

"THE GREATEST TEMPTATION OF ALL"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Max Anders, in his book, The Good Life, describes a rather suspenseful story about a Zoo Keeper at the Los Angeles Zoo who answers to the name of Gary Richmond.

On the day that Gary Richmond was given the master key to the cages of a number of animals at the zoo, he was also given very strict instructions that constant vigilance was necessary for ensuring the safety of both the animals at the zoo as well as the people. It was made quite clear to him that his greatest responsibility would be to guard those keys and to make sure he used them wisely which he did for a number of months...always the model of vigilance.

But one day while tending a polar bear named Ivan he suddenly realized he had made a careless mistake. Now Ivan, this polar bear, was easily the size of three large men. Many felt he was the most dangerous animal at the zoo. He hated human beings and he would try to maul anyone who passed his cage. He had even killed two female polar bears.

Gary Richmond had unlocked a door in Ivan's cage in order to let him walk out into a hallway that was in the sunshine. Suddenly he realized that he had forgotten to close the door and to lock it.....a door at the other end of this hallway and this door led right into the area where Gary himself was working. If Ivan came through that door, Gary would have no way to escape and he knew that Ivan would attack him.

Now Ivan, a creature of habit, was just finishing his morning pacing in the sunshine. The polar bear always paced for the same amount of time, in the same pattern, every day. In a very few seconds he would be finished pacing and would look for a way to get back into his cage. If Ivan noticed the open door, he would surely come in. His life would be in danger.

He figured that he had about seventeen seconds to get down the hallway, close and lock the door, if the bear did not alter its routine and if the bear did not notice him. When the bear turned to make its last amble in the sunshine, Gary sprinted down the hallway reaching that door seconds before Ivan. He pulled the door shut and somehow managed to lock it. His heart seemed ready to burst and as he sank to the floor in a bit of a quivering mass of spent adrenaline, he looked up and saw Ivan staring down at him through the window.

He was safe, but we can guess that the advice given him previously to guard his keys took on a bit of new meaning after that very close call.

LIFE CALLS FOR VIGILANCE

a mountain of difficulty.

It helps to remind us that life calls for vigilance, doesn't it. One tiny miscue can sometimes lead to

I think that Jesus knew that. The Scriptures remind us that He faced the Temptor throughout His life. Remember that when Satan tempted Him there in the wilderness of Judea that the account ended with these words,

"And when the devil had ended every temptation,
he departed from Him until an opportune time."

Notice those words...."an opportune time". Yes, Jesus would face the tempter again. He taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation". Just what did He mean by that? Did He mean that God might somehow tempt us to do wrong? No, I don't think so...of course not. I think He was trying to help us see that life has its snares and that the tempter (or whatever you wish to call him...or her) is always present and that we must be vigilant and careful. We need God's help if we are to avoid the dangers that surround everyone who seeks to live the best possible life.

It was in the papers last Fall that a Jesse A. Williams, a veteran of many an alcohol-treatment program had filed a lawsuit against his former employer, Anheuser-Busch. Williams went to court complaining that the company supplied him the regular employee allotment of four free cases of beer a month and then proceeded to fire him for his alcoholism.

There are many kinds of temptation - drugs, sex, money...to just name a few we may be familiar with. But for Jesse Williams, temptation was alcohol. And alcohol, I've noted, is a serious problem for many people. Perhaps it is for you. Drunk driving is the most frequent crime for which people are arrested in this country. Slaughter by drunken drivers continues on the highways of our nation. Studies show that over one-half of young people between the 7th and the 12th grades drink and that nearly a half million of them binge on a weekly basis - 5 drinks, one after another. In fact, I read somewhere that one in every eight, 8th graders, or 13%, report binge drinking....and one in every four 8th graders (or about 25%) are occasional drinkers.

And why not? The typical American consumes 100,000 advertisements for alcoholic beverages before even reaching legal drinking age. Someday we are going to have to face up to the fact that we as a society have a serious problem in this regard. For some, YES....the temptation is alcohol.

For others, it may be a little piece of plastic.

Oh, it's so easy to buy when you know that you're not going to see the statement for 45 days...isn't it? And then you have...what is it...another 30 days to pay your debt and if you are up to the limit, why it's no big deal. Just get another card. You and I get offers all the time. You can get a cash advance on one card to help pay off another. I just cancelled my American Express card (I never used it)....and already they're on the phone offering me a free meal out to reactivate it.

One counselor says that the first step in getting our finances under control is to quit using those credit cards (and ATM cards, too). He says,

"Take those cards out of your wallets and purses and file them so they will no longer burn a hole in your pocket".

And he tells about one person who put all his cards in a bowl of water and then put the bowl of water in the freezer. To use the cards was a major act of unfreezing the big chunk of ice with his cards all there in the middle.

Most of us have too many cards. He tells about being on a Southwest Airlines flight last year when they had a contest. The person with the most credit cards won and the person sitting next to him had 16 cards. How much is enough? Go and eliminate the cards - cut them up, put them in a bank vault, out of sight.

RESISTING TEMPTATION

Each of us has our strong points and each one of us has some weak points. Life calls for vigilance for temptation is with us - always! Of that you can be sure. But there is a second thing for us to consider and that is that the ability to resist temptation is one of the great SUCCESS skills that can be acquired.

