

"ONE ON ONE WITH THE DEVIL"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 5, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

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Put this down as the first point of today's message. There comes a time when all of us must "confront Satan" and go "one on one" with the Devil. In other words, there are times when all of us are tempted. None of us ever escapes some form of temptation. And some of us are tempted more than others. It's a part of life and seldom does a day go by that we are not wrestling with temptation in one form or another.

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"Have any of you ever been faced with temptation and with the help of Jesus somehow resisted the temptation?"

One woman said, "yes" and she went on to describe how just the week before there had been some confusion in the checkout line in the supermarket. Before she knew it, she said...she was standing in the parking lot with a loaf of bread that she had not paid for. She said that because of her Christian convictions she went back into the store and paid for it. All present smiled and nodded their heads..."yes...she had certainly done the right thing!"

Dr. Willimon asked if anyone else wished to share. A young woman who was attending the Bible study for the first time raised her hand. Her name was Verleen and she was a bit different from the rest of the women who were present. She lived over on the other side of town. She began to share, saying:

"A couple of years ago I was into cocaine really big. You know what that's like. You know how that stuff makes you crazy".

The other ladies in the class didn't quite know how to respond to that. She told the women that a few years before she and her boyfriend had robbed a gas station. She said it was as simple as taking candy from a baby and that night her boyfriend also wanted to rob a "convenience store", but something inside of Verleen told her it was wrong. Her boyfriend beat her up for refusing to go along with him...but she said she felt good saying "no"....

"...cause that was the only time in my life I ever said no to anything" (This is what she told the group....)

There was a bit of uneasy silence. Through the stunned silence of that moment of discomfort, Dr. Willimon muttered,

"Well....er, uh...that's resisting temptation...and that's what...it's sort of what this text is all about...."

And then he led the group in a closing prayer and they departed...which reminds us that temptation is relative. We need to be aware of and sensitive to the fact that there are people all around us who are tempted daily with situations that you and I cannot even imagine. "The Devil is in the details" (Marcia Clark)

Out in the wilderness for forty days Jesus confronted evil head on. He was tempted by Satan just as we all are tempted. We all face temptations large and small. And one doesn't have to travel to the Dead Sea region to be in the wilderness. One can be in the wilderness standing on a street corner of this city, saying, "should I? Or, shouldn't I?" When tempted, we need to learn from Jesus. Let's move on.

WE BECOME STRONGER WHEN WE RESIST TEMPTATION

There is something else we need to put down and bear in mind. We become stronger when we resist temptation. Put that down as the second point of another "three-pointer". This is something we need to understand about the power of the Tempter. The more we give in, the weaker we become. The more we resist, the stronger we become.

In C. S. Lewis' book, The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe, the wicked queen entices the boy, Edmund, with a box of enchanted Turkish Delight. Each piece is sweet and delicious and Edmund has never tasted anything better. There's only one problem. The more he eats of this enchanted Turkish Delight, the more he wants. He doesn't know that this is the plan of the wicked queen. The more he eats, the more he will want and thus he will eat and eat and eat until one day it kills him. It would never satisfy his hunger. It would never fill him up. It would simply kill him. "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear". C. S. Lewis is giving us a metaphor for sin. This is how sin is. It never satisfies; it only enslaves.

Stephen Covey deals with this in his book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. He notes that just as junk food and lack of exercise can ruin an athlete's condition, those things that are obscene, crude and pornographic can breed an inner darkness. He quotes those wonderful words of Dag Hammarskjöld:

"You cannot play with the animal in you without becoming wholly animal....or play with falsehood without forfeiting your right to truth....play with cruelty without losing your sensitivity of mind. He who wants to keep his garden tidy doesn't reserve a plot for weeds".

I guess you could say it's sort of like something that happened when they were renovating the Queen Mary. This gracious old vessel was the largest ship to cross the oceans back in the mid-thirties when it was built and launched and through four decades and a World War this ocean liner served its owners well. Then it was "retired" to Long Beach where it is anchored as a floating hotel.

During its conversion to its present status as a hotel and museum, its three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repaired. But on the dock these three massive pieces of steel crumbled. Now actually...that is not quite true. There was nothing left to crumble. Nothing was left of the three-quarter of an inch steel plate from which those massive stacks had been built. All that remained were more than thirty coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away.

Is not this an analogy of what happens to the character of some people? They give in to temptation time and again until one day their moral fiber is eaten away. But fortunately, the converse is also true. The more times we resist the Temptor in our lives the weaker he becomes. Perhaps there is some one present in our congregation this morning who needs to hear this. Anyone who has ever begun an exercise program or gone on a diet or tried to quit smoking...or whatever....knows that the hardest part is getting started. Yes, indeed, sometimes the most difficult thing to get is GOING! The longer you wait to begin, to take that first step, the harder it is to start. And it is possible to put it off for so long that the chances for success and victory grow very slim.

Jesus nipped the temptation in the bud. He said "no" from the beginning. So, too, should we. "Get Thee behind Me Satan". Today is the first day of the rest of your life. And the journey of a thousand miles, begins with the first step!

