

TEMPTATION

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 Matthew 4:1-11

A member of Weight Watchers was determined to make it through a full week without cheating. She dropped into a cafeteria one day for a cup of coffee. A man with two doughnuts and a cup of coffee sat down on the other side of the table. The pastries smelled truly delicious--but the woman remained firm in her decision not to indulge.

Lo and behold after a while the man got up, leaving behind one whole doughnut. An internal struggle ensued and temptation triumphed. The woman reached across the table, picked up the doughnut and started to eat it...Just then the man came back with a second cup of coffee. Temptation.

Somebody has said that ever since the Garden, "forbidden fruit is responsible for many a bad jam." Temptation.

What's the hardest thing in the world to control? Some 40 percent of us say the hardest thing in their lives to control is their weight. Another 35 percent say they wrestle most with their spending. Just 10 percent say the hardest thing to control is their anger, 13 percent pinpoint their fears, and 2 percent their smoking, drinking, or drug use--or abuse. But everyone has their own temptation.

When we are young, sexual temptation may be our greatest nemesis. We modern parents put our kids in an awful bind. We want our young to know that sexuality is a good thing, a blessed thing given to us not only for the propagation of the race but also to bind man and woman together. But we also want them to know that it is a dangerous thing--a gift God has given for enjoyment within the relationship of marriage.

Years ago a man wrote *READER'S DIGEST* recently to say that when his daughters reached dating age, he and their mother told them some boys would be perfect gentlemen on a date and some would have other things on their minds. If the girls ever felt backed into a corner, their daughters were instructed to give the boy their phone and tell him, "Call my dad. If he says what you're suggesting is okay with him, then it's okay with me." The phone was never actually used, but one was brought out on a few occasions.

The oldest girl, now 27, married recently. Late on the evening of her wedding day, the phone rang. When Dad picked it up, the newlywed daughter's smiling voice asked, "Dad, Bob just made an interesting suggestion. Is it okay now?" Parents get out your phones. I wish that every family had the kind of communication that obviously existed in that family. You don't have to be a prude to realize that the

head-long rush toward free and open sex has reaped some terrible consequences for our society. Babies born out of wedlock, Hollywood starlets glorying in becoming single parents, AIDS, and many scarred and broken lives. But even more important to the people most of us know, the sexual revolution has robbed us of that feeling of a lifelong and unique commitment that once characterized marriage. It's all a package, you see. It has to do with personal discipline and values and the C-word--commitment. Temptation.

IT'S A REALITY IN ALL OUR LIVES. Even our Lord faced temptation. Luke's telling of the temptation of Jesus ends with these words: "the devil left him, to return at the appointed time." Temptation. It's a real force in our lives.

Did you know that over eight million children disappeared in the United States between 1987 and 1990? When I first read of this tragedy, I was shocked! Outraged! How could this happen and so little be done about it? However...The year 1987 marked the first time the IRS required proof that children claimed as dependents actually existed. After that, many children started disappearing from income tax forms. Temptation.

Some years ago a hearing clinic at Northwestern University ran some experiments on words that are hard to hear. One of the very hard words to hear, they discovered, is the word "no". Temptation.

For all of us a reality: FOR SOME OF US A RUIN.

Clarence L. Macartney once noted that the first temptation in the history of the human race took place in a garden, and with man at peace with the whole animal creation. The temptation of Jesus, the second Adam, took place in a wilderness, where he was with the wild beasts.' That contrast between the first temptation and the temptation of Jesus, one in a garden, the other in a desert, is a picture of the ruin which had been wrought by sin.

Nathan Horwitt, a mushroom expert, has said that a mushroom which is properly known as AMANITA PHALLOIDES, is the deadliest of all mushrooms. It is also possibly the tastiest, says Horwitt. Asked how he knows this, he explains that the poison is slow-acting and that often the first symptom of poisoning is communicated when the victim remarks, "Last night I ate the most delicious mushroom of my life." Just like temptation.

