

"TEMPTATION"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 1, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

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Who was it who once said that ever since the Garden of Eden,

"Forbidden fruit is responsible for many a bad jam!"

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A question: what's the hardest thing in the world for you to control? For 38% of us the hardest thing to control is our weight. For 32% the hardest thing to control is their spending. And only 10% admit that the hardest thing for them to control is their anger, while 17% pinpoint their fears, and about 2.5% say it has to do with smoking or drinking or drug use or abuse. But everyone has their own temptation. What's yours?

When we are young, sexual temptation may be our greatest nemesis and it may be for many who are not so young. Raise a hand if that's your temptation? Here's one you'll enjoy. A man wrote to the Reader's Digest recently to say that when his daughters reached dating age, he and their mother told them that some boys would be perfect gentlemen on a date and some would have other things on their minds...so be careful. If the girls ever felt backed into a corner, they were instructed to give the boy a quarter and tell him,

"Call my dad. If he says what you're suggesting is OK with him, then it's OK with me...but call him first."

A quarter was never used, but it was brought out on a number of occasions. The oldest daughter, now 27, recently married. Late on the evening of her wedding day the telephone rang and her father answered it. The newly-wed daughter's smiling voice asked,

"Dad....Bob just made an interesting suggestion. Is it OKAY now?"

Oh, if only every family had that kind of communication that obviously existed in that family. You don't have to be a prude to realize that the head-long rush toward free and open sex has brought about some serious consequences for our society. Babies...born out of wedlock. AIDS. Many scarred and broken lives. But even more important I think the sexual revolution has robbed us of that feeling of a "life-long commitment" that once characterized marriage. It's all a package, you see. It has a lot to do with personal discipline and values and the C-word - COMMITMENT.

TEMPTATION. It has many forms.

None of us is too old or too young....too sophisticated or too naive, to escape the Tempter. Temptation can lead us into all kinds of problems and can bring us all matters of complications. Thank God that Jesus was victorious over the Tempter. Oh, if only it were that way for all of us. One young lady was asked to name her favorite Bible verse. She answered, "If any man would come after me.....LET HIM..."

A REALITY IN OUR LIVES

Yes, it is a reality in our lives. Yes, even Jesus faced it. Did you pick up on how Luke's telling of the temptation of Jesus ended with these words,

"The devil left Him....to return at the appointed time."

I read somewhere recently that more than eight million children disappeared in the United States between 1987 and the year 1990. 1987 marked the first time that the IRS required proof that those children claimed as dependents actually existed. After that many children started disappearing from income tax forms.

And some years ago a hearing clinic at Northwestern ran some experiments on words that are hard to hear. One of the very hardest words to hear, they discovered, is the word NO. Temptation. For all of us a REALITY.

And for some it's a ruin. Think of it this way. The first temptation in the history of the human race took place where...in a garden - right? And with man at peace with the entire creation. The temptation of Jesus - the Second Adam, if you will - took place in a wilderness....where we read that "He was with the wild beasts". That contrast between the first temptation and the temptation of Jesus....the first in a Garden, the other in a ~~desert~~ wilderness....is a rather vivid picture of the ruin which has been wrought by sin.

A mushroom expert, Nathan Horwitt, tells us that a mushroom known as AMANITA PHALLOIDES is the deadliest of all mushrooms. It's also possibly the tastiest, claims Horwitt. Asked how he knows this, he explains that the poison is slow-acting and that often the first symptom of poisoning is communicated when the victim remarks,

, "Last night I ate the most delicious mushroom of my life!"

Just like temptation.....and sometimes even knowing better does not seem enough to stop us. To me, it's a bit like some of those scenes from that popular movis of a few years ago....Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Remember it? Indiana Jones and the beautiful, but evil Elsa Schneider after all kinds of difficulty have at last found the Holy Grail. But no sooner does Elsa hold the Grail - a vasselike object - in her hand than an earthquake causes the ground beneath her to tremble and split apart. And suddenly she finds herself dangling dangerously above a deep chasm. All that saves her is Indiana Jones desperately holding on to one of her arms. The Grail has slipped out of her hand and has landed on an outcropping just out of her reach. Elsa stretches her free arm in an effort to retrieve it. Indy warns her that his grip is weakening. And frantically he says,

"I can't hold you. Give me your other hand."

Elsa ignores him. Only the Grail has her attention. She insists,

"I can reach it. I can reach it!"

But, as she reaches out one more time....she slips from Indy's grasp and falls to her death in the deep chasm.

Now, Indiana Jones knows how dangerous it is to try to reach for the Grail, and yet....only seconds later...when he, too, finds himself dangling from edge, high above the abyss, he also makes a grab for the Grail. This time, it is Indy's father hanging desperately onto one arm while Indy reaches with the other.

