

Here are some of the things that have been said about temptation:

That great American theologian Mae West said “I generally avoid temptation unless I can’t resist it.” George Bernard Shaw said “I never resist temptation – because I have found that things that are bad for me do not tempt me!” Robert Heinlein said “Yield to temptation. It may not pass your way again!” Rita Mae Brown prayed: “Lead me not into temptation; I can find the way myself.” Lane Olinghouse: “Those who flee temptation generally leave a forwarding address.” And finally, Sam Levenson: “Lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is; we’ll find it ourselves.” (HOMILETICS, Vol 16 #1, p. 65-66)

First a bit of background on Jesus’ temptation. How did the evangelists KNOW the story of Jesus’ temptation? Presumably, Jesus was alone in the desert with Satan. Except for the Agony in the Garden, this is the only time in which the writers report on something that happened -- when no one was around to hear it. Obviously, Jesus must have shared with His disciples that He was in fact tempted. But the story is clearly of a highly symbolic nature. The 40 days in the desert recalls Israel’s desert sojourn of 40 years, the 40 days Moses spent fasting and writing down God’s law (Ex 34:28), and Elijah’s 40-day walk to the place where he would meet God (1 Kings 19:8). Those three events provide the backdrop for Jesus’ 40 days in the desert. Scholars are pretty much agreed that Jesus obviously shared the fact that He too struggled with temptation; and they also pretty much agree that this story is a theological creation to teach us about our own temptations.

The story is set AFTER Jesus’ baptism, where He was told “You are my beloved Son in whom I take my delight.” The context is critical in understanding the text. The devil frames his first two temptations as challenges to Jesus’ newly understood status as Son of God. In the first, the devil suggests that the Son of God should never suffer hunger, but rather use His power to provide for Himself. When Jesus answers that He does not live by bread alone – it is no vow to live hungry. We need to remember that the Gospels are much more apt to portray Jesus as frequenting banquets than skipping a meal – remember He was criticized as a glutton and a drunkard! The point of Jesus’ response about bread is not to promote fasting, but a declaration that He believes in God’s providence more than in His own desires or plans. As He told His disciples: “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish His work.” (Jn 4:34) This temptation is not about eating or not eating – but of relating to God as a trusting, obedient son.

The second temptation includes a good dose of irony as the devil claims power over all the kingdoms of the world. Scripture proclaims that God rules all the nations (see Ps 22:28-29, 103:19), and even in this verse, the devil only claims that “it has been handed over to me” to distribute, thus admitting that he does not have full control. Ultimately, this is a temptation to worship power – whether by directly dedicating Himself to acquiring it or indirectly through collaboration with or submission to demonic power. Jesus’ response, taken from Deuteronomy as was His first, is that only God deserves worship. Nothing else is valuable enough to merit His dedication.

The third temptation, to leap off the Temple parapet, goes to the heart of religion and Jesus’ own life journey that culminated on a cross in the holy city. This can be seen as a temptation to manipulate God, or to use religion as an insurance policy. Ultimately it suggests the hope or belief that God’s own will never suffer – a theory that is untenable in the light of the lives of the prophets and undone by the Book of Job, not to mention the life of Jesus Himself. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 10 March 2019, p. 3)

Second, what does this story have to do with us? A man tells the story: My wife and I were shopping at a mall, and a shapely young woman in a short, form-fitting dress strolled by. My eyes followed her.

Without looking up from the item she was examining, my wife asked, “Was it worth the trouble you’re in?” (HOMILETICS, Vol 16, #1, p 66)

We’ve probably all been in a backyard in summer and there is that blue light set up, and periodically you hear ZZZZZap sound buzzing in the night. It’s the sound of bugs hitting the bug zapper. The light attracts the bugs, they fly in and they get toasted. And it goes on and on – all night long – hundreds and hundreds of bugs. You would think that after a while the bugs would wise up. You would think they would observed that the tray underneath the light is littered with the bodies of impulsive relatives who went before them. You would think some thoughtful bug would say, “Whoa! Wait a minute! I’m not going to just blindly follow my desires. I notice all my friends get drawn into this, but they never come back. I’m going to consider just how high a price I’m willing to pay for the experience of a close look at the beautiful big blue light.”

But no bug ever does. Apparently they say to themselves, “I know what I’m doing. I’m strong enough, smart enough to handle this attraction without getting burned. I’m not going to pause for reflection – I’m a buzzzzzzz kind of bug.” And all night long it goes on – zap, zap, zap.

