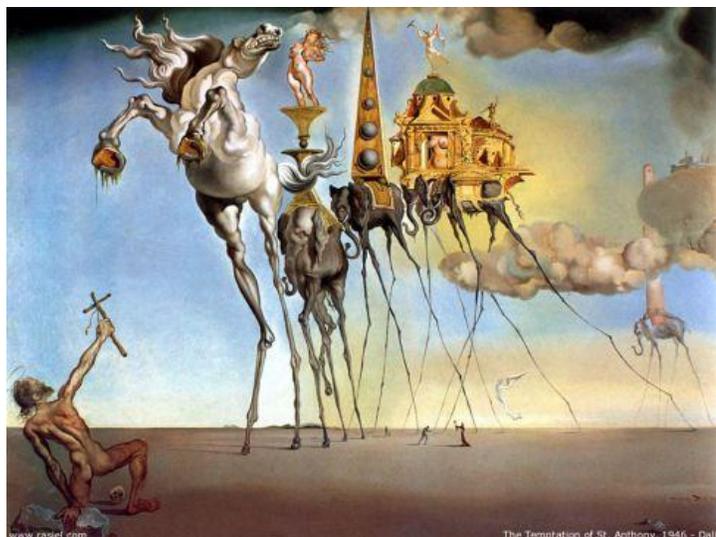


## The Down Side of Getting Better – March 9, 2014



*So you start that diet, only to find you are now tempted by foods you previously had no interest in eating. Or you want the quick fix for your problems. Or want to test someone's love. Or you just feel like being bad. This is how Jesus dealt with it. Kind of helpful for everyday life, not just churchy things.*

GENESIS 2:15-17, 3:1-7 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.<sup>16</sup>And the LORD God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

3:1Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'"<sup>2</sup>The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; <sup>3</sup>but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"<sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; <sup>5</sup>for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."<sup>6</sup>So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate.<sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

GOSPEL MATTHEW 4:1-11 <sup>1</sup>Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.<sup>2</sup>He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.<sup>3</sup>The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread."<sup>4</sup>But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

<sup>5</sup>Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, <sup>6</sup>saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

7 Jesus said to him, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” 10 Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.

## **The Down Side of Getting Better**



So this is Lent, which is a time when people choose to give up something, as a sacrifice to God. A lot of people give up sweets or alcohol. Sometimes people start doing new things for lent, for example, daily Bible readings, or acts of service.

The problem with things like fasting, or making a commitment to say, work with Wednesday night Live, is that once you try to start, you are tempted to stop. Say I decided to give up pecan pie for lent. Now in reality I have pecan pie once or twice a year, and to be honest, while I really like it, its not like I go everyday wishing I had a piece.

But if I tried to give it up, I bet I would start thinking about it—a lot. I would wake up in the morning thinking, I wish I could have some pecan pie. It’s kind of like, you don’t miss food...until you go on a diet.

Temptation is something that only occurs when we are trying to get better—if we are trying to lose weight, we are tempted to eat, if we are trying to quit smoking, we are tempted to have a cigarette, if we are trying to get up early to read the Bible, we are tempted to stay in bed, if we are trying to grow spiritually, we are tempted to stay where we are.

Temptation is really a good thing. It shows that we are trying to be better people. If you are never tempted by anything, than you either have the make up of a saint (but to be honest, most saints can write prolifically of their temptations) are you are too content staying where you are.

Jesus, for whatever reason, felt the need to go out in the desert and spend forty days in prayer and fasting. Jesus felt the need to work on his spiritual life. And of course, while he was out there, Jesus was tempted.

The first temptation involves fasting. Jesus goes out in the desert for a forty day fast. Now the desert is filled with rocks and when I saw the place where this all supposedly happened, I was struck by how much the rock looked like little loaves of bread. Jesus has not eaten for a while, and Satan says, “Hungry? You know you can do something about that. Just turn one of these stones in to bread.”

In order to understand why this is a temptation, we need to understand why fasting is important.

You see, we grow spiritually one of two ways—by doing something, or by not doing something. We are more familiar with spiritual growth that involves doing something—going to church, reading the Bible, helping others. But there is another type of spiritual growth, where we grow by NOT doing things. In the monastic tradition they spoke of *Ora et Labora*—work and prayer. Prayer, in this context, means much more than just talking to God; it means being totally quiet, and listening to God.

We fast, we give up food, so we can grow closer to God.

But the thing is, spiritual growth is a process—a long term process. There are few short cuts. And the things we do have a cumulative affect. They build up over time, and the more we do them, the more we tend to grow. Going to church once will affect your spiritual life about as much as skipping one meal will affect your weight. The best spiritual growth happens over the long haul. And you cannot speed up the process, just like you cannot speed up a diet. As a matter of fact, studies show that the quicker you lose weight, the more weight you put back on after you stop the diet.

