

Temptation
A Sermon for Lent 1 by David Roquemore
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
James 1: 12-16

Let's think as we get started about Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God created the man and woman to be partners, because "it was not good for the man to be alone." They are to keep each other company. They delight in each other. They have the entire garden as their home. They can eat any of its fruits. They have no problem with gardening or growing food. No trouble harvesting or having enough – it is all there for them, just ready to be picked and enjoyed.

And so you might think they'd be happy with that. But God gave them one commandment, one boundary. That one tree in the garden, don't eat from it, God said. No reason is given, really; it is simply God's command. If they obey the commandment, they can live happily ever after in the garden with God.

And so of course temptation arises. The fact of the commandment issues a boundary, a line that cannot be crossed, and so that line draws their attention. What happens to us if we cross that line? Why is that line there? What is the reason for this commandment?

The man and the woman are just like children: when we tell them not to do something, they immediately become very interested in doing it, and want to know all kinds of reasons why we gave them the rule. You'd think they would know that we have their best interests in mind, but that doesn't matter. They see a boundary and immediately want to cross it. What boundaries do you see in your life that you are tempted to cross?

So Adam and Eve are in the Garden, tempted by the tree God has told them not to eat. The tempter comes along. The snake. Satan. He comes bringing temptation to the woman.

First he says, "Did God say you can't eat of any of these trees?" That sounds like an innocent question, doesn't it? What exactly did God say?

But the question itself raises the possibility of different interpretations, of different understandings, even of God being wrong! Did God say this – or did he say *that*. What did God say? And so the tempter plants in the woman's mind the possibility of a different understanding. He plants in her mind the notion that whatever God said might be debatable.

Her answer is correct: we may eat of all the trees except that one, lest we die. And the tempter then says, "You won't die! You will be like God!" You will have great knowledge and be just like God. You will be as powerful as God. This will be a good thing!

And the woman saw that this was desirable, and the fruit looked good to eat. And she took it and ate, and gave it to the man and he ate.

My friend used to say that it took all the wiles of the devil to get the woman to eat the fruit; all it took for the man to eat was for a beautiful woman to hand it to him.

The sin came with the eating; all before that was temptation.

As we read James, we can learn more about how this works. The first thing we learn here is that we should not blame temptations on God! God does not tempt us with evil, because God cannot be tempted by evil.

There are those times when the Scriptures say that God tempted someone, or allowed someone to be tempted, or sent something to a person as a test, or something like that. What we are to take from this verse is that God doesn't tempt us directly. God may allow us to be tempted, to see if we can withstand, or how we stand up to it, but God doesn't himself directly tempt us.

That may seem like splitting hairs, and perhaps it is, but we are meant to see that God is holy, pure, and good. God cannot be tempted by evil, and so does not himself directly tempt us. God is all and only good and holy. God is pure. God cannot contradict his own will, and that is what evil is: not following the will of God.

So God does not tempt us. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask that God "lead us not into temptation." God does not lead us into temptation. But God does let temptation come our way, and in this prayer we ask God to protect us from temptation and to deliver us from evil. We want him to keep us safe, to keep us close to him.

And yet, temptations come. Why? Look at verse 14: each one is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desires. That is the version I memorized once, many years ago. What comes and tempts us? Our desires.

Which is to say, we are tempted by what we already want, at some level. We are tempted by our desires. Let's see: I have no desire at all to eat broccoli. I will eat it; it is good for me. But I won't enjoy it. I won't eat it because I want it. I never open the fridge and say, "ooo look! Broccoli!" No, I have no desire for that stuff. Now, ice cream is a different matter entirely. I know that ice cream is there in the freezer. When the house gets quiet, I can hear it calling my name. I want the ice cream. I desire it.

There is nothing wrong with desires. I can desire ice cream. I want to learn to read Danish. I want to travel the world. I want to live in the mountains. I want all kinds of things. I even want things I can't have. I want that cool car. Have you ever seen a Ferrari 250? Absolutely the coolest car ever built. Of course, they stopped in 1964, and the few that exist cost a lot of money. Millions! I don't even have enough money to drive one for a few minutes. But they are so cool. And I want one.

Desires have a way of tormenting us. Especially the things we can't have. I may want my neighbor's whatever, but I can't have it. It can make me crazy, if I sit on my porch every day staring at my neighbor's back door. So sometimes, one way of overcoming

temptation is to remove ourselves from the desire. But even if I do that, even if I throw away all the ice cream, it doesn't really help, because I know where to get more!

So I have to come to terms with my desires. I have to decide which ones to act on, which ones to not act on, to let go of. Maybe I have to set a boundary of some kind. I can't do that, or go there, or look at that anymore, because if I do, it leads me to be tempted to sin.