"I can't hold you" says the elder Jones. "Give me your other hand!" "I can reach it" says Indy...

He's thinking only of how badly he wants the Grail even though just minutes before he was pleading with the foolish Elsa just as his father is now pleading with him to forget it....luckily for Indiana Jones and for his fans watching in the theater or before TV...he comes to his senses before he, too, drops into the deep abyss.

Just like a person who is being tempted. He knows better, but the lure is almost irresistible. Spouses know that cheating can end their marriage and lead them to disgrace. Smokers know that tobacco will coat their lungs and may prematurely end their lives in a horrible way. Business people know that sooner or later shady practices will catch up with them and they'll be exposed, but knowing is not enough. Something more is needed. Temptation - the reality and then one day comes the ruin.

THERE IS A REMEDY

But hold on. Don't let go. Move on with me. There is a remedy. Reality. Ruin. Remedy.

The remedy to temptation is not all will power. Oh, how easy it would be if it were the final remedy. Just say "no". Isn't that what they say. Walk away from it. Turn your back on it, but some people just have no will power. They're a bit like Mark Twain who once said, "I can resist anything...everything except temptation". Some of us are stronger than others. Much of this was probably determined back in the days of our childhood.

Remember that study of a few years ago about children and marshmallows and delayed gratification. I remember sharing it with you on another occasion. The researchers found that children who can delay gratification by saving marshmallows until a later time turn out to be happier and better adjusted later in life. No wonder. The disciplined life is a better life. The problem is that too many of us are in that second group....the group that gave in and ate the marshmallows immediately. And no amount of sermonizing or moralizing seems to help. Oh, we wish it were not so, but it is. And there is only ONE that works. It is to make such a positive commitment of our lives that we do not have the time nor the place for the negative, the destructive, the sinful.

Am I right that in Homer's epic poem, The Odyssey, the sirens were mythical, evil creatures, half-bird and half-woman, who lived on an island surrounded by submerged and jagged rocks. As ships approached the island, the sirens would sing beautiful seductive songs, luring the sailors to their deaths. When the ship of Odysseus approached the island, he ordered his crew to fill their ears with wax to escape the lure of the songs of the sirens. This done, he commanded them to bind him to the mast as they passed the island so that he could not change his orders.

However, on another occasion when the ship of Orpheus sailed by that same island, Orpheus sang a song of his own that was so beautiful and divine that his sailors did not even listen to the music of the seductive sirens. The point is that we need to fill our lives with a song so beautiful that we cannot even hear the song of the Tempter. But how do we do that? And how do we apply this remedy to the reality and the ruin of Temptation? There's only one way that I know of and that is to have a Redeemer.

A REDEEMER

I read this week about a ministerial colleague who collects unusual and funny signs. Some of these are simply the result of people in foreign countries having difficulty translating into English. This colleague spoke of a sign at the entrance to a hotel swimming pool on the French Riviera that reads like this:

"Swimming is forbidden in the absence of a Savior".

Maybe the person who posted that sign knew English better and more about life than we give him credit for. Not only swimming on the French Riviera, but life itself should not be lived in the absence of a Savior. And praise the Lord - we do have a Savior.

A poem by Kenneth Fikins entitled, "The Pit" catches this in beautiful fashion. Let me share a little bit of it with you in closing as we reflect on this traditional First Sunday of Lent scripture passage dealing with the temptation of our Lord. A man, you see, fell into a pit and he couldn't get out...

Buddha said: "Your pit is only a state of mind."

A Hindu said: "This pit is for purging you and making you more perfect."

Confucius said: "If you would have listened to me, you would never have fallen into that pit."

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Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of that pit".

CLOSING

Friend, let's face it....a pit is an awful place to be....and particularly, the pit of temptation. It doesn't take much to stumble and fall into it.

"Who's there?" I cried. "A little lonely sin". "Enter" I said...."and all hell was in!" You know what I mean.

That's the way it often happens when we open the door, only a crack....to temptation.....before long, "all hell is in".

But there is ONE who can and will help. I don't know of any other lasting remedy to the reality, and the ruin of temptation. Fill your life so full of Christ -

Our REDEEMER....that there is simply no room for the tempter to do his thing, his evil deeds. Take these four "Rs" out of here with you today. REALITY. RUIN. But there is a REMEDY....and that remedy is our REDEEMER.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments, O God....and help us as we draw apart from the world during this season of refreshment and renewal, to see Jesus with new eyes and understanding.

Help us to make this season of Lent a period of growth in our own understanding of ourselves and in our usefulness to others. Be with us, especially in our times of testing. O thou tempted One who did not sin, but stood firm. In the spirit of Jesus, our Lord. We pray. Amen.

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