Now fasting is kind of like the opposite of dieting. In dieting you go without food to shrink your body. In fasting you go without food, or sweets, or something, to grow your spiritual life.

It works like this. I used to put a lot of sugar in my coffee. I like my coffee hot and sweet. But a few years ago I gave up sugar for Lent, including sugar in my coffee. To this day, when I drink a cup of hot, unsweetened coffee, I am reminded of my relationship with God. When I fast, and I get hungry, or I start to desire the thing that I have given up, I am again reminded of my relationships with God. The other night I went with some folks to a movie. After the movie they wanted to go for ice cream, and I was all over that, but my wife reminded me that I am giving up sweets for Lent. So reluctantly I turned down the invitation, and we went home, where I had soda water.

So what is it about fasting that helps us grow spiritually? When you grow during times of prosperity, you tend to grow fat. But when you grow during times of deprivation and hardship, you tend to grow strong. Fasting is a time of deprivation, and helps you grow spiritually strong.

So Jesus is out in desert on a forty day fast. And Satan comes up and tries to get him to take a short cut.

“Jesus, you are out here to discover more of who God is, and who you are by fasting. I have an idea. Why don’t see how much power you really have, and just do a little miracle here. Just turn one of these stones into a loaf of bread. That will show you how powerful you are. Come on Jesus, take a short cut!”

How often are you tempted to take short cuts in the important things in your life? Almost always,



they tend not to work. There are not reliable “Get Rich Quick” schemes. There are no quick weight loss methods. You cannot read a few books and subscribe to a Golf Magazine, and become a scratch golfer. You cannot put a book under your pillow and pass the test the next day. You cannot fix a broken marriage with a weekend seminar.

And there are no short cuts for spiritual growth. And that is what Satan is offering Jesus. Take a short cut! You have the power! Use it!

But the point of the fast was to grow, and taking a short cut would have cut short the spiritual growth Jesus needed to fast for forty days. I don’t why, but he did.

And the way Jesus fought this particular temptation was to remind himself why he was fasting. We do not live by bread alone, but by the Word of God. Bread is good, and feeds our bodies, but we need to feed our souls, and that was the point of his fast.

The second temptation had to do with Jesus relationship with God. Satan takes him to the pinnacle of the temple, the highest place in the city, and says, “Jump! If you are really the Son of God, your Father will save you. He will make sure you do not get hurt.”

So what is so bad about this? Why is this a temptation? What would be wrong if Jesus did this? Look at Jesus response. “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

Imagine, if you will, a newlywed couple. They are settling into their new house, and they all lovely dovey, like newlywed couples tend to be, and one of them says to the other, “If you love me, you will take out the garbage.” If you love me, you will make me mashed potatoes for dinner. If you love me, you will do the dishes.”

The proper response to that would be, “What you mean, ‘If I love you...? I married you! Of course I love you! Why the test?”

Now imagine that this spouse does not even say, “If you love me, you will do the dishes after dinner,” they just leave the dishes undone. And they are thinking, “If you love me, you will notice, and you will do the dishes.”

Let me tell, that is NOT a loving relationship.

When I was in Fairbanks I had a person who wanted to join my church. She came from another church, and when I asked why she was making the change, she said, “I wasn’t sure the other church really cared about me. So I stopped coming, and sure enough, no one contacted me. Never. So I decided to come here.”

Now, to be fair, if someone starts to miss a lot of Sundays, they should be contacted. But the fact is, she did not love the church she was attending. If you love someone, you don’t test their love for you. You don’t pull that, “If you love me, you will...” stuff. Now I know we do it sometimes. We do it without thinking about it. When I do marriage counseling, one of the things I look for is whether the couple has a litmus test for love, whether they are playing the “If you love me...” game. Because that is a dangerous game, especially if you are not informing the other person about the rules.

Jesus, KNEW God loved him. He did not need to test God. He did not need to play the “If you love me you will make sure I don’t hurt myself when I do something stupid like jumping off this building.” And in a loving relationship, we don’t play that game either. Not with God, and not with each other. What we do is to say, “I love you, but I need this from you.” We don’t play games, and we don’t test love.

When we test people or God like that, we are focusing on how they might fail us, and not on how the positive aspects of the relationship. If Jesus had tested God like Satan suggested, he would be showing a lack of faith in God at the beginning of his ministry. And that is not how a good relationship starts.

Finally Satan says to Jesus, “If you worship me, I will make you Lord of the earth.”