Let's take chocolate. Let's say that for some reason, there is a huge chocolate bar at your house. It is fresh, tasty, and wrapped in gold foil. It sits in the cabinet waiting on someone to devour it. Now you know you can't have it, or more than a taste, because it will mess with your blood sugar. You don't want diabetes, do you? Leave it alone!

But it sits there, looking so good. Now and then you sniff it, and the odor is heavenly! Maybe it will spike my blood sugar, and the caffeine in it will keep me awake, but still.... You decide to have just a little tiny nibble; surely that won't hurt! And so risking diabetes, a sleepless night, and gout, you have a nibble. OK, you have a bite. It is so good! See how desire works? You are lured and enticed by your desires.

At some point, you sin. You throw caution to the wind. You begin to eat the entire chocolate bar! Who cares about health? Who cares if I get fat? This is so good. I just can't stop eating it. And of course, once you have eaten the entire chocolate bar, your blood sugar begins to fall, and you start looking for something else, and you eat more and more. You are helpless before your desires, and you fall into sin.

There is a sin called gluttony; most Americans don't consider that a sin at all. But eating more than you should or need to is sinful. I think the sin here is about not being in control of ourselves, of our bodies. We can't stop eating – that is the sinful part of it. Something else is controlling us and we are giving in to our desires.

We are lured and enticed by our desires, and “then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.” So the line between desire and sin gets pretty obscure. We are lured and enticed, -- that chocolate looks so pretty! – and then WHAM! We are eating it. Where is the line between filling our desires and sinning? Is there a line? I think there is a line: we can act on some desires: we can eat a little bit of chocolate. But if we eat the WHOLE bar, we have eaten too much. We have crossed the line. We have committed the sin of gluttony. We have sinned. Sometimes we know exactly when we cross the line, but sometimes we don't know. That is where things get murky for us.

Some of us don't even like chocolate that much. I could take or leave it, frankly. But the same process works in us with all kinds of desires. Maybe you like watching certain kinds of trashy television or movies. Maybe you can't stop watching porn. Maybe it is the House and Garden shows that let you gently lust after wealth and comforts. Maybe it is shopping! Oh, Lord, can we shop! Do we need all of that stuff? Well, no, but it makes us happy to shop. Then we get buyer's remorse and the only antidote is, buy something else! We want everything to be new and fresh.

In short, whatever it is that we desire, even things that are completely harmless and legitimate, can lead us to sin. “Desire when conceived gives birth to sin.” So the question is, how do we avoid sin? At what point does desire cross the line? And should we suppress all our desires, or what?

Desire isn't bad: God made us as physical creatures with appetites. God created us this way. So we have desires, say for chocolate. But like all good things, evil corrupts them. And so we have an inordinate desire for chocolate, and that will lead us to sin. Inordinate – the word means disordered. So our disordered desires lure and entice us. You know, it doesn't have to be anything terrible – if the powers of evil can get us to be lured by our desire for antique British teapots, that is enough. Because our desires keep us focused on the thing, the object of the desire, and so not on God. There lies the rub. If we are not focused on God, we are astray.

So what do we do? The obvious thing is, once we know that a thing tempts us, that we desire something in an inordinate way, in a way that is not good for us, we avoid it. We don't have to buy that huge chocolate bar! We don't have to watch that movie. We don't need to go to that store. And there are ways to prevent these things from coming into our homes and becoming temptations.

Better than avoiding though is training ourselves, our bodies, our appetites. If we know that eating one nibble of chocolate will be our downfall, then we can avoid it, or we can train ourselves to enjoy one nibble and not eat the entire huge bar. How do we train our appetites? We do that by fasting and self-denial! That is the point of Lent: to teach our appetites who is boss. If we can control our stomach, we can perhaps learn to pray! But as long as our stomachs are in control, our prayer life doesn't have much of a chance.

The other part of this is that God gives us commands and guidance. God told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of that one tree. God tells us what to do through Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We know what we are supposed to do, or allowed to do, and what is forbidden. If we take that seriously, and modify our desires to stay within those guidelines, we will do well.

This is important because, as the verse goes on to say, “Sin when full-grown leads to death.” You don't want to die, do you, apart from God? You want to live, with God, forever. And so it matters if we sin or not, and so it also matters what we do about our desires that lure and entice us. Temptation is a tricky subject; it is not in itself wrong, but it so easily leads us that way, and that path takes us away from God. So train your desires, pray for God's Spirit to give you strength, pray for the grace that Jesus promises, so that you may be strong and not give in to the temptations that abound around us. And we pray that God will bless you, and all of us, so that we may remain faithful to what God calls us to do. Thanks be to God. Amen.