

**“THE WAY OF THE CROSS:
Surviving Temptation”**

A sermon preached by
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7ⁱ Then the LORD God took the man in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep an eye onⁱⁱ it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From all the garden’s trees, you may eat,^{”iii} ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat from it, for on the day that you eat from it you will die.^{”iv}

Now the serpent was the most sensible^v of all living things of the field, which the LORD God made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say not to eat from any of the garden’s trees?” ² The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat ³ from the fruit of the trees of the garden, but from the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God says, ‘You must neither eat from it nor touch it or you will die.’” ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, “You won’t die, ⁵ for God knows that on the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will become like gods – knowing good and evil. ⁶ The woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was desirable to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable for wisdom. She took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Matthew 4:1-11^{vi} Then Jesus was led into the wilderness^{vii} by the Spirit to be tested^{viii} by the devil. ² He fasted forty days and forty nights, and then he was hungry. ³ So, the Examiner^{ix} came close by and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” ⁴ But he answered, “It is written, ‘People shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God’s mouth.’”^x ⁵ Then the devil takes him to the holy city and stands him up on the summit of the temple. ⁶ Then he says to him, “If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down – for it is written that ‘He will command his angels concerning you’ and ‘On their hands they will lift you up so that you will not stub your foot against a stone.’”^{xi} ⁷ Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘You shall not test^{xii} the Lord your God.’”^{xiii} ⁸ Again the devil takes him up on a very high mountain and shows all the kingdoms of the world and their glory to him. ⁹ Then he says to him, “I will give all these things to you, if you fall down to worship me.” ¹⁰ Then Jesus says to him, “Go, Satan! For it is written, ‘The Lord your God shall be worshiped,’^{xiv} and ‘You shall serve God alone!’”^{xv} ¹¹ So the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and cared for him.

Valentine’s Day is this week, and have you seen those new greeting cards? I saw one. It has some very pretty purple flowers on it, kind of a Van Gogh-ish picture. It says, “Just when I thought I would never find my true love – you came along.” That’s sweet, isn’t it? You open it up, and it says, “My soul has been searching for you since I came into this world.” That’s nice. “All my life,” it says, “I have had this emptiness inside, like a part of me was missing and I was incomplete... And now I can’t imagine my life without you... Even if I have to share you. I love you.”^{xvi}

What?!!! They’re called “infidelity cards,” and they’re the newest thing in greeting cards. The woman behind them (yes, it’s a woman!) said she started making them to help the unfaithful “express their emotions” and to make some money, since she saw “there’s a huge, untapped market.” One card says, “As we each celebrate [the holidays] with our families, I will be thinking of you.”^{xvii}

That’s just wrong, isn’t it? Cashing in on people who succumb to temptation. I mean, doing right is hard enough. Who needs help to do wrong? Any schoolchild knows that doing the wrong thing is easier than doing the right thing, especially when doing right means going against the crowd.

How many times have we gone along and not spoken up when we should have? How many times has someone been hurt by mob mentality?

Think of Lynndie England. You remember her from the photographs of her with sexually humiliated Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prisoners. She pleaded guilty to mistreating the prisoners. When the judge asked about a photograph in which she was smiling, Pfc. England said at first she said, “No, no way... But they were being very persistent, bugging me, so I said ‘OK, whatever... I had a choice, but I chose to do what my friends wanted me to do.”^{xviii}

All of us can choose right from wrong, but there is something within us that wants us to choose wrong over right. There is a tension between what we know we should do and what we want to do. Someone put it well when he said, “We want to be a saint, but we also want to feel every sensation experienced by sinners; we want to be innocent and pure, but we also want to be experienced and taste all of life; we want to serve the poor and have a simple lifestyle, but we also want all the comforts of the rich; we want to have the depth afforded by solitude, but we also do not want to miss anything; we want to pray, but we also want to watch television, read, talk to friends, and go out.”^{xix} Perhaps the poet, Carl Sandburg, put it best when he said, “There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.”^{xx}

When their children asked them why it was so hard to do right, their ancient Israelite parents would tell them a story. They said, “Once upon a time, God made the sky and the earth. There was no one to garden, so God picked up some dirt and shaped it into a man. God called him, “Clay.” God breathed into Clay, and he came alive. God planted a garden for Clay and put him there. God planted good things in the garden, fruit and vegetables for Clay to eat.

There were two special trees in the garden: the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God said, “You can eat anything you want – all you can eat – just don’t eat the fruit of that one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you do, you will die.”

