

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“STRUGGLING WITH TEMPTATION”
March 13, 2011
Matthew 4:1-11
ALL SERVICES**

Lent brings us to a fresh consideration of our own struggles with temptation and sin. This is anything but a simple problem. Is our dilemma that we do not know what is good? Or is it that we know but cannot do what is good? We face both dilemmas simultaneously. We struggle both with knowing what is good and with doing it.

The temptation experience of Jesus is a clear confirmation of the reality of the Incarnation. Jesus entered our humanity even to the point of being tempted to betray God and use his powers to his own advantage. We must never suppose that this struggle was not real for Jesus; it clearly was.

In this troubled world things never seem to stay settled. Our ambiguous lives remain a struggle to find wisdom to know what is good and the courage to do it. This challenge is part of the human situation.

On the subject of temptation and sin nothing is new. The oldest story in the Bible is a timeless tale about how it all began. Adam and Eve succumbed to the temptation to move beyond the boundaries God had ordained. The world knows well the tragedy that resulted. It is ever so.

Mark Twain said, **“The surest protection against temptation is cowardice.”** And **The Old Farmer’s Almanac** says, **“Don’t worry about avoiding temptation - - as you grow older, it starts avoiding you.”** There are more jokes about temptation than almost any other subject. We laugh about being tempted by food, drink, and other minor indulgences, and about our inability to resist. We smugly enjoy stories about other people’s failures to resist more consequential temptations. In short, we seldom speak of **“temptation”** seriously. But temptation in the Bible is no joking matter.

Temptation is serious. We have tragic examples of this from history and from the daily news. We also have a positive example from the life of Jesus. After his baptism, Jesus went into the desert for forty days of fasting. There he was tempted by the devil. Both his baptism and his wilderness experience were preparation for his public ministry. The proximity of the two is not unusual. Often our greatest achievements are followed by our greatest times of trial and testing.

Jesus faced three temptations, each directly related to his ministry. What kind of Messiah would Jesus be? How would he proceed in beginning his mission? The tempter's approach was to look for weaknesses in Jesus that might be exploited. Jesus was hungry from fasting; why not turn stones into bread? Jesus would need to reach people, why not do something spectacular that would draw an instant crowd? Jesus would confront a hostile world, why not let the devil give him control over all worldly powers? The temptations were calculated to appeal directly to Jesus' immediate concerns. How could he possibly resist?

Jesus was prepared for all this, however. **First**, his priorities were firmly set: complete obedience to God, and love for every person he met. **Second**, Jesus knew the source of his authority and power. He countered each temptation with appropriate Scripture. **Third**, Jesus was free of personal concerns and ambitions. He was prepared to face temptation. He was strong in every area where the tempter hoped he would be weak. He was ready to begin his life's work.

Someone will ask, **"Is it possible to be tempted to do good?"** To tempt means to entice and technically it is possible to be enticed to do good. Usually, however, temptation means enticement to do evil. At least, that is how we are using it today.

Our encounters with temptation are not entirely different from Jesus' experience. Often our temptations seem intensely personal, as if coming from an actual enemy. They strike us when we are weak and where we are vulnerable. Our temptations involve deception, appearing to support us and our worthy intentions, and then enticing us with short cuts and questionable methods. Temptations often appear at first to involve innocent and agreeable opportunities, keeping the truth well hidden. We may even cooperate with the temptation with such thoughts as, **"What could possibly be wrong with this?"** and **"Who would it hurt?"** The human brain is highly skilled in the art of rationalizing. Sometime later we may find ourselves asking, **"How could I have ever imagined that this was a good thing to do?"** In short, we need to be smart enough to respect temptation, and not underestimate its persuasive powers. If we are wise we will

treat it as a foe, a creative and committed foe. It cannot be trusted. Temptation is inevitable, but not irresistible. Jesus faced it!

As was true with Jesus, being prepared to face temptation involves keeping our priorities well in mind. One advantage Jesus had in the wilderness was that the issues raised by the devil had already been decided. Nothing was going to deter Jesus from doing the will of God. No argument was going to alter his commitments. He knew who he was, whose he was, and what he was about. He didn't have to decide. He had already decided.

When faced with something tempting, we should ask ourselves several questions. **First**, would this be pleasing to God? **Second**, would this violate any of my commitments to myself or to others? **Third**, would I be ashamed for everyone I love to know about this? These are not foolproof tests, but they help us consider a particular temptation in the light of our highest values and concerns. Remember, Jesus was prepared for facing temptation by having his priorities firmly in place.

The values of resisting temptation are many. The most obvious is that it keeps us from error, from harm, and from sin. Perhaps the second greatest value in resisting temptation is that it makes us stronger - - morally, emotionally, and spiritually. In so doing, it prepares us to face temptation in the future.

Strength comes from resistance. It is true physically. Exercise, whether push-ups, weight-lifting, or deep knee bends, involves resisting gravity. A person who does nothing but lie in bed and avoid all kinds of movement will succumb to gravity's downward pull. If we do not resist gravity, we will weaken, lose muscle mass, and waste away. When we see someone who is muscular and fit we know he has done countless hours of exercise. He has become strong through resisting.

We become strong internally by resisting all that would pull us down mentally, emotionally, morally, and spiritually. This requires discipline. Discipline and disciple come from the same root. Both have to do with resisting temptation and with finding abundant life.

A little girl came home and told her mother about a friend in the neighborhood whose pet had died. The mother asked, "**What did you say to her?**" The child said, "**I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just helped her cry.**" Understanding the universality of temptation, sin, and suffering should encourage us to more freely share our stories when it seems appropriate. Sometimes it is a

powerful source of hope for a hurting person just to know that someone else has been where they are and knows what they are feeling.

If you are struggling with temptation and want to position yourself to make sure that every temptation you face in life comes up against your highest values and concerns, and gives you the strength to resist, come and grow your spirit with us on this journey to the cross. I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.