

"Three Strikes"

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March 1, 2020

Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, help us to resist temptation. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

A little boy was standing near an open container of candies in a candy store. "Now then, young man," said the owner as he approached the boy. "What are you up to?" "Nothing," replied the boy, "nothing." "Well it looks to me like you were trying to take a candy." The boy replied, "You're wrong mister, I'm trying not to!" Nothing makes it easier to resist temptation than a proper up-bringing, a sound set of values, and witnesses!

Have you ever been faced with the temptation of taking a candy, or something else you want, that you know you shouldn't? Why is it that opportunity may only knock once, yet temptation bangs on the door constantly!

Temptation can really play havoc with our lives. There was a humorous "Cathy" cartoon strip where Cathy is struggling with her diet.

Frame 1: I will take a drive, but won't go near the grocery store.

Frame 2: I will drive by the grocery store, but will not go in.

Frame 3: I will go in the grocery store, but will not walk down the aisle where the candy is on sale.

Frame 4: I will look at the candy, but not pick it up.

Frame 5: I will pick it up, but not buy it.

Frame 6: I will buy it, but not eat it.

We know where this leads! The power of temptation is deceptively subtle and persistent. Temptation seldom gets directly to the point. John Newton said that "a green log and a candle may be safely left together, but

with a few shavings, some small sticks, and then larger, and you may bring the green log to ashes.”

After fasting for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness, Jesus enters into a battle of words with Satan who tries to divert the obedient Son of God from his path of righteousness. In the Hebrew Bible, “satan” literally means “the accuser.” Satan was a member of the heavenly court, the divine prosecuting attorney who implemented the will of God, the heavenly judge, by putting suspected sinners to the test. Later, Satan became a proper name for a fallen angel who had rebelled against God and continues to resist God’s will by attempting to lure human beings into sin. Satan thrives in the absence of God. Rather than an evil person, some consider Satan to be the force of evil that thrives in the absence of God.

Forty days and 40 nights is reminiscent of Moses, when the faith of the Israelites was tested in the wilderness until restored by miraculous manna. When Jesus responds to Satan’s three attempts to tempt him, each time Jesus quotes Moses from Deuteronomy. In Noah’s time, the rain of the great flood fell upon the earth for 40 days and 40 nights and later, Elijah fasted for 40 days and 40 nights. It’s a long transformative time, and Jesus’ encounter with Satan after 40 days and 40 nights is not accidental. It’s part of God’s divine plan for Jesus to demonstrate his total obedience. The temptations represent a confrontation between the kingdom of God and evil, and Jesus wins on behalf of the kingdom of God. But even though Satan is defeated with three strikes against him, Satan will be up to bat again and continues to tempt Jesus throughout his ministry. Satan continues to tempt us today.

We have fascinating little plants that grow near the lakeshore beside our dock at the cottage. They’re called Sundew plants and they are cunning little carnivorous plants that deceive small insects by attracting them onto

their sticky open leaves. Unaware of what they are getting into, the insects succumb to the temptation of the attractive sundew leaves. Then the leaves close on the unsuspecting insects to digest them. And these treacherous little tempters are growing naturally right beside our dock. Nature is full of temptations!

We're faced with resisting temptations everywhere and in everything we do. The temptations of food and drink, the temptations of money and possessions, the temptations of power. The temptations of pleasure and possessions are generally personal, but the temptation of power affects community.

Jesus was tempted three times by Satan, but they're not really three temptations; they're three variations on a single theme. Satan tempts Jesus to go for power. Jesus was successful in resisting Satan's temptations, but we need to be ever vigilant to avoid the insidious temptation of power.

At the time, some thought that the Messiah would reproduce the miracle of the manna and that there would be a lavish supply of food. The first temptation is not just about Jesus' hunger, but to use his divine power to provide bread for all – the stones and loaves are both plural. The temptation is to use miraculous power to change creation that God has already deemed "good."

The second temptation is to use spectacle for power; the lure of the conspicuously heroic. The church often presents Jesus as the ultimate hero, giving those who know him a sense of pre-eminence and power.

The third temptation is about political power; to go for absolute political control. The term Christendom means the quest for Christian power; the "dom" is from dominion and domination.

Did you notice that in Satan's third and culminating temptation, Satan uses an "IF" clause? After taking Jesus to a very high mountain and showing him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour, Satan says, "All these I will give to you, if you will fall down and worship me." The lure of power over the whole world, IF ... It's a very big "IF." You will get \$500 of free groceries, IF you sign up for delivery service. You will get three free TV stations IF you sign up for three years. IF, IF, IF.

As the Union Pacific Railroad was being constructed, an elaborate trestle bridge was built across a large canyon in the West. Wanting to test the bridge, the builder loaded a train with enough extra cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was then driven to the middle of the bridge, where it stayed an entire day. One worker asked, "Are you tempting fate to break this bridge?" "No," the builder replied, "I'm proving that the bridge won't break." In the same way, the temptations Jesus faced were not designed to see if Jesus would sin, but to prove that he wouldn't.

Temptation is deceptive seduction, the cunning and persistent solicitation to evil. Satan "the Tempter" tempts. God does not tempt. We may face many hardships and difficulties which serve as trials or tests of our character and our faith. But they make us stronger and lead us to goodness and love. And resisting the temptations of Satan makes us stronger too. Scottish theologian, William Barclay, said that "temptation is not meant to make us fail; it is meant to confront us with a situation out of which we emerge stronger than we are." "Temptation is not meant to make us sin; it is meant to enable us to conquer sin."

Jim George, in his book, *God's Man of Influence*, talks about trying to sell a used boat trailer in the middle of winter. It was freezing outside, and no one was boating. Then a potential buyer contacted Jim. The buyer was

willing to pay Jim's asking price, but there was an "IF." The buyer wanted Jim to put only half the price of the trailer on the bill of sale. "That's the way we do it in these parts," the buyer explained. That way he would only have to pay half the sales tax, which amounted to several hundred dollars.

Jim reflected, "My first thought was, I really want to sell that trailer, and if I say no, he might back out, and I may not find anyone else who'll pay my asking price. If I agree, I'll be lying - not to mention breaking the law - but who would know?" Jim said, "I knew what I should do, but still I was having this inner struggle."

He told the buyer he was a Christian and couldn't do anything illegal. The man went ahead and bought the trailer anyway, and Jim declared the full amount on the bill of sale, but he was prepared to lose the sale.

Jesus connects us with our own experience of being tempted and he's a model for our response in resisting temptation. Jesus uses scripture faithfully and in context. Jesus refuses to use power selfishly. Jesus responds to each temptation by total reliance on God. Temptation is inevitable, as is desiring personal pleasure, possessions, prestige and power. Through a trusting relationship with God, we can lead authentic human lives that include our temptations and limitations. God leads us to goodness and love through the teaching of Jesus and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.