Then, God said Clay needed a partner to help him tend the garden. So, God made all the animals and birds. The man named them all, but none of them made a good partner. So God made Clay go to sleep. He took something close to Clay’s heart, a rib. God took the rib and made a woman. When he woke up, Clay said, “Finally, she is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. Let’s call her, “Woman,” since she was taken out of Man. They were naked, but not ashamed.

One day, Snake came. Of all the animals, Snake was the most sensible, crafty, and shrewd. He asked the woman, “Pssst. Did God *really* say not to eat from any of the garden’s trees?” “No, that’s not what God said,” she replied. “We may eat from any tree except the one in the middle of the garden. God says, “Don’t eat it or touch it or you’ll die.” Now, you know and I know that’s not what God said. God just said, “Don’t eat it.” God didn’t say anything about touching it. The woman has taken a lot of flak for that. It may help to remember, though, that she wasn’t even created when God said that. Did the man tell her not to even touch it?

Anyway, Snake said, “You won’t die. God knows your eyes will open when you eat it. You’ll be like gods. You’ll know good and evil.” She looked at the tree. It looked okay. Snake said it would make you smarter. Who doesn’t want to be smarter? She picked some fruit and ate it. She shared some with her husband, who was there, silent, standing by like a good husband. He ate some too. Snake was right. They didn’t die. Their eyes opened, just like he said. They gained knowledge too, but not the kind they expected. They knew they were naked, so they ran to the nearest tree – a fig tree – and made themselves some underwear. Have you ever touched a fig leaf? It’s like sandpaper, not exactly the best material for underwear.

Isn’t that just like us? They were tempted by food, and so many of our temptations are physical. Eating more than I need is certainly one of my temptations. Many of us have physical temptations: food, drink, illegal drugs, tobacco, sex, just to name a few. Physical pleasure is a tremendous temptation. The man and woman were also tempted to test God, and we are too. These are temptations of faith. “Is God who God says God is?” “Can I get away with this? What about this?”

Perhaps our greatest temptation is self-idolatry, the temptation to “become like gods” through knowledge. In a day when the power to create life and destroy life is in our hands, what a tremendous temptation that is, to become like gods.

Our temptations are the same, and so are the consequences. You remember what happened. The man and the woman were modeling their fig-leaf underwear when they heard God walking in the garden. They hid. That’s the first consequence: **alienation**. When we do what we know we ought not do, we get separated from God.

God called them. “Where are you?” The man spoke first. He said, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself.” That’s the second consequence: **fear**. When God comes near, so near that we can see how good God is, we realize how short we fall in comparison, and we feel ashamed. How could we stand in the presence of such goodness?

God said, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat that fruit I told you not to eat?” You remember what the man said. “That woman you gave me gave it to me.” God asked her about it. What did she say? “Snake made me do it.” Snake looked around, sheepishly. That’s the third consequence: **blame**. Isn’t that us? It’s never our fault, is it? Martin Luther, who started the Protestant Reformation, once said, “Think of all the squabbles Adam and Eve must have had in the course of their nine hundred years. Eve would say, ‘You at the apple,’ and Adam would retort, ‘You gave it to me.’”^{xxxi}

We never want to take responsibility, and that brings us to the fourth consequence: **brokenness**. Not only are we alienated from God, but our relationships with other people and with our world are broken. God created Man and Woman to bless the world and care for it together. Now, Snake bites man. Man kills Snake. Woman wants Man, but childbirth hurts. Man raises food for Woman, but farming requires hard labor. Everything is broken. That’s how it is today, isn’t it? That’s the meaning of the Fall. The Christian author, G.K. Chesterton once said that the Fall means, “Whatever I am, I am not myself.”^{xxii} We are not as God created us to be.

Several years ago, a statue of Adam fell and broke into pieces at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The statue was 600 years old, carved by the Italian Renaissance artist, Tullio Lombardo. The museum director said, “It will take a great deal of time and skill, but the piece can be restored.”^{xxiii}

The rest of the Bible, from Genesis 4 through Revelation 22 tells us how God is restoring broken humanity. God tries wiping out all the sinners, but that doesn’t work. God makes a bunch of rules and demands obedience, but that doesn’t work. God sends prophets to remind everyone about the rules, but that doesn’t work. Finally, God comes in Jesus. God healed our broken world by living, suffering, and dying as one of us. No more alienation. No more fear and shame. When we do something wrong, we can take responsibility for it and do better because God loves us anyway. The writer of Hebrews says Jesus is not “unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but...in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”^{xxiv}

Matthew tells us that in our gospel reading this morning. Jesus understands our temptation. Jesus was tempted in the same ways as Adam and Eve. Physically, he was tempted to make food for himself by turning stones to bread. He was tempted to test God by throwing himself off the tiptop of the Temple. He was tempted by idolatry, to worship something other than God. Yet, Jesus passed the test.