JESUS WAS NOT ALONE IN HIS CONFRONTATION WITH THE TEMPTOR

And the third
and final point

to remember is that Jesus, of course, was not alone in His struggle, in His confrontation with the Temptor and neither are we! Long ago the Psalmist of Israel declared,

"My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth"

To me it's interesting to note in the Temptation account in the Gospel that Jesus resisted Satan with words from the Book of Deuteronomy. "You shall not tempt the Lord, your God". It's almost as if He was putting Satan on notice here that Satan was confronting not simply man's power, but the very power of God, Himself. That same power is available to us. Jesus was not left all alone in the wilderness. God was there with Him. Remember that.

Let me share with you a fascinating story that I came across recently in a church publication. It came out of the 1989 earthquake that almost flattened Armenia. You may remember that this deadly tremor killed over 30,000 people in

less than four minutes. And in that same short interval so many lives were forever changed. In the midst of all the confusion of the earthquake, a father left his wife securely at home and rushed to his son's school and when he arrived he found to his horror that the school building was as flat as a pancake. Standing there looking at what was left of the school, the father remembered a promise he had once made to his son. "No matter what, I'll always be there for you!"

Tears came to his eyes. The situation looked so hopeless. And he kept bringing that promise back to mind. He went around to the back of the building where he remembered his son's classroom was. He started digging through the rubble and even as he dug, other grieving parents arrived, clutching their hearts and saying, "My son...my daughter". Some of the parents tried to pull him off of what was left of the school, saying:

"It's too late. They're all dead. You can't help?..go on home." Even a police officer and a fire-fighter told him he should quit, go home. As people tried to stop him, he would say...."Aren't you going to help me?"

He kept on digging, by himself....for he needed to know whether his son was dead or alive, and for 10 hours and then 15 hours and then 25 hours and then 30 hours...and finally in the 38th hour as he pulled back a boulder he heard his son's voice. He screamed his son's name..."Armand". A voice answered "Dad? It's me...Dad." Then the boy added these priceless words,

"I told the other kids not to worry...I told 'em that if you were alive, you'd save me and when you saved me, they'd be saved. You promised, dad....'no matter what, I'll always be there for you!' You did it, dad!"

"Come on out" called the father. "No, dad....let the other kids out first....'cause I know you'll get me. No matter what, I know you'll be there for me!" That's a special relationship between a father and his son....

CLOSING

I would like to believe - and I do believe - that you and I have that same relationship with God. And that when we come face to face with the Temptor, we need not fear because God is there with us...seeking to find us, locate us in the midst of life's rubble. Friends, the deep brushing by of mystery....the living presence of grace that sweeps in and under and over our lives has the name and the face of Christ.

A camp counselor was asking a ten year old girl about her faith. Trying to prepare her for the temptations that one day would surely come before her in the real world, the counselor inquired, "What if the devil comes to your door and tries to lead you astray?" She replied, "I'll ask Jesus to answer the door for me."

God has promised each one of us that no matter what, He'll be there for us. We have a God who loves us unconditionally, a God who never gives up on us, a God who will not let us fail. Knock on the door, and He will answer. Ask for the strength and He will give it. Matthew, in his account of the Temptation, brings it to a close with this line: "And the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him". We can depart from the wilderness knowing that God will be there for us!

PRAYER. Help each of us, O God, as we draw apart from the world during this Lenten season of soul refreshment and renewal to see Jesus with new eyes and with deeper understanding. Keep us close to Him as we try to follow Him in the wilderness of temptation. Wrestle with us in the dark corners of our lives where the tug of sin and selfishness so often occur.

Point our markers in the wilderness for those who may have lost their way. Douse with cold waters of common sense any present who may be edging toward some destructive action or some unhealthy decision or relationship.

Make us sensitive to Your nearness in these moments. Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing presence. Be near to those we mention by name in the privacy of our own thoughts.

And finally, be with us in our times of testing, O Thou tempted One who did not sin and who forty days later walked out of the wilderness knowing He would rather be right with you and fail in His mission than to be wrong with You and succeed. In His name we offer this prayer...the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep by name and who gently calls them home to Himself.

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"I told the other kids not to worry...I told 'em that if you were alive, you'd save me and when you saved me, they'd be saved. You promised, dad....'no matter what, I'll always be there for you!' You did it, dad!"

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We will be tempted. Nothing in this world is surer than that. We need to respond as Jesus responded. Confront the Temptor head on, and reject without hesitation that which would weaken or destroy us. And depart with this promise that God will be there for us. And if we only learn to ask, He will surely help us to overcome.

PRAYER

VISITORS: Sunday, February 26, 1995

Weather: 25 to 30 degree day. Wind. Snowy dusting underfoot.

Attendance: 172 adults, 22 children (eight were infants). Total of 194.