Sometimes I wonder if we are any smarter. It may be that we have experienced the temptation that comes when life does not turn out the way we had planned. Sin that at another point in our life we would have spurned instead begins to look attractive. Little rationalizations play themselves out in our minds. C.S. Lewis wrote in THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS that although we would think we are most vulnerable to temptation in seasons when our energy level and appetites are highest, in fact it is when we are in the valley, when we are struck by sadness or desolation, that we are in the most dangerous place. Sin is always a substitute for holding on, maybe suffering for the sake of holding on to what we know is true and just and right. Sin is an attempt to obtain the pleasure that does not rightfully belong to me or evade the pain that does. We mostly sin when we say “I deserve this” – when we know in fact that we don’t deserve it and also that it’s not going to be good for us. (adapted from IF YOU WANT TO WALK ON WATER, YOU’VE GOT TO GET OUT OF THE BOAT, Ortberg, p. 105-106)

Third, what do we DO with temptation? We all know what it’s like to have a hunger for something we want – something that others might say we need or even deserve – but that we know will serve only to distract or derail us. Click on that questionable Web site. Spend that extra dollar. Talk trash behind the back of a coworker. Sleep in on Sunday morning. Take that extra drink. Eat the doughnut. Ignore the kids. The wife. The husband. The parent in the nursing home. The list is endless. Temptation is everywhere. And like the smell of great street food when our stomach is empty, its pull is strong. Jesus isn’t the only one who has Satan whispering in His ear.

And be clear that the presence or absence of temptation is NO INDICATION – of our holiness or sinfulness. Temptation is a fact of life. Even Jesus was tempted – so we know that temptation itself is not sinful. And scholars suggest that this story of Jesus’ temptation is a capsulation of the temptation that Jesus faced at every moment of His life – to act for Himself – rather than for God. Isn’t that the same for us?

Temptation, like street food, comes in countless forms. But no matter how it manifests for each of us individually, the goal is always the same: to pull us away from a life that is authentic and serving God – to a life of gratifying and serving ourselves. This is the tactic Satan used with Jesus: “Hey, JC, Forget about following the plans of your Father. Feed your stomach instead. Stop submitting as a son. Instead, grab some glory for yourself. Why would you trust all God’s plans in the first place? Jump from these heights and see if He has your best interest at heart.”

The goal of temptation, just like with Jesus, is to pull away from a life that's obedient to God and gives glory to God. Instead, the devil wants us to walk through life scratching every itch and ultimately just gratifying ourselves. The hope is that if he can get us to do it enough, he can get us off God's team altogether.

But back to my question: *So what are we to do? Well, the antidote to temptation is NOT to assert more willpower. To muscle it through with our own willpower.* As if we have it within us to resist every single sin if only we try hard enough. Some would argue that the best defense is to barricade our life from as many evil influences as possible. Cancel the cable. Pull the plug on the computer. Home-school the kids and start making our own clothes. Pull away from society, and we'll stay far from temptation. The only trouble is that temptation goes with us. Satan followed Jesus into the desert – he will follow us too. Besides, there's this whole issue of original sin and our inclination to sin – and our weakness. Seriously, what are we supposed to do? FIGHT TEMPTATION WITH TRUTH.

Jesus fought temptation in a very specific way. He didn't assert His power, although He could have. He didn't flee, although it was an option. Instead, Jesus fought temptation with TRUTH. He fought temptation with the truth of God's word. With each offer, Jesus answered by pointing Satan to the promises and standards of the one true God. As temptation tries to pull us from God, the greatest antidote we have – our lifeline – is the truth of God. When temptation shades our mind, God's "word is a lamp to our feet and light to our path." (Ps 119:105) We can't truly live by feeding our hungers, by devouring bread or by savoring the joy of street food alone. We truly live only when we feast on the things of God.

But we have to know that this choice or that option is less than God's best because we have been inspired to strive for Christ's ideal. It's one of the reasons why coming to church is so essential in our culture. The culture lies to us – all the time. It tells us that if we just buy that, take this, do this clever but devious little shortcut, we will be popular, happy, satisfied, and number one. NO WE WON'T!

In church, we have the chance to hear the deep truth about ourselves – and it is what Jesus heard at His baptism – and what sustained Him to withstand temptation. YOU ARE GOD'S! And you are loved! And you don't need to take shortcuts that cheapen who you are or your high destiny. You are made for God! And nothing but God will ever satisfy you.

And you and I both know that we will forget this from time to time, stumble, maybe even do some really bad things. Temptation, like street food, comes in countless forms. And man, it can look and smell incredible! But just because we're hungry for it doesn't always mean we need it – or should have it.

And as sure as there are amazing tacos on the streets of Mexico City, there is forgiveness, there is mercy and there is grace in abundance for us all, ESPECIALLY IN OUR MOMENTS OF TEMPTATION. May God give us the strength to choose real, lasting, life-giving food – found in God alone. Amen. (help from HOMILETICS, Jan-Feb 2010, p. 64-65)