



WESTMINSTER  
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# On Being Tempted

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*The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.” But he answered, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:3).*

Lent is a season of preparation for the great events of Holy Week, when Jesus offers himself up on a cross for the sins of the whole world—which is to say, for your sins and for mine. The beginning of Lent is a fitting time, then, to reflect on why we need a Savior after all, and on some of the temptations that keep us from loving God and our neighbors, and even ourselves, in the way that God intends.

Two great temptation stories from the Bible— one about Adam and Eve in Genesis, who represent all of us symbolically, and the other about Jesus himself—show something about the wiles of the devil and the way temptation works in our lives. You can think of the devil literally, as some sort of fallen angel, or figuratively, as a perennial impulse of human nature; but either way, you know that there’s something forever at work to keep us from living the way we ought to live. Read the temptation stories closely and you’ll begin to notice some patterns, not only in the biblical stories themselves but in your own story as well.

The most obvious thing to notice about temptation is that it almost always promises some short-term pleasure. No one would ever be tempted if there wasn’t some more-or-less immediate reward for giving in. The little sugar rush from the donut, the buzz of alcohol, the quickening of nicotine is familiar to most of us, either directly or indirectly.

In small doses, none of those things may pose a serious threat to our well-being, but we all know people who struggle with overeating, or alcoholism, or the diseases that can follow a lifetime of smoking.

Which points to a second thing about temptation: namely, that the rewards tend to come right away, but the costs come later. Sin and temptation work on the “Buy now, pay later” plan. Whether it’s some kind of addiction, or skimming money off the company books, or having an affair that finally breaks up a family, temptation only works because we get something we want now, while the things we don’t want come to claim us later on.

There’s a Fleetwood Mac song from thirty years ago, where a girl wants to believe that the romance she’s been involved in is still going strong, and the guy she loves is still committed to their relationship. Deep down, she knows it isn’t true, but she doesn’t want to hear the truth, so she sings, “Tell me, tell me, tell me lies. Tell me lies. Tell me sweet little lies.” It’s a poignant song, and it suggests something else about the way temptation works: which is that, if we suspect we’re not going to like the truth, we look around for some more comforting falsehood to console us.

Jesus says the devil is “a liar and the father of lies,” and the Bible shows how lying, or at least twisting the truth, is another favorite tool of temptation.

Some people get to be good at lying if they have lots of practice, but for most of us, conscious lies are actually pretty hard to keep going. We have to engage in all sorts of moral gymnastics and mental rationalizations to justify telling

people things we know are not true. And consciously lying to ourselves is even harder, since we already know the truth; so what we typically do instead is engage in wishful thinking. We tell ourselves what we want to believe, and then we simply avoid any truths that might shatter our illusions. That way, we get to believe things that aren't true without all the cognitive dissonance and moral tension of consciously having to lie.

We do that in our personal lives, to justify doing things we shouldn't do and failing to do the things we should, and we do it in our public life together too. So politicians keep telling us that we can spend more and more money on defense, for example, and cut taxes at the same time, while somehow managing to balance a budget that's already deep in the red. George H. W. Bush famously called that "voodoo economics" in the 1980 presidential primaries, and all you have to do is look at a chart of deficits since that time to know that he was right. We want certain things but we don't want to pay for them, so we listen to those who tell us we can have it both ways. It's as if, in our personal lives and in our life together, we're like the girl in the song: we want to hear sweet little lies because we're afraid of the changes we'd have to make if we were forced to confront the truth.

But the truth has a way of catching up with us sooner or later. Adam and Eve give in to temptation, and next thing you know they're hiding from God; then Adam blames Eve for his own shortcomings, and implicitly blames even God himself. "The woman whom *you* gave to be with me, *she* gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." Literally the oldest rationalizations in the world, according to the biblical story, are that it's somebody else's fault and then the question,

“What else could I do?” People since time immemorial have tried to claim that they had no choice, by way of rationalizing the choices they did in fact make.

If all of this makes us a little nervous because it comes so close to home, that’s good, because it’s part of the point of Lent. It points to why we need a Savior: because the power of temptation is so strong in our lives, and we’re so much better at rationalizing the ways we give in than we are at finding ways to resist.

But the story of Jesus’ own temptation reminds us where our hope lies. Satan tries to get Jesus to turn stones into bread, partly because Jesus is famished after forty days of fasting and partly because the devil wants Jesus to doubt his own identity as the Son of God. But Jesus answers, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” It’s the truth, the truth of God’s word, that sets us free, as Jesus will say later on; and he knows from his own experience.

Don’t put God to the test, the story tells us, by letting the devil or anyone else try to set some standard for how to behave, other than the great commandment God has already given us. And don’t bow down to any other god; don’t let your life be driven by anything or anyone that might interfere with the way you need to be faithful to God.

Jesus shows us how to resist temptation, but *seeing* how to do that and being *able* to do it are two different things—which, again, is why we need a Savior. Jesus says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” But

notice: it isn't just *knowing* the truth that will make us free. The *truth itself* will free us. Jesus also says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," and part of what he means is that he himself will free us, because Jesus *is* the living truth of God. Then the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, will guide us. And he will give us the wisdom and strength to resist temptation, and the grace to find forgiveness when we fail, and the courage to get up again and continue down the road that God has prepared for us—the road that will lead us all the way to the kingdom of God.

So let these Lenten days be a time of reflection, when by the grace of God we find the courage to see the truth about ourselves and the world around us, but also remember the truth that God loves us, and God has come in Christ to save us, and to reconcile us all to God and one another.





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