

Third Wednesday in Lent, March 16, 2022  
Mercy in Temptation  
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One of the most prevalent causes of automobile accidents is distracted driving. Distractions occur when a driver takes his eyes off the road to look at something else. This could be to turn to talk to a passenger. It could mean searching for something to eat or drink. Sometimes one becomes drowsy and loses focus. Most frequently people are distracted by their cell phones. This is especially dangerous when they are reading or writing texts while driving. The results of such distractions can be devastating, even deadly. Each year nearly 400,000 injuries and 4,000 deaths result from car crashes involving distracted drivers in the United States.

There is another kind of distraction that is deadly. It is spiritually deadly and can result in eternal destruction. That is when we are distracted away from the things of God. It occurs when we lose focus from God's will and God's way. It happens when we are tempted to look away from the Lord and instead turn to the attractions of the world. This distraction is what the Bible calls temptation.

During this Lenten season we seek to focus on Christ and his cross. But so often our view is distracted by other cares and concerns of life that direct us away from our Lord and his will for our lives. Today we consider the reality of temptations in our lives, and we seek God's power to overcome temptation. We will consider the Bible reading from 1 Corinthians chapter ten to guide us to escape temptation. There are three insights from this passage that are pertinent to our struggle with temptation.

### I. Temptation is Persistent

First, we must recognize that temptation is persistent. It is constantly around us, and it continually seeks to distract us from God. The apostle Paul makes this point in verse 12 of 1 Corinthians 10, writing: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." In other words, don't let your guard down! Temptation will catch you when you least expect it.

The reason that temptation is persistent is because the tempter is persistent. Satan and his demonic minions will do all that they can to seduce you to sin. In our text St. Paul describes how the ancient Israelites were tempted with idolatry, sexual immorality, discontentment and even rebellion against God (1 Corinthians 10:6-10). And notice what the devil did to tempt Jesus in the wilderness as described in our Gospel reading. Satan was persistent. He didn't stop with one

temptation but tried three times to tempt Jesus to sin. The devil attempted various tactics to entice Jesus to go against God's will.

Even today, Satan is tireless. If he can't get you in one area, he will try another until he finds a vulnerable weakness in you. Satan will undertake to place many temptations in your line of vision so that, like a distracted driver, you take your focus off God and away from the righteous path that God directs you to.

The evil one uses various distractions to tempt you off course. You may be attacked with temptations of the flesh, appealing to your appetites and lusts with pornography or gluttony. Or you may be tempted to escape the challenges of life by addictions to alcohol or drugs or electronic media. Or the temptations may come from the world as you are seized with greed for power or possessions. A woman in a clothing store tried on an expensive dress that was far beyond her means, but she was sorely tempted to buy it. So she cried out: "Get thee behind me, Satan!" Then she heard a devilish voice from behind her say: "It looks good from back here as well; go ahead and buy it." Yes, the devil is persistent in tempting us in so many ways.

## II. Temptation is Progressive

The second insight about our struggle with temptation is that it is progressive. Not only is temptation persistent, it's progressive! This means that it starts small but grows and becomes more deadly as it progresses. Verse 13 of our text says that temptation has the potential to overtake you. In using these words, the text implies that temptation can eventually subdue and overcome us. There is a progression of effects that results from succumbing to temptation. Paul describes how the Israelites in the wilderness progressed from complaints against God to outright rebellion against him to the ultimate abomination of idolatry.

The same is true for us. Temptation begins subtly but grows in its destructive power. Take the example of adultery. It begins with the attraction to someone other than your spouse. You think, "No harm done." Then it progresses to sexual lust, but you say to yourself, "I can handle it." Next the temptation is to have a one-night fling with the other; you hear a voice say, "Just try it." Ultimately you find yourself entangled in an ongoing affair that leads to the dissolution of your marriage. It starts small and seemingly insignificant, but when you succumb to temptation it will frequently snowball into a situation that entraps and engulfs you.

Someone has described the progression of temptation in this way: Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap character; sow character, reap your destiny. Temptation is progressive as it inch by inch leads you away from God and his will and into spiritual danger and destruction.

With each progressive step into temptation, it gets more difficult to get out of temptation. What appears harmless at first eventually becomes deadly.

### III. Victory over Temptation is Possible

So far this message about temptation doesn't sound very hopeful. Temptation is persistent and it is progressive. The demons are persistently casting temptations into our line of vision and once a sin takes hold, it will mushroom. But these are not the last words on temptation. There is in fact hope for us. Because not only is temptation persistent and progressive, but victory over temptation is possible! This victory over temptation is promised in the final verse of our text from 1 Corinthians 10 (verse 13), which states: "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Victory over temptation is possible because of what Lent is all about. Lent is about Jesus, and Jesus has conquered temptation. Note in this verse that the one who accomplishes the victory over temptation is God and God alone: "God is faithful ... He will not allow you to be tempted beyond your ability ... He will provide the way of escape." God is the subject of these verbs. He is the one doing the action. God in Christ is the one who gains the victory for us over temptation.

Jesus defeated temptation by entering into the ring with it. He came to temptation's territory when he fasted forty days in the wilderness. And the devil threw all the artillery of temptation at him there and throughout his life—ultimately to the places of Gethsemane, Gabbatha and Golgotha. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was tempted in every respect as we are—with the temptations of lust and greed and power and selfishness.

But that's where the similarity with us stops, because the verse goes on to say that he was tempted, "yet without sin." This means that although Jesus was tempted to sin, he was not overtaken by sin. He was not overcome by temptation so that he succumbed to and submitted to it. In the very face of temptation, our Lord prevailed over temptation. He is the only human being who can make the claim of winning over temptation every time. But he claims it not for himself; he claims it for us. He resisted temptation to sin perfectly in order to credit his perfect sinless life to our spiritually bankrupt account. Then he assumed the penalty for our transgressions—our submission to temptation—by suffering and dying on the cross, thereby paying the wages of our sin with his death.

In Christ we have victory over temptation in two ways. First, when we fall into temptation and succumb to its sin, through repentance we receive the

forgiveness of that sin. Recall the message of Ash Wednesday—that those who truly repent receive God’s mercy. This is why we engage this topic of repentance “in view of God’s mercy.” As we travel down the highway of life, we may be distracted in our driving by temptations that allure us and detour us from the direction God has for us. But when we renew our focus on God and on his mercy, he pardons our waywardness and restores our relationship with him. This is what our text means when it says that “with the temptation [God] will also provide the way of escape” (v. 13).

But the text says more. It says that God will also provide you with the ability to endure temptation (v. 13)! This means that when you face sinful temptations, God will empower to you say no to them. He does this by keeping your focus on him and his mercy. You drive through life “in view of God’s mercy,” and that mercy and grace of God sustains you in the midst of temptation. In view of God’s mercy, we say no to sinful lusts and desires. In view of God’s mercy, we focus on Christ and his purposes for us. We are not distracted from him, but we “fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

And so we travel through life with our eyes fixed on the road—the path of righteousness centered in Jesus Christ. We are not distracted by temptation or deterred by Satan’s attacks. Instead, we keep God’s mercy in view, know that he is faithful and will provide an escape from the treachery of temptation. Amen.

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