Now this is really curious. If Jesus did not fall for the more subtle temptations, what makes Satan think he will fall for this one? If Jesus would not turn a stone in to bread, or jump off a tower to see how much his father loved him, why in the world would he then turn, and start to worship Satan?

But I think the tempter knows something here, something we should all know—we don’t have to be tricked to fall into temptation. We don’t have to be lured. Some times we can withstand all the subtle temptations, then fall for the most blatant of vices. If Satan thought he had a chance with this one, it is because it had worked before.

I had a man come into my office to confess to me that he had been having an affair for the last two years. Now this was not the kind of man I would expect to do this. He was an outstanding father, a respected member of the community, and as far as I could tell, a faithful husband. And what he said really scared me.

“I knew it was wrong from the get go.” He was tricked, he was not lured, he was seduced. It was not one of those relationships that started off innocent and then slowly crossed boundaries. “She came to work for me,” he said, “and from the moment I first saw her, I wanted to sleep with her. And I did.”

In the book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis writes letters from a senior tempter in Hell, which he portrays as a bureaucracy, to a junior tempter on how to lead a new Christian astray. The senior tempter has a bag of tricks, that consists of very devious ways to destroy the faith and practice of Christians, but in this last temptation there are no devious tricks. Often when we fall to temptation we are able to deceive ourselves, to tell ourselves that his is really ok, or to justify our actions, but if Jesus had worshiped Satan there would no deception, no self-justification, no sense of doing something wrong for the sake of a greater good. Jesus would just be doing what was wrong willfully.

And in this temptation we learn that is always a possibility. I have known former addicts, who stayed clean for years, and then one night just went out and got high. I have known alcoholics who stayed sober for for years, and then willfully went out one night and started drinking again. And they knew what they were doing. And they knew it was wrong. And they did it anyway.

When we chose to do something wrong, we do not always need a reason, nor do we need an excuse. Sometimes we just do it.

In dealing with the first temptation, Jesus quoted a verse that reminded why he was doing what he was doing. When we are tempted to take a short cut, whether it is a spiritual or material short cut, we can always remind ourselves why we are on the road in the first place. If it is a spiritual short cut, we can remind ourselves why we want to grow spiritual, why we come to church, why we work for others, why we are serving our God. The answers to that are many, but can basically be boiled down to, God loves us, and we want to get to know God better.

If we are tempted to test those we love, from God on down to the members of our church, of our family or our friends, we can remind ourselves of why we don't test them. A good relationship is based on how we treat them, not about how they live up to our expectations about them. When I go into a restaurant, I want a person to meet my standards of service but in a relationship I want to show them that I care about them, and not test them to see how much they care about me.

And when we are faced with those head on temptations, when we are about to venture into territory where we know we should not travel, we can remind ourselves who and what we want to serve. I do not want to serve alcohol or drugs, or pornography or money, or even my own baser instincts because those are cruel masters. When we bow down and serve the wrong things, we put ourselves under the power of something that can destroy us.

But when we serve God, when we serve love, when we serve the demands of our faith, when we serve the hope that we have within us, we serve a master who enlarges our lives, who enriches our lives, who fills us with the Good.

That said, I want to end with this. A long time in the garden Adam and Eve fell to temptation, a temptation that changed their lives for the worse. God intended that they live lives of love and openness, but the first thing that happened after they ate of the fruit was that they were ashamed of themselves, and they hid themselves—from God and from each other. They could no longer walk around naked. Adam looked at Eve, and then at his own nakedness, and wondered if Eve saw how he had gained a few inches around the middle, and who he might not measure up to what he thought Eve wanted in a mate. So he hid himself from her. Eve looked at Adam, and for the first time started wondering if that fig leaf made her look fat, if Adam was still attracted to her, if she measured up to his standards. And she hid herself from Adam. And both hid themselves from God.

But what was God's response?

We didn't get it in this morning's reading, but do you remember what God did? They sewed themselves clothes made of leaves, but God sewed them clothes made of leather. God helped them in their weakness.

"My children, my fragile children," God must have thought, as he played the divine seamstress, "how broken you are now. How needy you are now. How scared you are now, of each other, of yourselves and of me. Wear these in your weakness. I will cover you. It is not my place to condemn you, but help you live your lives together, and if you need these to do so, then wear these. It will make love harder, but being naked is now impossible. So wear these.

And as I see that picture in my head, with tears in God's eyes, clothes were laid out for them, clothes made in sorrow, but made in love.

We will not always succeed in mastering our temptations, but we will never succeed in separating ourselves from God. We will not always succeed in our relationships, but we will never succeed in cutting ourselves off from God. We will not always succeed in persevering, but God will always persevere in loving us.