

February 15, 2014

THE GREATEST TEMPTATIONS

Matthew 4:5-11

To be tempted is to be pressured into doing something you otherwise might never do. It is to be lured, enticed, seduced, tantalized. To be tempted is to be baited, a fishing term. And that sort of bait is often a treat that disguises a hook, a sharp, barbed hook! John Bevere wrote a book entitled *The Bait of Satan*, where he speaks of how the devil uses little spats in churches that we are tempted to let become big deals to us in order to make churches completely ineffective. In fact, sometimes, the Holy Spirit absents Itself from such congregations. But the temptation is often that of harboring resentment and ill-will toward another because of some disagreement. Other times the temptation comes in the form of something very attractive... at first. Sometimes it is the appeal of a certain sort of characteristic that draws us – as in “If I smoke, I will be cool.” Or, “If I wear a low-cut blouse, I will be sexy.”

At the beginning of Matthew’s Chapter Four, Jesus is being tempted. The first temptation was for Jesus to feed Himself by turning stones into bread. But Jesus proclaims that the human body does not live by bread alone. (4:4) The fact is, we are more than just bodies. We are souls. And our souls need to be fed. Feeding the soul is just as important as feeding the body....though we are very tempted to believe that we don’t need to feed the soul that much. In each of His temptation, the devil is enticing Christ to use His power – for Himself, for show, and...for wealth. (?)

Note right now, that it is not as sin to be tempted. Temptation only becomes sinful when you give in to it. To tempt another, though, *is* a sinful act. We cannot completely avoid temptation, but we can pray for God to lead us away from it, to be delivered from evil. Martin Luther once said that you can’t prevent the birds from flying overhead, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair!

Temptation has always been around. It was even able to happen in the Garden of Eden. (Genesis 3:6) Later, East of Eden, Cain was downcast because what he had given as an offering to God was not looked upon favorably. God told Cain, “*Why are you angry? ...If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.*” (Genesis 4:6-7) “**Sin is lurking at your door!**” Like a predatory animal, the temptation to sin needs to be mastered. Peter said, “*Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour! Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering.*” (1 Peter 5:8-9) Never think that you are all alone in the ways you are being tempted. No one is immune!

When we suffer, either physically or emotionally, we want to escape. Often we are tempted to numb the pain, or, escape it into some sort of high. We want to feel better. But to use alcohol or drugs, or, to pursue behaviors that give only temporary pleasures, leaves an easy opening for the devil to really get her hooks in us. And nobody really wants that. Rick Warren, in *The Purpose Driven Life*, said that “temptation begins by capturing your attention.” It can present itself as a way of escape, or, simply as a way to feel good. And of course, everyone likes to feel “good.” But...when we pursue behavior only because it feels good, we can get caught -- hook, line, and sinker, by what is called *the pleasure principle* – “If it feels good, do it.” But to do it without any regard to the consequences that may result, is foolish. It is sin.

The Devil was tempting Jesus to show off, to impress people by jumping off the highest point of the Temple and land safely. The devil quoted a passage of Scripture that acknowledged the way God could make it possible. But Jesus countered with the ultimate resistance. *"It is written: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God!"*

There is a sort of temptation that often comes our way that actually looks good...at first. It's the temptation to take a short-cut. Kids want to take the short-cut through the neighbor's yard. Youth want the short-cut to adulthood and adult behavior. We want short-cuts to love, to wealth, to status... and to heaven. But... "The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and only a few find it!" (Matthew 7:13-14)

We are often tempted to take the easy way. And often it has to do with cheating. Few people actually like having to do everything the hard way. But, the fact of the matter is... that's the only real way. Jesus was tempted by the devil to worship him. *"All you have to do is worship me,"* she said, *"and you will have it all!"* First of all, it wasn't the devil's to give! *The kingdoms of the world and all their splendor* belong to the kings and queens and all their governments.

Secondly, the temptation is not really about worldly wealth or status, it is about worship. Who do you worship? The question becomes more poignant when you are a believer and part of a community of faith. When the opportunity to worship is offered, and you choose to do something else, before whom or what have you really bowed down?

Teilhard de Chardin, a theologian of the early 20th Century, has said that whatever your *ultimate concern* is, that has become your god! It's idolatry. For some, Sunday morning is a time for comfort and ease (rest). Worship is optional to them. Well, the Fourth Commandment is to *"Remember the Sabbath"* (the day of rest)... *"to keep it holy."* The purpose is worship, really, not just non-work. And we, true worshipers, worship so as to truly enter our *eternal* rest. But...we're tempted to think that we've gotten our ticket, we've been saved, we're okay. We want the short-cut version of faith, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace. Well, now, realize that God isn't finished with you yet. You're coming to worship is not only for your own good, someone else just might be blessed by your actions when the opportunity to worship arises in your community of faith.//and you attend, participate, and add to the spirit of the worship.

For some, Sunday morning might actually be a time to work. Their place of employment calls them to work when they otherwise would be worshipping. Well, you can't serve God and money! (Matthew 6:24) This needs to be qualified, however. We desperately need health-care workers, and police and fire fighters to be able to work even on Sunday mornings when the opportunity to worship is most commonly offered. But... no one is absolutely required to work *every* Sunday morning, therefore, when the availability to pursue the opportunity is present, what should God expect? What should the Church, the worshipping community, expect?

For some, it has to do with sporting events, in which they may be participants, or at which they might be spectators. This is shameful, because the coordinators of such events use the excuse that "It's the only time we could schedule it!" False! Priorities are being confused in such circumstances. And Christ has said, *"Seek first (as in priority) God's Kingdom, and, God's righteousness, and all else will be yours as well."* (Matthew 6:33)

Jesus *is* talking about the things that cause us to worry when He says this. And one of the ways the devil works to make us unfocused and unfruitful is to get us to worry. To worry is to be tempted to focus on things in counter-productive ways. It is not a sin to make plans, to prepare. But when you've got plans, and, you fret or are anxious about the carrying out of the details before they can even begin to fall into place, it's leaning in the direction of sin. And when we worry about health or wealth or relationships, when we otherwise can pray and place them all in God's hands, again, we're leaning toward sin. It is sin because we are not trusting God... when we should.

Our focus, our purpose, our primary thought should be Deuteronomy 6:12 – “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only Him!” Jesus repeated it to the devil, we believe it, that settles it! “Seek first God's Kingdom and God's righteousness!”

But then along comes the devil and whispers little suggestions in your ear and you're lured away. And one of the ways the devil whispers is through our personal and intimate urges. Remember how James said, “*We are tempted by our own desire, being lured and enticed by it,...*”. We want to say, “The devil made me do it.” Well, no one can make you do anything you don't want to do. Use a little self-control. It's a fruit of the Holy Spirit! But another thing we're all tempted to say as an excuse for our behavior when we give in to temptation is, “I'm weak.” Or, “I was weak.” “I couldn't refuse.” There's another lie, because Paul has told us how God's power is made perfect in weakness! (2 Corinthians 12:9b) God told him, “*My grace is sufficient for you.*” (9a)

Remember: “*God is faithful, and He will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing He will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it!*” (1 Corinthians 10:12-13) God will provide a way. Not a short-cut. God provides a way... And Jesus Christ is The Way!