So many times we read or hear the stories of star athletes, on every continent, who spend their lives in training; dedicated to becoming the best they can be...and then there comes the party, or the steroids, or the drugs, or the gun. Temptation. The reality and the ruin.

Don't they know better? we ask. Knowing better does not seem to be enough.

Just like a person who is being tempted. He knows better, but the lure is almost irresistible. Spouses KNOW that cheating can end their marriages and lead them to disgrace. Smokers KNOW that tobacco will coat their lungs and may prematurely end their lives in a horrible way. Business people KNOW that sooner or later shady practices will be exposed, but knowing is not enough. Something more is needed. Temptation--the reality. And then the ruin.

BUT THERE IS A REMEDY. The remedy to temptation is not will power. It would be so easy if will power were the remedy. Just say no. Isn't that what they say? But some people have no will power, and sometimes will power isn't enough. They are like Mark Twain who said, "I can resist everything except temptation." Some of us are stronger than others. Much of this was determined in our childhood.

You may have seen that study last fall about children, marshmallows and delayed gratification. Researchers found that children who can delay gratification by saving marshmallows until a later time turn out to be happier and better adjusted later in life. No wonder. The disciplined life IS a better life.

The problem is that many of us are in the second group—the group that gave in and ate the marshmallows immediately. And no amount of moralizing seems to help. We wish it were not so, but it is. We are weak. We are vulnerable. We need a remedy to help us deal with the tempter. And there is only one that works. It is to make such a positive commitment of our lives that we do not have time nor place for the negative, the destructive, the sinful.

In Homer's epic poem *THE ODYSSEY*, the sirens were mythical, evil creatures, half-bird and half-women, who lived on an island surrounded by submerged, jagged rocks. As ships approached the island, the sirens would sing beautiful seductive songs, luring the sailors to their deaths. When Odysseus' ship approached the island, he ordered his crew to fill their ears with wax to escape the lure of the sirens' songs. This done, he commanded them to bind him to the mast as they passed the island so that he could not change his orders. On another occasion, however, when the ship of Orpheus sailed by that same island, Orpheus sang a song of his own that was so beautiful and divine that his sailors did not even listen to the sirens' music!

We need to fill our lives with a song so beautiful that we cannot even hear the song of the Tempter. But how do we do that? How do we apply this remedy to the reality and the ruin of Temptation? Only one way. A REDEEMER.

Richard Lederer collects funny signs. Some of these are simply the result of people in foreign countries having difficulty translating into English. He says that at the entrance to a hotel swimming pool on the French Riviera there is a sign that reads like this: Swimming is forbidden in the absence of a savior. Maybe the person who put up that sign knew English better than we may suppose. Not only swimming but life itself should not be lived in the absence of a Savior.

Kenneth Filkins has caught this beautifully in a poem entitled "The Pit." Let me share just a little bit of it with you:

A man fell into a pit and he couldn't get out.

BUDDHA said: "Your pit is only a state of mind."

A HINDU said: "This pit is for purging you and making you more perfect."

CONFUCIUS said: "If you would have listened to me, you would never have fallen into that pit."

A NEW AGER said: "Maybe you should network with some other pit dwellers."

A SELF-PITYING PERSON said: "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit."

A NEWS REPORTER said: "Could I have the exclusive story on your pit?"

AN I.R.S. MAN said: "Have you paid your taxes on that pit?"

A COUNTY INSPECTOR said: "Do you have a permit for that pit?"

A REALIST said: "That's a pit."

An IDEALIST said: "The world shouldn't have pits."

An OPTIMIST said: "Things could be worse."

A PESSIMIST said: "Things will get worse."

JESUS, SEEING THE MAN, TOOK HIM BY THE HAND AND LIFTED HIM OUT OF THE PIT.

A pit is an awful place to be--particularly the pit of temptation. But there is one who will help. I don't know another lasting remedy to the reality and ruin of temptation. Fill your life so full of Christ, the Redeemer, that there simply is no room for the tempter to do his evil deeds.