Comparison figures for the last 24 years:

1994: 185	1986: 179	1978: 230
1993: 200	1985: 175	1977: 180
1992: 170	1984: 218	1976: 139
1991: 164	1983: 185	1975: 147
1990: 165	1982: 245	1974: 147
1989: 160	1981: 181	1973: 131
1988: 181	1980: 197	1972: 135
1987: 173	1979: 182	1971: 129

1. OT Mr. and Mrs. Mark (Faye) Anderson: 100 South Houston
Athens, Alabama 35611
Telephone: 205 -233 -0466

Out of town note to the mother and ste-father of Perri Colley. Here for a weekend visit with Perri and T. A. McKinney. Came down for coffee hour and met quite a few folks. Judi: in your letter to them, let's ay how delighted we were that Perri and T. A. brought them over to church.

2. IT Ms. Melissa Bennett: 905 West End Avenue, Apt. 82
New York, New York 10025
Telephone: 932 -2329

Pink card. Letter. In letter, JUDI, mention that I'M hopeful she'll rturn to sing in the choir. (She sang in it about three years ago). Melissa is a good musician. UM from Fullerton, California. Mid-twenties. PC will call her at week's end, too....

3. IT Ms. Lidney DeBolt Motch: 63 West 70th Street, Apt. 5
New York, New York 10023
Telephone: 877 -8332

Pink card. Letter. Mid-twenties. From Anderson UM Church in Cincinatti, Ohio. Greeted at door by PC. PC will call her. Brownish hair. Greeted at door by PC. Suede coat. Unusual name, but visitor card is quite legible. Go with it.

(over...continued)

4. IT Mr. and Mrs. Don (Annette) Stone: 12 Anthony Place
Riverside, Connecticut 06878
Telephone: 203 637 -4906

Pink card. Letter. Even though they're out of town friends of Lyndon Woodside's...let's go with IN-TOWN letter. Don is from Texas. Started out as Methodists, I believe...now Unitarians in Riverside, Connecticut. Came to coffee hour and stayed to end. Early sixties. Oratorio Society connection, PC recalls.

5. IT Mr. and Mrs. Bruce (Emily) Chapman: 115 East 86th Street, Apt
New York, New York 10028
Telephone:

Pink card. Letter. In early thirties. He is about 6'3" with dark hair (says Sharon) and she is 5'7" and wore a green jacket. PC chatted with them at the door. Live across the street from the church.

BACK AGAIN

1. Charles Bertrand: 7th or 8th visit. Baritone in choir. Bad cold kept him out of choir on Sunday.
2. Marney Kliever: 2nd Sunday in row in choir.
3. Allee Parker: blond hair, like Sharon. 5'6". 472 -3207. PC to call her.
4. John ???? - Asian American.
5. Nancy Licko: 451 East 83rd Street, Apt. 5 A. Have we a pink card on her? Have we sent her a letter. PC should check. Virginia background. 30 ish. Brown coat. Reddish hair???
6. Jim and Ann Lillis: 47 or 55 East 88th Street. First attended: March 20, 1994 From Westport and moved back to NYC.
7. Julian Basch. Riverside Church member
8. Al Graham. Riverside Church member
9. Annette and Dan Tomlinson and Savannah. 5th visit with us. Married here by PC
10. Don and Irma Hofmockel. Jim Hofmockel's mom and dad. Jim read scriptures
11. Melody Hunt: PC to call her at 472 -9551.
12. Joe and Tracey Sparks
13. Ann Pearl Gary
14. Josephine Keim. Going into hospital. PC should call her.
15. Charles and Dorothy Scardino
16. Hillary Ford, I think (PC) Yes - she was here!
17. Mrs. Dress / PC has known her for many years. In her late seventies. Lives at 244 E. 86th Street. Marble Collegiate connection.
18. Stacey Simmons. To be baptized by PC on Saturday, April 1st. 702 -6000, 1436
19. Michelle Harmon: 988 -2770
20. Olga Bromfield.

21. Jim and Dana Randall and new infant, Timothy James Randall. Rose on altar in honor of Timoty James.
22. Elaine G. O. Kim: third visit. Forest Hills.
23. Robert Milburn: 440 E. 79th Street. Fifth or sixth visit. Still hasn't come down to coffee hour.
24. Ann Sappington: Alexandra's mother. Tall, pretty brunette who is a NC UM (North Carolina Methodist). Married to Dr. John Sappington by PC. Baby baptized here last Summer. She comes to the coffee hour regularly.
25. Catherine E. Bose: 90 LaSalle Street, NYC, NY 10027. PC can't place her, but thinks she has been before. Judi: check pink card file and if she isn't in pink card file, send letter.

NOTES TO SHARE...

Rummage sale receipts totalled \$ 2,004.36 (last year it was \$ 1,750 for the same February Sale). Bake Sale II totalled \$ 451.45....one of the best, ever!

Another 1995 pledge received bringing total to 232 pledges and \$ 171
We still need another 18 pledges and another \$ 1,155 to reach our goal of \$ 172,500.

Josephine Keim indicated a trip to the hospital for her. No other information.
Eric deFreitas is still in St. Vincent's. 604 -5046.

Coralie Bailey is back with us and working...doing much better!

PLEASE NOTE:

March 19th: EACH ONE BRING ONE SUNDAY!

March 19th: Same Sunday / A special coffee hour focus on inviting new friends "Down" for Coffee Hour.

BOTH ARE MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE CONCERNS.