

"How To Avoid Temptation"  
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February 14, 2016  
Menifee United Church of Christ

## Introduction

Oscar Wilde and Mae West are probably not the best people to turn to for advice on how to avoid temptation. Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything except temptation." And Mae West said, "I generally avoid temptation unless I can't resist it." So I probably shouldn't have begun a sermon about avoiding temptation by quoting Oscar Wilde and Mae West. But I couldn't help myself! I gave into temptation! During Lent!

Lent is a time when we try to avoid temptation. Lent lasts about six weeks. Then comes Easter Sunday. Lent is like a do-over for your New Year's resolutions. If you resolved in the New Year to read the Bible more, but you haven't kept your resolution, Lent is when you can get back on track. Lent is a time of reflection. Prayer. Fasting sometimes. Lent is when we think about the more spiritual aspects of life. Lent is when we remember the things we've done right and rejoice. And Lent is when we remember the things we've done wrong and repent. What about you? Do you examine your life during Lent? Do you remember the things you've done right and rejoice? And do you remember the things you've done wrong and repent? Do you make it a point during Lent to apologize to those you've hurt? Do you hope that the people who've hurt you will apologize to you during Lent? Do you try to avoid temptation, especially during the 40 days of Lent, the way Jesus did for 40 days in the wilderness?

## A Biblical Example

The wilderness, according to the Gospel of Luke, is where Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit. For 40 days Jesus was tempted by the devil. The devil showed Jesus a stone and said, "Hey, Jesus. You see this stone? You're hungry. So turn this stone into a loaf of bread." Jesus said, "No thanks, devil. The Scriptures say one does not live by bread alone." Then the devil showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and said, "Hey, Jesus. You see all these kingdoms of the world? I'll give them all to you, to your authority, if you'll just worship me." Then Jesus said, "No thanks, devil. The Scriptures say to only worship God." Then the devil took Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem and said, "Hey, Jesus. Throw yourself down from here; God's angels will catch you." Then Jesus said, "No thanks, devil. The Scriptures say not to put God to the test." Then the devil left, waiting for another time to tempt Jesus. (I believe the next time the devil tempted Jesus was when he was hanging on the cross, and the devil said, "Hey, Jesus. Take my advice. Don't forgive those people who nailed you to the cross." Then Jesus said, "No thanks, devil." Then Jesus said of those who nailed him to the cross, "Forgive them, God, for they don't know what they're doing.")

Doing wrong can leave us feeling guilty. God doesn't want us feeling guilty. God certainly doesn't want us feeling paralyzed by guilt. God wants us to feel forgiven. And if God can forgive those who nailed Jesus to the cross, then God can forgive us. That's where Lent comes in. We remember the mistakes we made, seek forgiveness, repent, and vow not to make any more mistakes. Then, God forgives us. And then, hopefully, we resolve to be more like Jesus.

## Another Biblical Example

Jesus, according to the Gospel of Matthew, when he taught us to pray, he taught us to pray temptation away. Jesus taught us to pray like this: Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Evil. That prayer makes it sound like God leads us into evil, into temptation, doesn't it? But I don't believe that's what Jesus is saying. I believe Jesus is saying God delivers us from evil and does not lead us into temptation. I believe we're capable of leading ourselves into temptation, without any help from God, thank you very much. We see people giving in to temptation in the Bible all the time. Adam and Eve were tempted to eat of the forbidden fruit and they gave in to temptation. King David was tempted to commit adultery with Bathsheba and have her husband Uriah killed on the field of battle (in other words David was tempted to have Uriah killed and left in a heap) and he gave in to temptation. The scribes and the Pharisees – the Religious Right of his day – were tempted to have Jesus crucified and they gave in to temptation. We see people giving in to temptation on the news all the time. Somebody is tempted to lead police on a car chase on LA freeways and gives in to temptation. A white police officer is tempted to shoot an unarmed black man and gives in to temptation. A world leader is tempted to go to war with a country that poses no threat and gives in to temptation. For help in avoiding temptation we would do well to turn to the Lord.

### Still Another Biblical Example

The Lord, according to Psalm 91, is our help in times of temptation. The Bible says, when we make the Lord our refuge, when we make the Most High our dwelling place, no evil can come against us, because God will command God's angels to guard us. God's angels will catch us when we fall. But don't put God to the test by jumping off a 10 story building. That's what the devil wanted Jesus to do. And Jesus said: No thanks, devil.

