

THE GREATEST TEMPTATION OF ALL

Matthew 16:21-26

Gary Richmond, a zookeeper at the Los Angeles Zoo, remembers the strict instructions he was given when he received the master keys to all the animals' cages. His supervisor made it very clear that constant vigilance was necessary for ensuring the safety of the animals and all the people at the zoo. Gary's greatest responsibility would be to guard his keys and to make sure he used them wisely--only opening or closing those doors that absolutely had to be opened or closed.

For the first few months, Gary was the model of vigilance. But one day, Gary was tending to the polar bear when he realized he had made a horrific mistake. The massive polar bear, easily the size of three large men, was the most dangerous animal at the zoo. He hated humans and had tried to maul anyone who passed his cage. He had also killed two female polar bears. Gary had unlocked one door in Ivan's cage in order to let Ivan walk out in the sunshine in his enclosed space. But Gary realized that he had forgotten to close and lock another door at the end of the hallway, one which the bear could easily enter. If it did so, Gary would have no way to escape. And he knew the bear would attack him.

The bear, a creature of habit, was just finishing his morning pacing in the sunshine. The bear always paced for the same amount of time, in the same pattern, every day. In a few seconds, the bear would be finished pacing and would look for a way to get back in its cage. If it noticed the open door, it would surely come in. And the door was at the end of a hallway.

Gary reasoned that, if the bear did not alter its routine one iota, he would have about seventeen seconds in which to run down the hallway, close and lock the door, and pray that the bear didn't notice him.

When the bear turned to make its last amble in the sunshine, Gary sprinted down the hallway. He wasn't sure if the physical effort or the fear was making his heart seemingly burst in his chest. He reached the door only to see the bear nearby looking right at him. He pulled the door shut and scrambled to lock it. As he sank to the floor in a quivering mass of spent adrenaline, he looked up and saw the bear staring down at him through the window.

We can guess that the advice to guard his keys took on new meaning to Gary Richmond after that.

LIFE CALLS FOR VIGILANCE, DOESN'T IT? One little letdown can get us in a whole lot of difficulty.

Jesus faced the Tempter throughout his life. Remember when Satan tempted him in the wilderness? In Luke's Gospel the story ends with these words: "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until AN OPPORTUNE TIME." (4:13, RSV) Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." What did he mean by that? Did he mean that God might somehow tempt us to do wrong? Of course not. He was saying that life has its snares. The Tempter is always present. We need God's help if we are to avoid the dangers that surround everyone who seeks to live the best life possible.

In October of 1995, Jesse A. Williams, a veteran of alcohol-treatment programs, filed a lawsuit against his former employer Anheuser-Busch in Tampa, Florida. Williams' complaint was that the company supplied him the regular employee allotment of four free cases of beer a month and then fired him for alcoholism.

For Jesse Williams, temptation was alcohol. Alcohol is a problem for many people. Drunk driving is the most frequent crime for which people are arrested most Western Countries. The slaughter by drunk drivers continues on our highways. The situation is worse in North American than here in Europe, however studies show that over half of our young people in the 7th through 12th grades drink. More than a million binge drink on a weekly basis—five drinks, one after another. In fact, 1 in every 8 eighth graders--or 13 percent--report recent binge drinking--and 1 in 4 eighth graders--or 25 percent--are occasional drinkers. And these numbers seem to be consistent

And why not? The typical American consumes 100,000 advertisements for alcoholic beverages before reaching legal drinking age. Someday we're going to have to face up to the fact that we have a serious problem. For some, temptation is alcohol.

For others, temptation is a piece of plastic. It is so easy to buy when you know you're not going to see the statement for 45 days, and then you have another 30 days to pay it off. And if you are up to the limit, no big deal. Just get another card. You get offers all the time. You can get a cash advance on one card to help pay off another.

One counselor says that the first step in getting our finances under control is to quit using credit cards (and ATM cards too). "Take those cards out of your wallets and purses and file them," he says, "so they will no longer burn a hole in your pocket." He tells about one person who put his cards in a bowl of water and put the bowl in the freezer. To use the cards was a major act of unfreezing the big chunk of ice with their cards in the middle.

Not that long ago I was at a gathering when they had a contest. The person with the most credit cards won. The person sitting next to me had sixteen credit cards. How much is enough? Life calls for vigilance, for temptation is with us always.

But there is a second thing we need to see: **THE ABILITY TO RESIST TEMPTATION IS ONE OF THE GREAT SUCCESS SKILLS WE CAN ACQUIRE.**

Many of you are familiar by now with the famous Marshmallow Experiment. I bring it up again only because the implications are so staggering. It turns out that a scientist can see the future by watching four-year-olds interact with a marshmallow. The researcher invites the children, one by one, into a plain room and begins the gentle torment. "You can have this marshmallow right now," he says. "But if you wait while I run an errand, you can have two marshmallows when I get back." And then he leaves.

