

Pentecost 2: May 28/29, 2016
70 Words: How to Face Temptation



Cookies! Is there anything better than mom's chocolate chip cookies? And is there anything more conflicted in all of creation? There is nothing better than the smell of fresh

baked cookies cooling on the kitchen counter.



And there is no greater struggle than not eating them so "you don't spoil your appetite." The same could be said of that bag of potato chips in the pantry or the half gallon of ice cream in the freezer. Once you start,



good luck with stopping! Do I hear an "amen!"?

Pastor Jeff said he didn't want to preach on forgiveness because of how hard it is if we take it seriously. I can't say any more fondness for temptation because of how prevalent it is in us if we are honest with ourselves. I say honest with ourselves because too often we excuse sinful behavior and justify it by social standards. God's standards are not social standards.



His standards are his holy law, and any activity that is contrary to it is sin. It can reside in our minds, fall from our lips, or be carried out with our hands. I am convicted. And not just from yielding to sinful behavior. But even more so by failing the spirit of the law, which is love. Love of God with heart, soul and mind. Love of neighbor as self. I am tempted to sin daily. And I yield to that temptation far more often than I care to admit.

It's important to know that temptation to sin is not a sin in itself. Jesus was tempted to sin yet he did not do so. Truth be told, many times the object of temptation is morally neutral, be it an apple or money or morphine. It is when we yield to the controlling power of the object that temptation becomes sin. Jesus never yielded and never sinned. We yield far too often and we sin daily. As Paul says, "O wretched man that I am! When I want to do good, evil is right there with me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner to the law of sin."

When we pray "Father, lead us not into temptation," know that God tempts no one to sin. He abhors sin and would have us do the complete opposite. But he does test us, such as he did with Job of old or with Abraham in the sacrifice of Isaac. He does not delight in suffering produced by testing. But he does recognize that faith is strengthened as faith is put to the test. His goal ever and always is that we withstand the test and come through it stronger in faith. This stands in sharp contrast to the devil, the world, and our sinful nature which seeks the *destruction* of our faith. So our prayer "lead us not into temptation" is that God guard us on our way lest we yield to temptation and fall. Temptation that would deceive us into thinking that sin is actually good (which is what Eve believed), that sin is relative and that ours is acceptable, that my life is better than most and as such I deserve better treatment. It is all sin, yet the temptation to minimize it is

all around us. When we are deceived by temptation only bad things can result. As the catechism says, it results in “false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice.”

So what temptations do you wrestle with? If you were to believe the media, they would be greed and lust and revenge. While these are certainly good candidates, Barna research would suggest that these are not the temptations we struggle with daily. Can you guess what research says are



our top four temptations?

Procrastination tops the list. 60% of Americans are tempted to procrastinate. The ancients called this sloth. We might call it lazy. We justify it by saying we work better under pressure, when bumping up against deadlines, because there are too many demands on our time. The fact is, we struggle with procrastination all the time. Not that this temptation stands alone. Of equal weight according to Barna is the



temptation... to worry.

No topic is off limits to worry. I like one saying regarding it. “Worry is like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do but it doesn’t get you anywhere.” Jesus speaks forcefully against worry. “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things (that we worry about) will be given to you as well.” To round



out the list of top temptations?

55% of Americans are tempted to overeat and 41% are tempted to spend too much time on media. So that’s where we live. Procrastination. Worry. Overeating. Media overindulgence. These are our struggles. These are our temptations. Do I hear an “amen” to these as well?



How are we to deal with them? For the rank and file the answer is: Nothing. The majority of Americans surveyed admit they don’t do anything to avoid temptation. When asked why, they say they are “not really sure.” It would be easy for me to whitewash this response by affirming what Mark Twain said about yielding to temptation. He wrote, “There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable.” Interestingly, research doesn’t bear this out. Rather, these are the reasons people gave for yielding to temptation: 1) To escape from “real life,” 2) to feel less pain or loneliness, and 3) to satisfy other people’s expectations of me. People are hurting. We are hurting. And in our hurt we turn to whatever panacea holds out hope for relief. This doesn’t justify sin. But it does explain why temptation, even for Christians, has such power over us. Paul gives voice to this power of temptation in the Christian life. “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want, that is what I keep on doing. Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:18-19,24).



Do you believe there is power in the word of God? We confess it. Do you believe it? Jesus believed it. The devil invited Jesus to sin in a most innocent way. Are you not hungry? Do you not miss the glory that was yours in heaven? How will your mission be known without miraculous signs? Reasonable questions. Laced with evil motivation. Jesus saw the devil's heart. And his response is instructive for every Christian confronted by similar temptations to sin. "It is written." "It is written." "It is written." Three times Jesus responds in this way, underscoring the authority of the word of God. It drove the devil away. First in the wilderness. Regularly as Jesus was tested by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Temptation was brought to a head for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when the severity of his mission became visceral for him. Yet the word of God was always his response. "Thy will be done" settled his temptation. And settled his temptation was. He didn't look back. He tuned out all voices to the contrary. He stayed the course through pain and torment. And when his ordeal was over and his victory complete, he validated the power of the word of God over every temptation.



"Who will deliver me from this body of death?" says Paul. "Thanks be to God—it is through Jesus Christ our Lord." That is the powerful word of God over against any and all temptation. Jesus Christ who delivers me. Deliverance through forgiveness when we fall. Deliverance through his Word and Sacraments, restoring us to continue in our struggle against temptation. Deliverance through his presence and power to confront temptation and deal with it by the power of Christ in us, who is mighty to save.



So you have an assignment, lest this word go in one ear and out the other. First: Identify that one temptation that vexes you more than any other. I have mine and you have yours. And when we are in the middle of that temptation, we struggle mightily. Focus on that one temptation in the coming week. Second: Pray. Pray "Father, lead us not into temptation." Neglecting that which calls you to do? *Father, lead us not into temptation.* Worried about your finances, your health, your family, your country? *Father, lead us not into temptation.* Struggling with your diet, be it of food or media? *Father, lead us not into temptation.* Jesus saw fit to pray these words. May they be on your lips this week when confronted by that one temptation. Identify. Pray. And finally, follow Martin Luther's advice. "Temptations cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair." Don't flirt with temptation. Rather, flee from it. Don't play with fire. What on the surface appears sweet and, in Eve's words, "pleasing to the eye," only results in pain and suffering. There's too much of that in the world already. Rather, let us be agents for healing and reconciliation. Let this be your prayer this week: *Father, lead us not into temptation.* Amen