

When Temptation Comes A'Knockin'

Matthew 4:1-11

I know as we have been journeying through the Lord's Prayer, you've all been waiting for the week when we could talk about...TEMPTATION!! ☺ As we consider temptation this week, there's a little story written by Ray and Anne Ortlund about Toad and Frog: ¹

Toad baked some cookies. "These cookies smell very good," said Toad. He ate one. "And they taste even better," he said. Toad ran to Frog's house. "Frog, Frog," cried Toad, "taste these cookies that I have made."

Frog ate one of the cookies, "These are the best cookies I have ever eaten!" said Frog.

Frog and Toad ate many cookies, one after another. "You know, Toad," said Frog, with his mouth full, "I think we should stop eating. We will soon be sick."

"You are right," said Toad. "Let us eat one last cookie, and then we will stop." Frog and Toad ate one last cookie. There were many cookies left in the bowl.

"Frog," said Toad, "let us eat one very last cookie, and then we will stop." Frog and Toad ate one very last cookie.

"We must stop eating!" cried Toad as he ate another.

"Yes," said Frog, reaching for a cookie, "we need willpower."

"What is willpower?" asked Toad.

"Willpower is trying hard not to do something you really want to do," said Frog.

"You mean like trying hard not to eat all these cookies?" asked Toad.

"Right," said Frog.

Frog put the cookies in a box. "There," he said. "Now we will not eat any more cookies."

"But we can open the box," said Toad.

"That is true," said Frog.

Frog tied some string around the box. "There," he said. "Now we will not eat any more cookies."

"But we can cut the string and open the box." said Toad.

"That is true," said Frog. Frog got a ladder. He put the box up on a high shelf.

"There," said Frog. "Now we will not eat any more cookies."

"But we can climb the ladder and take the box down from the shelf and cut the string and open the box," said Toad.

"That is true," said Frog.

Frog climbed the ladder and took the box down from the shelf. He cut the string and opened the box. Frog took the box outside. He shouted in a loud voice. "Hey, birds, here are cookies!" Birds came from everywhere. They picked up all the cookies in their beaks and flew away.

"Now we have no more cookies to eat," said Toad sadly.

"Not even one."

"Yes," said Frog, "but we have lots and lots of willpower."

"You may keep it all, Frog," said Toad. "I am going home now to bake a cake."

¹ Ray & Anne Ortlund, *Renewal*, Navpress, 1989, p. 73-74.

Temptation is likely more powerful than the lure of cookies or cake, however, after giving up gluten and dairy faithfully over Lent, I'm not sure that food isn't a good symbol of our struggle with willpower and temptation. At age 17, St. Augustine himself said "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet." The question of whether we truly intent to resist temptation is a valid one, but first we must consider the ways we are tempted. Unlike Jesus, we are typically not in the desert considering eating stones or jumping off of Temples. But what exactly are we talking about when we pray "lead us not into temptation?" What is temptation?

According to the Harper Collins Bible Dictionary – temptation in the Bible is given two different meanings – one meaning being a time of testing, a sort of training and conditioning, where a person has an opportunity to prove their faithfulness, John Dominic Crossan, Irish-born American theologian, would categorize this as a trial, not temptation. The other sort of temptation is more in line with what you and I might think "*an enticement toward sin leading to a deliberate act of evil against God or one's neighbor.*"

I think the disciples wrestled with their own temptations – to power, to fame, self-righteousness, violence, quick fixes, insensitivity, the list goes on, and since we don't know the inner thoughts of those first followers, the list will forever be incomplete. We know three of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness with the devil. This testing or trial comes just before he begins he public ministry, and the temptation to be more exhibitionist or even pursue glory over service, seem valid temptations and yet, Jesus uses Scripture and his calling to defeat temptation and evil. What are our temptations? In 1992, there was a survey the Discipleship Journal invited readers to rank their greatest temptations, and the results were as follows: 1. Materialism. 2. Pride. 3. Self-centeredness. 4. Laziness. 5. (Tie) Anger/Bitterness. 5. (Tie) Sexual lust. 7. Envy. 8. Gluttony. 9. Lying.

We are tempted only because we are convicted in our hearts or minds that the thing that we crave is ultimately out of line with what God calls us to be or do. And partaking of such creates a fracture in our relationships with God and neighbor, which is a sin. Being tempted isn't the sin, it's the giving in...so our prayer that we would not be led into temptation, seems appropriate. More than that it seems vital. We need help.

Pope Francis recently pointed out what scholars have long been considering in the translation of the Aramaic that Jesus used – what is frequently translated as "*Lead Us Not into Temptation*" is more accurately translated to "Do not let us enter into temptation." Others translate it to say "*Do not abandon us as we face temptation.*" Perhaps our prayer, as discussed in Bible Study this week should be: **help lead us through temptation.** Avoiding temptation altogether might be preferable, but it doesn't seem very practical.

I have an almost teenage daughter, and I've worked with other people's teenagers for quite some time. Trying to help teenagers understand choices and consequences, and avoiding situations where they have certain temptations is a challenge. We know this. There is wisdom in avoiding places you know will be difficult. At least until we've built our stamina. Then being in places where you know you'll be tempted and being able to be strong, having supports around you is also important. Sometimes it's easier to counsel teenager than adults.

Sometimes we might think that temptation isn't all that bad. After all, Jesus made it through. But, here's the thing. We're not Jesus. So, what do we put in our resisting temptation toolkits?

The respondents from that survey I quoted earlier noted temptations were more potent when they had neglected their time with God (81 percent) and when they were physically tired (57 percent). Resisting temptation was accomplished by prayer (84 percent), avoiding compromising situations (76 percent), Bible study (66 percent), and being accountable to someone (52 percent).

As with Jesus' wilderness experience, temptation is usually its most powerful when we are alone or in isolation. In the twelve step programs of recovery, before even beginning, one must have a sponsor, so you're never alone. John Wesley knew that being an all-in Christian was hard...it was rewarding and fulfilling, sometimes resulting in such feelings of ecstasy and joy and peace that nothing – no substance or amount of money could give...but it's hard. So, he created accountability groups. He had societies and classes and groups so that members would check on each other. The question of Are you growing in grace of God? If so, show us the fruit, and if not, how can we help? The accountability of praying, reading scripture, making positive choices with the support of community helps Jesus-followers stay on the right track.

How can we support once another so we don't fall into sin? This past week, I participated in a session led by Action Ridge in Jordan Hall that began a conversation about Racial Justice and unpacking white privilege, understanding some of our biases, questioning our assumptions and ways we've been raised. Having some of those sensitive conversations in a place where you can help me see my racist tendencies and I can help you see yours is hard, yet so important. Honestly, we'd rather pretend that we're perfect than be confronted on ways that we have fallen into systemic sin. And yet, there's something powerful about increasing our own awareness and doing better. Using better words and language that includes rather than excludes. Lead us through temptation, and help us to find a better way, ways that strengthen and build relationships rather than hurt and destroy.

As we near Holy Week and the sacrifice God makes to be in relationship with us- let us consider the ways that we participate in resisting evil, in overcoming our temptations and choosing goodness. Holy One, Temptation abounds, lead us through, do not abandon us, and give us the strength to support our souls so that we might grow in Your love, grow in faith, and believe in our hearts and lives that relationship with you gives us peace and joy like the world and all those things that tempt us cannot begin to offer. Amen.