

## TEMPTATIONS OF THE WORST KIND

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What do you find tempting in your world? What are your worst temptations?

Sometime ago I was buying a cup of coffee and the coffee shop had the most wonderful double chocolate Bundt cake. I was so tempted. I love everything chocolate. I was really tempted, but it was a rather trivial temptation, not really worth calling a temptation.

A more serious one might be our computers and the internet. Have you ever been tempted to click on a video or an article or a game, and then found yourself spending way more time on this temptation than you thought? Such activities are meant to be deceptively tempting, and before you know it more time than you intended can be frittered away. It's tempting but there are more serious temptations than those.

When you have children, you also become aware of other temptations out there in an uncensored medium, temptations to which you might not want to expose them. There are some pretty risqué web sites we wouldn't want our children to see, either accidentally or purposefully. But what about you, in the privacy of your own home? Are you tempted? Who would know? Who would know?

How about what they call extreme sports? These are sports like ice climbing and skydiving where one's life is at danger. People are excited by the threat of death and exhilarated by conquering that threat, victory over self and nature, a sense of accomplishment. Are you tempted? Sometimes I think if I was in better shape, I might be...but really I think I'm a little too cautious for such things.

What do you find tempting in your world? What are your worst temptations?

Every First Sunday of Lent for I-don't-know-how-long, the Gospel reading has been the temptation story of Jesus. It was at the beginning of his ministry and so it is at the beginning of our Lenten journey, our time of self-examination and penitence.

The problem for me is that Jesus' temptations are not really mine. They are simply not very real to me.

If it is an historical story surely it is autobiographical. How else would we know what happened if Jesus didn't tell his friends? No one else was there. Perhaps one day they were complaining about their temptations, their struggles, their internal conflicts, and Jesus by way of illustration told them about his own. Perhaps that's the origin of the story in history, but if it is merely an historical story what power does it have?

The theologian Marcus Borg commented, "The literalistic approach to [the Bible] is not so much wrong as it is impoverished." It claims too little for the story. No, this story is

more than a history of Jesus' temptations. It is about mine and yours, our temptations of the worst kind.

How so? What do they really have to do with us? They are so impossible. I can't turn stones into bread. I can't fly. And as for controlling the world I wouldn't know what to do with such power if I had it! These temptations aren't mine. They are Jesus' temptations. He can do them. He has the power. I don't.

But they do point to ours. They do reveal our temptations of the worst kind.

In the first instance temptations of the worst kind are not so much temptations to do bad and evil things as they are temptations to do good.

What could be wrong with making stones into bread? The hungry wish they could. What could be wrong with taking political control? The oppressed would like that. What could be wrong with leaping from the temple and proving once and for all the power of God? The doubting and hopeless long for such undeniable proof.

Jesus wasn't asked to lie or steal or kill. The devil simply tried to get Jesus to pursue to his mission - by using other means than God's means.

The tempter in Eden did not ask Adam and Eve, "Do you wish to be a devil?" He asked, "Do you wish to be like God?" The temptation here is not to fall but to rise. There is nothing of debauchery here. The devil is not offering personal or domestic

or social ruin. All that is found at the bottom of the temptation in small print.

No, these temptations of the worst kind are those that tempt us to do good things by the wrong methods. Aren't there times that we try to out-think God? Sometimes we ignore God's guidelines and devise our own plans. Sometimes we trade God's will for our own clever techniques. Often, we pursue God's goals but not by God's methods. That is the kind of temptation Jesus faced and it is our temptation of the worst kind.

Such temptations are subtle as well. Blatant sin is easier to spot and to avoid than temptations of the worst kind. But sin for a good reason is so hard to resist.

A number of years ago, a new restaurant opened in Newmarket called the Red Devil. It was part of a chain that includes, I think, East Side Mario's and Kelsey's. They specialized in hot sauces and hence the theme. The trademark is a red devil face, a rather humorous depiction of the devil.

Some people found the theme and its logo to be offensive. They wanted the local churches to protest against it. It made fun of evil. I don't think we should make fun of evil, but evil and the devil don't take the form of red faces with horns and a moustache, and a pitchfork. Satan in the temptation story is a smooth-talking, sophisticated, tricky, treacherous, con artist, not obvious, not a ridiculous icon to be mocked. We could easily be speaking with him and not even know.

There's an advertisement on television about drugs and children. What we see is a young lad leaving the house and traveling up the street on a bike. The narrator over top of this scene is a young child who talks about resisting the drug pushers. We see pictures of them flashed before us. They are all depicted as tough, obviously criminal characters. "The toughest one of all to resist, though," the narrator says, "was my best friend." The boy on the bike gets off and offers his best friend a joint.

Remember it was not to a malicious opponent but to a close friend that Jesus said, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Our temptations are mundane and subtle.

You're in a shop and the cashier gives you the wrong change. You have an extra \$20.00 in your hand. Honesty is the best policy, but...

Our temptations are so mundane. They don't seem important at all. After all what's at stake? Who will know?

Our temptations of the worst kind, however, are really subtle.

Your boss calls you in. He has a smile on his face and as you sit down, he gives you the good news. You are being promoted to head the department for the whole eastern part of Canada. A raise in pay. A real opportunity. A step forward. A step up the corporate ladder of success.

But already you are away from home more often than you'd like. Your child sometimes jokes calling you 'stranger'. Now

you'll be away twice as often.

"I have to think of my family," you say.

"This is for the good of your family," he says. "Just think of what you can do for them with the increase in salary. You want to provide the best for them, don't you?"

Yes, but...

Temptations of the worst kind are so subtle.

And they are so possible.

Temptations are not a sign of weakness. They are a sign of strength. The things that will tempt us most are the things we can do.

Jesus wasn't tempted to do the impossible. They might have been impossible for you and me but not for him. The greater the strength, the greater the temptation. We are not tempted to do what we cannot do, but what is within our power. How fierce the struggle of Jesus must have been. Temptations of the worst kind are so deceptively attractive. We can do them and we can do good through them, but at what cost?

I remember reading about what they call white collar crime. When caught the perpetrators always have a good excuse. It's called the crime of opportunity. Because people can do it, they are tempted to do it. The greater their capability the greater the temptation, and the greater the damage they do.

There is a Buddhist teaching: "If we plant a certain kind of seed, it will inevitably bear the same kind of fruit...In precisely the

same way, the intentions and motives that underlie our words and actions plant seeds. Certain kinds of intentions will inevitably bear fruits of the same type.”

There are many in the world today who follow the motto, “Whatever it takes.” “The end justifies the means.” Jesus affirmed the opposite – the means justifies the end. You must do it right, if you want it to come out right.

How do we know what the right way is?

At Calvary Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan the youth group members wanted to revolutionize their lives by considering Jesus’ perspective as they made every decision. The question they asked was simple yet not simple, “What would Jesus do?” If they imagined what Jesus would do in their particular circumstance, they had a better idea of what they should do. They created wristbands with the letters *W.W.J.D.* on them to remind them to consider what Christ would do if he were in their shoes.

What did Jesus do in the face of temptations? He focused on God. He trusted God’s way and he committed himself to doing the right thing in the right way as difficult as that might be. And we know how that ended in suffering and gruesome death.

As we begin our Lenten journey of self-examination and penitence may God’s Spirit guide each of us, as Jesus was guided, to overcome temptation and to trust God’s guidance.

So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.