

"FACE TO FACE WITH THE TEMPTER"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
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INTRODUCTION

Today we are dealing with a subject that touches us all. It is temptation. None of us is too old or too young, too sophisticated or too naive, to escape the snare of the tempter. Temptation can lead us into all kinds of trouble and all kinds of problems.

DEVELOPMENT

For instance there was a story in the papers not too long ago about an Alabama man who carefully planned a simple robbery. He entered a house in broad daylight and began clearing out the valuables. In doing so he came across a gun and accidentally shot himself in the calf as he was looking it over. Quite obviously he could not risk taking himself to a hospital.

It was about this time that the woman who lived at that address returned home from her shopping. The burglar had no choice but to tie her up and that added seriously to his original offense of breaking and entering.

Now wounded, the man needed a car and so he stole the car belonging to the woman he had tied up. Grand auto-theft. However, the pain and loss of blood from his leg wound was causing him to drive rather erratically. It caught the attention of a police officer. The burglar pulled off the road in his stolen car and the policeman pulled up behind him. The fleeing criminal, now getting more and more desperate, shot through the windshield of the patrol car and wounded the officer. However, the patrol car was still moving forward and somehow managed to run over the burglar.

The car didn't do much damage because the burglar was in a ditch as the police car passed over him, neither that nor the complication of the attempted shooting of the policeman helped to "make his day".

Next, the Alabama man fled into the nearby woods on foot. Somewhere back in the woods, he apparently came close to a moonshine still or a marijuana patch. At least that was the best explanation offered up for why someone put three .22 caliber slugs in his posterior. Now, obviously in no shape to walk, he stole another vehicle. He had to crawl a ways to get to the car.

When the police finally caught up with him, he had been shot four times and run over once. He faced charges for attempted murder, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, two counts of grand auto-theft, and a host of lesser crimes. All this in an attempt to cover up a burglary! Now this is a true story with no exaggeration. It reminds us that temptation is a very real fact in our lives and it brings all matters of complications into our lives.

Today's scripture lesson reminds us that Jesus was victorious over the tempter. And how I wish it could be that way for each of us. Temptation.

A MIRACLE OF RESTRAINT

The Russian novelist, Feodor Dostoyevsky, made this Temptation scene a centerpiece in his master work, The Brothers Karamazov. Ivan Karamazov calls the Temptation the most stupendous miracle on earth: the miracle of restraint. If He had yielded to the Temptation, Jesus would have been a very popular figure, not just with Satan but with all Israel. He would have established Himself beyond dispute.

Just imagine for a moment - stones turned to bread to feed the hungry, a spectacular descent from the pinnacle of the Temple as the crowds gasped in amazement and awe, and finally political appeasement as the foundation of the Kingdom program rather than righteousness and justice. According to Dostoyevsky's view, Satan offered Christ three easy means of inciting belief - miracle, mystery and authority - and Christ refused all three. Again, I say, I wish we could all be so fortunate when temptation confronts us!

REALITY OF TEMPTATION IN OUR LIVES

Let's "dig" into this traditional First Sunday of Lent scripture by

acknowledging, first-off, the reality of temptation in our lives.

None of us is beyond temptation. It is a foolish Christian who treats temptation as no threat, believing he cannot fall. We are all susceptible at times, and if we are not vulnerable in one area, watch out - we usually are in some other area of our lives.

During the early days of the Civil War we were recently told that body armor became a bit of a fad, especially in the north. Some of this body armor did not work very well. In other words, it failed to stop bullets. Some of it actually saved some lives, however. The danger lay in believing it made one invincible.

When the 21st Alabama unit was skirmishing with Union soldiers down in Mississippi, one Union soldier was boldly exposing himself to fire from the rebels. He was wearing body armor. Twice Confederate sharpshooters hit him but with no effect. Then a third sharpshooter aimed for the soldier's head. That ended the matter.

Now only a fool deliberately exposes himself to gunfire or temptation! Better persons than you or I have given into the Siren's luring song. The Jim Bakkers and the Ivan Boeskys, and the scores of other prominent persons who have fallen to lust or greed or to any of our darker passions are no different than you or I. Put this down then as point one: temptation is a reality for all of us.

TEMPTATION SLIPS UP ON US BEFORE WE RECOGNIZE ITS SERIOUSNESS

Generally
temptation

slips up on us before we recognize the seriousness of it. This is point two.

In her autobiography, Lauren Bacall described how she became romantically involved with Humphrey Bogart. Bogart was married at the time, but his marriage was going badly and his wife had a problem with alcohol. Bacall and Bogart were thrown into constant close contact filming the movie, To Have and Have Not. Bacall says,

"From the start of the movie, as Bogie and I got to know each other better - as the joking got more so - as we had more fun together - so the scenes changed little by little, our relationship strengthened on screen and involved us without our even knowing it."

Bacall's last comment is interesting. "Our relationship strengthened on screen and involved us without our even knowing it". Such is the powerful but sometimes gradual pull of romantic attraction. It is precisely because our romantic and sexual feelings build so strongly and silently that the Bible would

encourage us - yea, command us - to flee certain situations. And if we choose not to flee in the beginning, we really cannot claim later on that we don't know how we became involved in a situation that we shouldn't be involved in.

