

## The Trouble with Sin

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Today being the first Sunday in Lent, it will come as little surprise to most of you that the readings for the day are all about sin, and two of those readings – the story of what we commonly call the Fall, and the story of Jesus' encounter with the devil in the wilderness – are about the most troublesome aspect of sin, which is temptation. And the theme that I wish to address this morning is the most troublesome aspect of temptation, which is its attractiveness. And there, I believe, we come to the root of the problem. The trouble with the sin that tempts us is not that it's ugly in its manifestation, but rather that it is ugly in its effects. Tempting sins are all beautiful. It is the beauty in sin that constitutes temptation, and that is why Jesus taught us to pray, as we will say in a few minutes, "and lead us not into temptation." We ask God to lead us not into temptation not because temptation is horrible in its ugliness but rather because it is terrifying in its beauty. It is terrifying because we are naturally drawn to the beautiful, and the beautiful is sometimes wrong. And that, in a nutshell, is the trouble with sin. It's pretty.

And to help me make this point, I have taken as my text part of verse six of the third chapter of Genesis, which says, "When the woman saw that the tree was good. . . ." There is the problem. The tree was good. The tree was not bad. The story tells us that the tree was good for food, that it was a delight to the eyes, and that it was to be desired to make one wise – all good things. Food is good, beauty is good, wisdom is good. There's nothing wrong with any of those things. They are part of the goodness of creation.

And the second story of the morning, Jesus's encounter with the devil in the wilderness, is likewise about the goodness embedded in temptation. The first temptation is for Jesus to satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread. Nothing wrong with a good meal. The second temptation is for Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple so that God's angels will catch him. Nothing wrong with trusting in God to deliver us from harm. And the third temptation was for Jesus to become the ruler of the realms of the world if only he would serve Satan rather than God. And imagine how different the world would be today if Jesus, rather than Satan, were running this show. That would be a wonderful thing!

So the temptations in both of our stories are all good things, all beautiful things, and therein lies their most troublesome aspect. The essence of temptation is not its badness; the essence of temptation is its goodness. We are not tempted to do bad things that are obviously bad or harmful for us. We don't go around, for example, hitting ourselves on the thumb with a hammer. That hurts, it's painful, and we are not naturally drawn to do things that damage or hurt us.

But potato chips, on the other hand, or grilled cheese sandwiches, or chocolate chip mint ice cream or driving too fast or evading taxes or skimming from our workplace or straying from our marital commitments – those and things like them are serious temptations for many of us precisely because they taste good or feel good or allow us to participate more fully in our commercialized world or they provide us an escape from our mundane or dysfunctional relationships or they make us feel better about ourselves at least for a time. It's the goodness in all of that badness that attracts us, and it is only

through discernment, practice, dedication, and God's grace that any of us is able to resist the good embedded in sin.

I can resist anything except temptation, Oscar Wilde said, and most of us have at least some knowledge of what he was talking about. As an esthete, Wilde was naturally drawn to the beautiful, and the sins that most beset us – the temptations to which we are most vulnerable – are the sins that in one way or another attract us and thereby make us feel better about ourselves, at least for a time. The cutting remark or the quick put down makes us feel clever and superior. The delectable bit of gossip confirms our in-the-know status. The underhanded or shady deal makes us feel smarter than the average palooka. The clandestine affair makes us feel special and wanted.

And we ought not to deny the goodness in the midst of the badness. We ought not to pretend that what is good is bad. In the first place, that denies the goodness of creation. And in the second place, it falsifies reality and plunges us into what Marx called "false consciousness," when we're no longer able to see things for what they really are. It does us no good to call black white or white black or up down or down up, just as it does us no good to call ourselves peaceful as we continue to prepare for war. We're not seeing reality for what it is, and if our false consciousness is about chocolate chip mint ice cream, that's one thing; but if it's about the breaking of someone's heart or nuclear weapons or the concentration of wealth that perpetuates grinding poverty or the pillaging of the earth that constitutes environmental suicide, that's quite another matter altogether.

The key to resisting temptation, as Jesus showed us and as Adam and Eve did not, is to recognize the good for what it is but to see how that goodness has been distorted or twisted into something that is no longer good. That distortion may be because of context, it may be because of amount, or it may be because of unforeseen consequences, but in the vast majority of cases, what makes a good a bad is our human tendency to direct that goodness toward ourselves rather than toward the world. The perennial human failing is to direct goodness, which is God's first and most loving creation, inward rather than outward. In fact, both Augustine and Luther said that sin consists essentially in that inward directedness by which we distort the goodness of all of God's creation. Luther put it this way in his lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans:

"Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, [being] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God toward itself . . . but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake."

To seek things, even God, for the sake of the self is to succumb to the first and most serious of all temptations, for the vast majority of our other sins will flow from that original sin. To serve the creature rather than the creator – which is what Adam and Eve did and what Jesus refused to do – is to fundamentally alter the direction of our love, and no matter how ardently or passionately we may love from that point on, we will be in trouble, because our love is pointed in the wrong direction. It's always possible to love the right things in the wrong way. And the surest way to love wrongly is to love in the service of the self.

Yes, of course, we all want to feel loved in a special and particular way, and our spouse or significant other doesn't always make us feel that way, and another person may. But the commitments we make in marriage mean, among other things, that there are boundaries which need to be respected and feelings other than our own that need to be honored. And the hard work of marriage, as most married people have figured out, is honoring the feelings of another even when we don't feel like it. That's commitment and it's love – mature, grown-up love that doesn't depend on our subjective feelings for its presence and persistence.

To love one's country is a good thing, but when that love blinds us to our country's failings and misdeeds and the legitimate needs and grievances of other nations, then that love has slipped from patriotism to chauvinism, and it's no longer a good. We have allowed our self-directed love to turn a good into a bad.

The first epistle of Timothy warns us against the love of money, which it describes as “the root of all kinds of evil” (6:10), and church people have often exaggerated money’s evil influence. But it is not money that’s the problem; it’s loving money as an end in itself – the millionaire who has to become a billionaire, for example – rather than as a means to an outward-directed end. Jesus does not pay our light bill or my salary or our contributions to Our Church’s Wider Mission; you do, and you do it with money, and that makes money a good. And whether it’s money in our families or money in our churches, the saying is still true: the tail should never wag the dog.

Intimacy, patriotism, money – all goods in themselves and all capable of becoming occasions for sin. We resist temptation, avoid sin, and make the right decisions with regard to all of those by asking ourselves how any given decision will direct the flow of goodness inherent in all of those goods not \*to\* me but \*through\* me to the betterment of God’s world. Once we get the direction of love right – and keep it flowing in its proper direction through habitual practice – temptation has a way of melting away.

“Don’t worry about avoiding temptation,” the comedian Joey Adams used to say. “As you grow older, it will avoid you.” He was talking about becoming less physically attractive to strangers as we age, but he could equally have been talking about spiritual maturity. Once we recognize the goodness inherent in all temptation, and remember that our task in life is to direct all of God’s goodness outward and not inward, temptation becomes far less treacherous and much more manageable.

In this season of Lent, when we pause to reflect on all the ways that sin affects us, don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater when it comes to temptation. See the good in everything, even in the tempting things, and then, as the old campfire song says, pass it on.