

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

1“When you come into the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance, and have taken possession of it, and live in it, 2you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the LORD your God will choose, to make his name to dwell there.

3And you shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, ‘I declare this day to the LORD your God that I have come into the land which the LORD swore to our fathers to give us.’ 4Then the priest shall take the basket from your hand, and set it down before the altar of the LORD your God.

5“And you shall make response before the LORD your God, ‘A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. 6And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. 7Then we cried to the LORD the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; 8and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; 9and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. 10And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O LORD, hast given me.’ And you shall set it down before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God; 11and you shall rejoice in all the good which the LORD your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.

Psalms 91:1-2, 9-16 (UMH 810)

Romans 10:8b-13

The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); 9because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. 11The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” 12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. 13For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Luke 4:1-13

1And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit 2for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. 3The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.” 4And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’” 5And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, 6and said to him, “To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. 7If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.” 8And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’” 9And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; 10for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,’ 11and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” 12And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’” 13And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Revised Standard Version of the Bible

Tempted Again

I decided to call this sermon “Tempted Again” because I preached a sermon on temptation two years ago this month. The sermon was based on the passage from the Gospel of Matthew that tells a very similar story to today’s passage from Luke. A passage about the temptation of Jesus by the Devil. I was tempted to dust off that old sermon and preach it again, but I resisted temptation - and instead decided to prepare a new sermon for today.

Temptation is an everyday occurrence for all of us. Jim Grant in Reader's Digest told about an overweight businessman who decided it was time to shed some excess pounds. He took his new diet seriously, even changing his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery. One morning, however, he showed up at work with a gigantic coffee cake. Everyone in the office scolded him, but his smile remained nonetheless. *"This is a special coffee cake,"* he explained. *"I accidentally drove by the bakery this morning and there in the window was a host of goodies. I felt it was no accident, so I prayed, 'Lord, if you want me to have one of those delicious coffee cakes, let there be a parking spot open right in front. 'And sure enough, the eighth time around the block, there it was!"*

The story from Luke is a familiar one to Christians. Jesus goes out into the wilderness of Judea to fast for 40 days and prepare for his ministry. While he is there, the devil confronts him and tempts him three times - in three different ways.

³The devil said to him, *“If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”* ⁴And Jesus answered him, *“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone.’”* ⁵And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, ⁶and said to him, *“To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours.”* ⁸And Jesus answered him, *“It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.’”* ⁹And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, *“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; ¹⁰for it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,’ ¹¹and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’”* ¹²And Jesus answered him, *“It is said, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’”*

Jesus resists the temptations of the Devil and has an answer to all the things the Devil tempts him with. He serves as a shining example of how to resist temptation.

This is the point in the sermon where you are probably expecting me to tell you that you have to resist temptation, just like Jesus did. But I'm not going to do that. At least not yet.

When un-religious people describe Christians, they often label us as uptight, prudish, boring, unexciting people. They say, "*I don't want to be like that.*" Billy Joel sums up the attitude pretty well in his song Only the Good Die Young.

*They say there's a heaven for those who will wait
Some say it's better but I say it ain't
I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints
the Sinners are much more fun...
You know that only the good die young.*

I suppose that as a group, we Christians have brought it on ourselves. Because there are many, many Christians who could be described that way. They probably become that way after being lectured repeatedly about resisting temptation in countless sermons over the years. But it doesn't have to be that way.

If you read the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it doesn't take long to get the idea that Jesus and his disciples were a group of wild party boys compared to the Pharisees. Time after time, the Pharisees criticize Jesus or his disciples for breaking one of their laws, or ignoring one of their rules. They ate with the wrong people, drank wine at parties, and didn't keep the strict laws about not working on the Sabbath, among other things.

When Jesus criticizes the Pharisees - as he does repeatedly - it is about their too-strict interpretation of the Jewish Law - of putting rules ahead of people - of being uptight and prudish.

So my question is: If we are followers of Jesus - trying to emulate his life and actions, then why do some of us behave more like the Pharisees?

Now I'm not suggesting you go wild, ignoring rules, and breaking laws. But maybe you could examine your life and your behavior and see if all the things you are doing in the name of Jesus are actually necessary.

A fellow bought a new Mercedes and was out on an interstate road for a nice evening drive. The top was down, the breeze was blowing through his hair, and he decided to open her up. As the needle jumped up to 80 miles per hour, he suddenly saw a flashing red and blue light behind him.