You may be familiar with the now famous Marshmallow Experiment. I bring it up only because the implications of it are somewhat staggering. It turns out that a scientist can see the future by watching four-year-olds interact with a marshmallow. The researcher invites the children - one by one - into a plain room and begins the gentle torment. He says to the four-year-olds:

"You can have this marshmallow right now...but if you wait until I return from running an errand, you then can have two marshmallows...upon my return."

And he leaves to do his errand.

Some children, of course, grab for the marshmallow the moment he's out the door. Some manage to last a minute or two before they give in...but still others are determined to wait. Oh...they cover their eyes and put down their little heads. They sing to themselves and try to play games or even fall asleep. And when the researcher returns, he gives these children their two "hard-earned" marshmallows. And then....science waits...it waits for these children to grow up.

And this is where it gets interesting. By the time the children reach high school, something quite remarkable has happened. A survey of the children's parents and teachers finds that those who as four-year-olds had the fortitude to hold out for the second marshmallow generally grew up to be better adjusted.... more popular...adventurous...confident and dependable teenagers. And the children who gave in to temptation early on were more likely to be lonely, easily frustrated and stubborn. They buckled under stress and shied away from challenges. And when some of the students in the two groups took the SAT's, the kids who had held out longer scored an average of 210 points higher.

So much for the Marshmallow Experience, but this ability to resist temptation, to delay gratification and to control one's urges....this is one of life's great success skills. Yes, that observation that Robert E. Lee is said to have made 150 years ago is still valid. A mother asked this man of deep character what was the greatest lesson she could teach her child. His response was:

"Teach him to deny himself....."

Life calls for vigilance. Temptation is always there...lurking in the background, off-stage. And this ability to resist temptation is one of life's great success skills and I would like to believe that it's never too late to acquire. BUT go with me one more step and let me say that there is one temptation that towers above all others.

THE GREATEST TEMPTATION OF ALL

I believe that the greatest temptation in life is to accept less than the best that one can be, less than the best that God has for each one of us. Let's go back to the Bible for a moment or two, to the 16th chapter of Matthew's Gospel and look at the incident that launched this sermon.

In this scene, we find that Jesus was unusually harsh with his dear and good friend, Simon Peter. Jesus, here, was explaining to His disciples that He must now go up to Jerusalem and there suffer and die and on the third day be raised to new life. Simon Peter took Jesus to one side and began to rebuke Him, saying... "Never, Lord... never shall this happen to You". Peter, after all, was just showing deep concern for the Master, for His Teacher. And it was then in answer to Peter's rebuke that Jesus blurted out those words that are familiar to us, "Get thee behind Me, Satan.... for you are not on the side of God, but of men!"

One wonders... was Jesus calling Simon Peter "Satan"? No, I think not... not really. Jesus was BUT ACKNOWLEDGING that the Tempter was still out there testing Him and that the greatest temptation of all was for Him to forsake the mission to which God had called Him. Forsake the conflict. Forsake the hard, difficult path that life has chosen you for. Friends, this is our greatest temptation. To give up the cross. Forsake the dream... whatever it may be for you.

God has created us in God's own image. I have always believed that. He has placed within us dreams and abilities and goals to pursue. God has set us down in a world where certain jobs must be done if God's world is to function as it was designed. The saddest thing we can do... yes, indeed, the greatest sin that we can commit... is to squander our lives and our gifts and to ignore that God has given us the potential that lies there within each of us.

We have been called to be "co-creators" with God. We have been called... each in his or her own way... to be agents of God's Kingdom of right relationships. We have been called to be reconcilers with Christ of a broken and sick and dying humanity. We cannot settle for anything less than giving our very best to the world for which we believe Christ died.

I think the tragedy of the other temptations that come daily to us in life - whether they be drug and alcohol abuse, or shoddy and unethical financial dealings and practices, or the violation of marital vows or whatever... is that they have a way of deflecting us from the course that God has established for each of us... that PATH that leads to an abundant life, a life in which we become all that God calls us to become.

SUMMING IT UP

The greatest temptation of all is that temptation to settle for less than the best God has to offer. It's a temptation that comes to all of us whatever our level of commitment to our faith. Life, yes... calls for vigilance. There are temptations out there that would destroy us and maul us if we would let them just as that polar bear would have surely mauled and probably destroyed his keeper. Jesus said to Peter that day long ago some words we would do well to put into that place where we keep the things most important to us... to be taken out and reviewed from time to time...

"Get thee behind me, Satan... for you are not on the side of God.... but of men!"

You may want to post them or put them on your refrigerator door... for they are words that we need to say to ourselves especially when we are tempted... tempted to turn back from our life's great calling, our mission as well.

LET US PRAY

Make us sensitive, O God, to your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments. Wrestle with us in the corners of our hearts where temptation may be lurking. Help us always to be vigilant and to remember that You have given us the strength to walk the high road at all times...wherever we may be. Help us to see life here this hour from higher ground. Send us forth from here...into the world "in peace". To be of good courage and to hold fast always to that which is good. To love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. In thy name we pray. Amen.