

The Way Through Temptation

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

March 11, 2007

I.

As you can tell from today's readings, we are moving deeper into Lent. This is the third Sunday in Lent and we only have two more weeks before Palm Sunday. And as we draw closer to the fateful and glorious events of Holy Week, our readings take on more somber tones to help heighten our appreciation of what Jesus Christ really did for us.

Today we have a New Testament reading from First Corinthians and a Gospel reading from Luke that have similar themes. They call upon us to repent or perish. They say be obedient or suffer the consequences; bear fruit, or be cut down. They call upon us to resist temptations or risk falling.

These readings can be challenging for a preacher. Both describe death and violence in the context of sin and temptation. And some preachers take the path of telling us how sinful we are, how we stand dangerously close to the pit, and how the consequences of eternal damnation are not far away.

And I don't want to be judgmental about that type of preaching. It can contain some important truths. I think, however, there frequently are better ways to set forth those truths, and I think we make more progress if we focus on what's good about God rather than what's bad about ourselves.

And there is a part of today's reading from 1 Corinthians that allows us to do that. In verse 13, at the very end, on page eight of your service bulletin, Paul said. "no temptation has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

II.

That passage is one of the foundations of the theology of the New Testament. It recognizes that temptation always will be with us. Jesus said in Luke 17:1 that "things that cause people to sin are bound to come." But temptation alone is not sinful, and experiencing the conflicting emotions of temptation is not sinful. It is succumbing to it that causes the problem.

Today's reading can be sort of a double edged sword. It can be both a source of hope and a rebuke. Paul tells us that God will never allow us to be tempted beyond our strength, and that God will eventually provide a way for us to resist temptation.

But what happens when we don't resist. What does it mean when we succumb to temptation? Where is God when we give in and do something we should not do? The hard truth is that God is not part of that.

If God gives us a way out we can't blame God if we don't take it. If we have an option to resist but choose not to do so, then we, not God, are responsible. From God's perspective no temptation is irresistible, and he is not the cause if we allow Satan to enter our lives.

This is Paul's basic point. We can trust God to keep temptation from being so strong that we cannot stand against it. He will show us how to escape the power of the enemy, and how to overcome our basic natures, so that we can endure the conflicts that tug at us. This is God's promise, and he will do what he says.

III.

We all know, however, that many things are easier said than done. And some disabilities, such as addictions and mental diseases, are so debilitating that the ability to freely resist or even freely decide is compromised.

But for most of us, we do have the capability to be obedient to God's will. Movies have been made and books have been written, some tragic and some funny, about the excuses we make, the rationalizations we come up with, and the silly reasons we use to justify doing something we know we should not do.

It's like the story of the fellow who was on a diet, and he walked into his house with dozen crême filled donuts. His wife asked him to explain himself, and he said, "I told God that if he wanted me to have some donuts, there would be a parking space open right in front of the donut shop. And sure enough, on my seventh time around the block, there it was!"

How many times have we lied to ourselves like that? How often do we come up with reasons like that to do what we already know we are going to do? What if we worked as hard to avoid temptation as we sometimes do to indulge ourselves?

The problem goes to the very nature of disobedience of God, the guilt we feel for being disobedient, the hopelessness that it sometimes brings, and our inability to break the cycle. Satan likes to tell us two lies when he tempts us. The first is, "just once won't hurt." The second is, "now that you have done it you are a sinner and what makes you think that God wants anything to do with you?"

And it's usually the same pattern, isn't it? A thought enters the mind. The mind allows it and entertains it. The thought takes root and the desire is conceived. Then, it's only a matter of time until desire reaches maturity and sin is born, and according to Paul when sin is full-grown we are led to death, figuratively if not literally.

I have heard this explained in terms of the frog and hot water. If you drop a frog into a pot of boiling water it immediately will jump out. But if you put the frog in a pot of cold water and gradually turn the heat up to boiling, the frog will stay put and eventually die.

Temptations operate in a similar way. Obviously, if Satan tried to get you to do something bad right away, you, like the frog, wouldn't go for it. But if it starts with just a little thing, that leads to another thing, which gives rise to even more mischief, then we can be like the slow-cooked frog. Before we come to realize it we are in hot water, and we think it is too late.

IV.

But is there any hope of being able to avoid temptation? And if we give in is it really too late? The answer to the first question is "yes, there is hope of living faithful, obedient lives." The answer to the second question is "no, it is never too late, at least for God."

Even though God gives us the means to avoid temptation, we still have to ask him to help us. God's promise in today's reading is not just a one way deal. God does not say that we will not be tempted beyond our abilities to resist, and by the way, good luck! God does not leave us like that. He is faithful to his promises, and if we truly seek the way out that he has prepared for us, if we pray and ask for guidance from the Holy Spirit, we will find that way.

But what happens when we inevitably trip ourselves up? And it always seems to happen in some way or another, doesn't it? What do we do then? Same thing. God still is faithful. If we acknowledge what we have done, and sincerely ask for strength and guidance to overcome the evil forces that beset us, his promise to show us the way out is still there.

Several years ago a prominent religious magazine did a survey on the areas of greatest spiritual challenge faced by their readers. The survey came up with nine things, and ranked from the most serious to least serious were materialism, pride, self-centeredness, laziness, anger and bitterness, sexual lust, envy, gluttony, and lying.

And perhaps more important than the specific items were the readers' responses as to when they were most vulnerable. Eighty one percent said that temptations were more potent when they had neglected time with God. Fifty seven percent said that being physically tired made it more difficult to resist temptations.

On the other side of the equation, eight four percent said that prayer helped in finding a way through temptation, seventy six percent cited avoiding compromising situations, Bible study was mentioned by sixty six percent, and fifty two percent mentioned being accountable to someone else as helpful.

V.

So, what do we do with these somewhat dismal and somewhat hopeful Lenten readings? Do we ignore them, wait for Easter, and then move on? I hope we don't, because temptations don't leave us alone. Someone once asked why opportunity knocks once, but temptation beats the door down.

It's important to remember, as I said earlier, that God is faithful, and God wants to have a relationship with us. And please make sure you understand this. God is not going to judge us in this world. That will happen in the next world on that great day when we all are held accountable. But now, we still have a chance.

Now, this does not mean that bad things won't happen to us if we do bad things. They will. But those are just the natural consequences of our own actions. God has nothing to do with it.

If someone drinks too much and then drives a car something bad could happen. That's not God's judgment; it's just the expected result of that person's actions. If someone robs a bank and gets arrested, that is not God's judgment. It's just the natural consequence of robbing a bank.

In the same way many things we do produce consequences in this world, but they are not from God. God still is with us, and no matter what we have done or are tempted to do, he will show us the way through it if we but ask him.

VI.

Lent is more than half over, but we still have some time. We still have time to acknowledge our difficulties, our temptations, and to ask God to help us work through them. We still can ask God to strengthen us, we can ask the Holy Spirit to lead us, and we can pray in confidence that our Lord and Savior will be there for us.

If we do that, then the existence of temptation is not a sign of weakness in our soul, and standing up to it with God's help signifies the strength of our faith. *Amen.*