In his teaching about temptation, Jesus was pretty radical. If you can’t keep your eyes off pretty girls, just pluck your eye out. If your hand is your problem, cut it off.^{xxv} Jesus said do whatever you have to do to overcome temptation. Amy Winehouse, if you need to go to rehab, go, go, go. Britney Spears, stay as long as it takes. He says the same to you and me: do what you have to do.

It also helps us to see how Jesus dealt with temptation in his own life. Jesus survived his temptation by doing two things. First of all, Jesus fought temptation by denying himself. Let’s say that together: **Jesus fought temptation by denying himself**. John Wesley, who founded

Methodism, said, “Self-denial of all kinds is the very life and soul of piety.”^{xxvi} He was saying that if you want to be like Jesus, you have to deny yourself. Self-denial makes us focus less on our desires and more on God. It gives us sympathy for those who suffer without choice. Self-denial also helps us to bless others. When you fast, use the money you would have spent to buy some canned goods for our food pantry. If you give up shopping, donate some of your old clothes. Bless others with your self-denial.

Secondly, Jesus fought temptation with scripture. Let’s say that together: **Jesus fought temptation with scripture.** Every time the devil tempted him, Jesus quoted scripture. Jesus knew it by heart. Each and every one of us should read a little scripture each day. Now, I know how most of us read the Bible. We get gung-ho and start to read it front-to-back. “Genesis 1:1: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* That’s nice. Hmm. Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel. We make it to chapter five, and we hit the “begat barrier.” We don’t even make it to Methuselah, and we give up. We start flipping. Get over to Matthew. “Hmm. More begats???” Jesus, yeah, know that. I’ll just skip on over to the end. AAAAAAHHHHH!!!! That was scary! I’m never going to open this book again!”

If you don’t read scripture every day, start off easy. Pick up a copy of *The Upper Room*. Read the recommended scripture reading every day, read the devotional, and pray. You can do that in five to ten minutes. If you want to go a little further, read Matthew’s gospel during Lent. There are 28 chapters. Read four chapters a week for the next five weeks. Read a chapter a day during Holy Week. On Easter Sunday, get up at dawn and read chapter 28. If you run into something that troubles you, call the preacher. He likes to talk about stuff like that.

Jesus overcame temptation by denying himself and turning to scripture. Let us do the same. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Literally, *keep*, or *watch*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hebrew: *to eat you may eat*.

^{iv} Hebrew: *to die you will die*.

^v Or *crafty*, *shrewd*.

^{vi} Translation, Hammett N. Evans, 2008.

^{vii} Or *desert*.

^{viii} Or *tried*, *tempted*.

^{ix} Or *Tempter*, *Tester*.

^x Deuteronomy 8:3.

^{xi} Psalm 91:11-12.

^{xii} Or *tempt*, *try*; note: this is what the devil is doing to Jesus.

^{xiii} Deuteronomy 6:16.

^{xiv} Deuteronomy 6:13.

^{xv} Deuteronomy 10:20.

^{xvi} www.secretlovercollection.com.

^{xvii} Alex Johnson, “When You Care Enough to Risk Everything,” msnbc.com (8-17-05).

^{xviii} T. A. Badger, “Reservist Says Peer Pressure Led to Abuse at Abu Ghraib,” *The Louisville Courier Journal* (5-03-05).

^{xix} Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing* (Doubleday, 1999), p. 9.

^{xx} Sandburg, Carl (1878-1967), quoted by Richard Hansen in “A Good Mystery,” *Preaching Today Audio* issue 253.

^{xxi} Luther, Martin, “Martin Luther – The Early Years,” *Christian History*, no. 34.

^{xxii} G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Ignatius Press, Reprint, 1995).

^{xxiii} “Museum to mend shattered statue,” *BBC News* (10-10-02).

^{xxiv} Hebrews 4:15 (NRSV).

^{xxv} See Matthew 5:29-30.

^{xxvi} John Wesley, quoted in *Christian History*, no. 2.