No thanks, devil. How many of us say that, or words to that effect, when we face temptation? Now I'm not one of those preachers who preaches about the "sin" of gambling, or the "sin" of drink, or even the "sin" of drugs. I don't think it's a sin to gamble and lose some money every now and then. But if you gamble away the family paycheck, week after week after week, that's a problem. And while the problem is the excess gambling, the problem is also the time lost with your loved ones. And it seems to me that's an even bigger problem than the excess gambling. The same is true with alcohol. I don't think it's a sin to have a drink or two every now and then. But if you have drink after drink after drink, day after day after day, that's a problem. And while the problem is the excess drinking, the problem is also the time lost with your loved ones. And it seems to me that's an even bigger problem than the excess drinking. The same is true with drugs. I don't think it's a sin - because it's already legal in several states and may be legal soon in California - to puff the magic dragon every now and then. But if you have puff after puff after puff, day after day after day, that's a problem. And while the problem is the excess puffing, the problem is also the time lost with your loved ones. And it seems to me that's an even bigger problem than the excess puffing.

### A Modern-Day Example

Puffing to excess is probably what you're going to think I was doing when I tell you what I agreed to give up with my daughter for Lent. I talked with my daughter the other day. She asked me, "What are you going to give up for Lent?" I said, "I don't know. Nothing." She said, "Let's give up cookies for Lent." I said, "OK." I thought, I can still have cake and pie and ice cream, so I can give up cookies for Lent. Then I told her about how we gave away donuts for Fat Tuesday, or Mardi Gras, in our parking lot. Then she said, "Let's also give up donuts for Lent." I said, "OK." I thought, I can still have cake and pie and ice cream, so I can give up cookies and donuts for Lent. Then she said, "Let's give up all sweets for Lent." What?! I don't want to give up all sweets for Lent! And I would have stuck to that. But how could I say, "No," to someone who just got accepted into Harvard Law School? And how could I say, "No," to someone who has me wrapped around her little finger? So I said, "OK."

OK. How am I going to avoid the temptation of sweets for six weeks? How am I going to avoid the temptation of Velna's butterscotch brownies, with nuts and without, for six weeks? How am I going to avoid the temptation of Chuck's chocolate chip cookies for six weeks? How am I going to avoid the temptation of whatever sweet treat Daye brings in for six weeks? I have willpower. What I don't have is won't power. I won't have brownies, I won't have cookies, I won't have sweets for six weeks. I'm just going to have to repeat my new mantra over and over

and over again for six weeks. I love my daughter more than I love sweets. I love my daughter more than I love sweets. I love my daughter more than I love sweets. I hope that will work for all of Lent.

### Conclusion

For all of Lent, as we examine our lives, let us remember who is for us during the Lenten season and during every season. The Choir sang about him earlier, when they sang, "Blessed Assurance." "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine!"

Glory divine is what we have, because: Jesus is mine! And Jesus is yours! God is yours and mine, as well. And God knows, we're not perfect. We're human. If God would've wanted us to be perfect, God would have made us angels, instead of humans. (But sometimes even angels are fallen.) Perfection is a goal line we'll never cross. We'll never be perfect. God knows that. God just wants us to strive for perfection. We do that, in part, by examining our lives during Lent. And really all year long. Rejoicing over what we've done right. Repenting over what we've done wrong. While I believe God loves us no matter what, I also believe God doesn't care if we give up sweets for Lent. I believe what God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit want us to give up for Lent - and forever - are hatred, revenge, and fear. But that's not enough. I also believe what God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit want us to replace hatred, revenge, and fear with for Lent - and forever - are love, forgiveness, and peace. If we can do that, if we can live a life of love, forgiveness, and peace, then Lent will not be such a somber time. Then Lent will be - dare I say it - sweet.

### Closing Prayer

Let us pray...

God of Love,  
Help us to rejoice over what we've done right.  
Help us to repent over what we've done wrong.  
And help us to know that you love us no matter what we do.  
Now and forevermore.  
By the power of the Holy Spirit.  
And in the name of Jesus.  
Amen.