Remember that the Tempter in the Garden of Eve was a serpent. From the first pages of the Bible we are introduced to the way that sin comes into our lives. It slowly slips in and grabs a quiet foothold before we are aware of it. Temptation slips up on us before we recognize the seriousness of what is happening. Someone has put it this way:

"'Who's there?' I cried,
 'A little lonely sin!'
'Enter' I said,
 And all hell was in."

THE ADDICTIVE NATURE OF TEMPTATION

The third thing we need to see is the "addictive" nature of temptation.

There is something about the very nature of temptation that not only makes it initially attractive, but keeps us coming back for more. Even when the initial thrill has worn off we find ourselves mired in the muck of our own worse instincts.

It's sort of like an incident that occurred last Summer at Fun Town up in Maine not far from where we spend a couple of weeks. The Portland Press Herald wrote it up. It happened on one of those crazy rides that people pay to go on. Riders board these little cars to be spun around at high speed for about four minutes. We've all done it but I haven't done it in many years. Being dizzy and scared is apparently something for which people still pay good money. This ride, however, ceased to operate properly and could not be stopped for about 12 minutes. When people were finally rescued from their thrill, all were sick and some had to be taken to a nearby hospital.

Now, there is something exciting about certain areas that the Bible would tell us to avoid, but the excitement is an emotion one feels when he gets on the ride, not when he gets off. Ask the person whose adultery has cost him his marriage and the respect of his family and friends and colleagues. Ask the person whose carelessness with his company's funds has cost him his job. Ask the person who attends "Gamblers' Anonymous". A little leads to a lot and the end is a tragedy for all concerned.

AVOID TEMPTATION IN THE FIRST PLACE

This is all to say that the only effective way for most of us to deal with temptation is to avoid it in the first place.

You see, we are not Jesus. He could go "eye ball to eye ball" with the Tempter and win. Every day there are many Christians who think they, too, can do the same...that they're strong enough to handle it, but find themselves, too late, weaker than they ever imagined. I say this as your pastor and friend. Some of us are strong. With God's help we can be victorious over temptation. For many of us though - perhaps the majority - victory will be the avoidance of temptation from the very beginning. Watch out for those demons. Walk away from them. Walk away from whatever it is that may be tempting you before it's too late.

Walk away from it!

An old Indian legend sums up something of our situation. Many years ago, Indian braves would go away in solitude to prepare for manhood. One would hike into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers and there, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow.

"I will test myself against that mountain" he thought to himself. He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulder and set off to climb the rugged peak. When he reached the top, he stood on the rim of the world! He could see forever...and his heart filled with pride. But then he heard a rustle at his feet. Looking down he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke. It said,

"I am about to die. It is too cold for me up here, and there is no food. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley".

"No" said the youth. "I know your kind. You are a rattle-snake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me."

"Not so" said the snake. "I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, I will not harm you."

The youth resisted for a while, but this was a very persuasive snake. At last the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. And there he laid it down gently. Suddenly the snake coiled, rattled and leaped, biting him on the leg.

"But you promised" cried the youth in pain. "You knew what I was when you picked me up" said the snake and it slithered away...leaving the youth to die.

A PARABLE It's a powerful little parable. The snake could be drugs, alcohol, extramarital sex, greed or a host of other attractions forbidden by God and by our good sense. Yes, the best protection any of us have is avoidance. Try to remember that and save yourself a lot of trouble.

We read in the Gospel that Jesus resisted the Tempter. "Angels came and ministered to Him". I like that line. Perhaps some of us can put ourselves in the presence of the Tempter and resist as well. But I'm not so sure. I wouldn't bet on it. Too much is at stake. Temptation is a reality in our lives and it slips up on us before we realize its seriousness. It can be so addictive, and even when it ceases being enjoyable, we find ourselves in its snare. So I say: the surest path to victory lies in avoidance. Even then, "with the help of angels"

That poor Alabama burglar sure found himself in a heap of trouble - shot four times, run over, arrested for auto theft, attempted murder, armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon and a host of lesser crimes. All of this in an attempt to cover up a burglary. But that's the way it so often happens when we open the door only a tiny crack to temptation.

"Then Jesus said to him, 'Begone, Satan!.....then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him."

PRAYER

Lord, in the quiet of this hour before You, we would pause to ask for a surer knowledge of who we are and what we are all about.

Be with each of us in those times when we are being tempted and tested. If we can recall a time when we loved You more, restore. If we have become good friends with some favorite sin, rebuke. If the flame of our commitment to the world's great need flickers dimly, rekindle. If along the way a relationship once cherished stands endangered through some careless word or action, real or imagined, reunite.

Show us the relevance of Christ in the wilderness being tempted for the life we live within and the world we make for others....that we may no longer live to ourselves, but unto Him whom we call Saviour, Lord and Friend. In His name we now pray. Amen.