"There ain't no way they can catch a Mercedes," he thought to himself, and opened her up further. The needle hit 90, 100, 110, and finally 120 with the lights still flashing behind him. *"What on earth am I doing?"* he thought and pulled over. The cop came up to him, took his licence without a word and examined it and the car.

"I've had a tough shift and this is my last pull over. I don't feel like more paperwork, so if you can give me an excuse for your driving that I haven't heard before, you can go!" *"Last week my wife ran off with a cop,"* the man said, *"and I was afraid you were trying to bring her back!"*

"Have a nice night," said the officer.

Ok, so going 120 on the highway is not such a good idea.

Temptation is all around us. Sometimes it is something small, like the temptation to buy a coffee cake - and sometimes it's big. A coffee cake isn't going to cause any harm, other than maybe putting on an extra pound around our waists. When the temptation is big, however - with big consequences - then we need to think long and hard about what to do.

God is our parent. In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly refers to Him as Father - but I like to think of Him as a heavenly combination of the best Father and Mother there could ever be. Those of you that are a mother or father, or those of you who had a mother or a father when you were growing up, know what that means.

Parents are constantly worrying about what their children are doing and what bad

thing could happen. Sometimes, even after they have grown up and moved out. Parents try to protect their children from harm. Anyone who has tried to prevent a small child from touching a hot stove knows what I'm talking about.

Johnny Dean tell this story: *When my oldest son was about three years old, I was outside doing some yard work one afternoon. I took Kevin outside to play while I trimmed the hedges. Holding his hand, I knelt down beside him so that we could look at each other face to face.*

Slowly and carefully I said, "Now, Kevin, you can play here in our front yard. You can go next door and play in your friend's front yard. You can ride your Big Wheel up and down the driveway. You can go in the back yard and play with the dog or play on your swing. You can go back inside and watch television. You can stay here and watch me trim the hedges.

These are all the things you have my permission to do. But you can NOT go out into the street. It is very dangerous there. You cannot play in the street. Do you understand what I'm saying?" And Kevin solemnly nodded his head. "Yes, Daddy," he said. I let go of his hand and he ran straight to the curb, put one foot in the street, and then turned his head toward me and smiled, as if to say, "Foolish mortal!"

When Jesus resists temptation - when God wants us to resist temptation - when we really *should* resist temptation - is when it is one of those situations where giving in to temptation will hurt us and others.

Situations like having one too many drinks and then getting in your car to drive home. The temptation for one more drink can lead to a tragedy. Or the temptation to take money from your employer. Long after the money is gone, the prison sentence remains.

A dying man gathered his best friends - a lawyer, doctor and a pastor - at his bedside and handed each of them an envelope containing \$25,000 in cash. He made them each promise that after he died - during his funeral they would place the three envelopes in his coffin. He told them that he wanted to have enough money to enjoy the next life.

A week later the man died. At the funeral, the lawyer and doctor and the pastor each concealed an envelope in the coffin and bid their old client and friend farewell.

By chance, the three met several months later. Soon the pastor, feeling guilty, blurted out a confession - saying that there was only \$10,000 in the envelope he placed in the coffin. He felt, rather than waste all the money, that he would send it to a missionary in South America. He asked for their forgiveness.

The doctor, moved by the pastor's sincerity, confessed that he too had kept some of the money for a worthy medical charity. The envelope, he admitted, had only \$8000 in it. He said that he too could not bring himself to waste the money so frivolously when it could be used to benefit others.

By this time the Lawyer was seething with self-righteous outrage. He expressed his deep disappointment in the felonious behavior of two of his oldest and most trusted friends. "I am the only one who kept my promise to our dying friend. I want you both to know that the envelope I placed in the coffin contained the full amount.

The other men looked down in embarrassment and the lawyer continued, "Indeed, only I honored the deathbed wishes of our great friend. My envelope contained my personal check for the entire \$25,000."

A temptation you can give into is to reuse a joke from the last sermon on temptation, like I just did.

To sum up, resisting temptation isn't about becoming an uptight, prudish Christian Pharisee. Jesus doesn't want that. In the 10th chapter of John, Jesus says "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" and I take him at his word. What God wants - what Jesus taught - is to avoid those temptations that seem harmless at the time, but lead to hurt. That lead to death. That lead to ruin.

Amen.