hard way.

What kind of person do you want to be? Who are you? Temptations come to test your resolve and to strengthen you. They help us to come to our senses. Who am I and why am I here? Some

4 Lewis, C.S., *The Screwtape Letters*, HarperOne; Reprint edition (April 21, 2015)

will claim you are mostly a body, a sexual being, and life is about lusting and being lusted after. Others claim you are mostly a brain, mostly a rational being, absorbing facts and figures. It's not who you are but what you know that matters most. Still others will try to convince you that you are mostly an economic engine, a spender of money. You are what you own, a doer, an obtainer of things, according to advertisers and sellers. And so we experiment with our lives, mixing in a little of this and that hoping the whole thing will gel before it blows up in our faces.

The spiritual life in Jesus Christ begins with a different answer to the question, "Who am I?" When at the most basic level we understand ourselves to be children of God who "renounce evil and its power in the world," we begin to come to our senses and find our identity in faith. We choose, like Jean Valjean, to become the people God created us to be, rather than being influenced by the conflicting messages of those around us. We will be tempted to take matters into our own hands, and find an easier or cheaper way to the life we desire, but when we resist temptation, it will flee from us and we will be the stronger for it.

The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament proclaims some good news, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in the time of need."⁵ Like the kindly Bishop in *Les Miserables*, Jesus says, "So you are here! I'm delighted to see you. Had you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest and worth a good 200 francs. Did you forget to take them? This silver was my gift. . ." Forgiveness, mercy, grace. It transformed Valjean's life and it can transform yours.

Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

⁵ Hebrews 4:15-16