Some children grab for the treat the minute he's out the door. Some last a few minutes before they give in. But others are determined to wait. They cover their eyes; they put their heads down; they sing to themselves; they try to play games or even fall asleep. When the researcher returns, he gives these children their hard-earned marshmallows. And then, science waits for them to grow up.

By the time the children reach high school, something remarkable has happened. A survey of the children's parents and teachers found that those who as four-year-olds had the fortitude to hold out for the second marshmallow generally grew up to be better adjusted, more popular, adventurous, confident and dependable teenagers. The children who gave in to temptation early on were more likely to be lonely, easily frustrated and stubborn. They buckled under stress and shied away from challenges. And when some of the students in the two groups took the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the kids who had held out longer scored an average of 210 points higher.

The ability to resist temptation--to delay gratification—to control one's urges--is one of life's great success skills. The observation that Robert E. Lee is said to have made a century and a half ago is still valid. A mother asked this man of deep character what was the greatest lesson she could teach her child. Lee's response was, "Teach him to deny himself."

Life calls for vigilance. Temptation is always at hand. The ability to resist temptation is one of life's great success skills. But there is one temptation that towers above all others. **THE GREATEST TEMPTATION IN LIFE IS TO ACCEPT LESS THAN THE BEST GOD HAS FOR US.**

Jesus was harsh with his good friend Simon Peter. Peter, after all, was just showing concern for the Master. Jesus was explaining to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die and on the third day, be raised to life. Simon Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" Simon Peter said. "This shall never happen to you." It was then that Jesus blurted out those words that are so familiar to us: "Get thee behind me, Satan, for you are not on the side of God, but of men!" Was Jesus calling Simon Peter Satan? Not really. Jesus was but acknowledging that the Tempter was still testing him and the greatest temptation of all was for him to forsake the mission to which God had called him. Forsake the conflict--forsake the cross. And, friends, that is our greatest temptation as well.

God has created us in God's own image. God has placed within us dreams and abilities. God has placed us in a world where certain jobs must be done if God's world is to function as it was designed. The saddest thing we can do--indeed, the greatest sin we can commit--is to squander our lives, to ignore that God-given potential that lies within each of us. We have been called to be co-creators with God. We have been called to be agents of God's Kingdom. We have been called to be reconcilers with Christ of a broken and dying humanity. We cannot settle for anything less than giving our very best to the world for which Christ died.

You see, the tragedy of the other temptations that come to us in life--whether they be drug and alcohol abuse, shoddy financial practices, the violation of our marital vows or whatever--is that they have a way of deflecting us from the course God has established for us--the path that leads to a fulfilling life, an abundant life, a life in which we become all that God calls us to become. The greatest temptation of all is the temptation to settle for less than the best God has to offer! And that temptation comes to all of us whatever our level of devotion to Christ.

Bob Hodges, a Presbyterian minister in Rogersville, Tennessee, tells about duck hunting with a friend of his on Cherokee Lake in East Tennessee. His friend, Riley, who had just recently given his life to Christ, began to ask some serious questions about his Christian pilgrimage. Riley's old friends were making it very difficult for him to remain consistent in his obedience and commitment to Christ. They seemed to delight in trying to get him to fall back into the old patterns of life. They ridiculed him for spending so much time with "the preacher." Riley asked, "Why is it that I'm having more trouble since I became a Christian than I ever did when I was lost? Everything seems to go wrong. I'm having such a struggle!"

Bob Hodges spoke up, "I'll tell you why, Riley. A couple of ducks fly over and you shoot. You kill one and injure the other. They both fall into the lake. What do you do? You have to get out of the boat and go pick up the ducks, but which one do you go after first?"

"Well," Riley drawled, "that's easy. I go after the injured one first. The dead one ain't goin' nowhere!"

Hodges said, "And that's the way it is with the devil. He goes after injured Christians. He's not going to bother with the man dead in his sin. But the minute you give your life to Christ, you'd better get ready; the devil is going to come after you. He is going to chase you; he's going to make it hard on you."

You and I might not say it exactly that way, but the message is on target. Life calls for vigilance. There are temptations out there that would destroy us if we would let them just as that polar bear would have surely attacked his keeper who forgot to lock the cage. But the greatest temptation we face is the temptation to be less than what Christ has called us to be. "Get thee behind me Satan," said Jesus. Those are words that we need to speak when we are tempted to turn back from our life's mission as well.