



REFLECTION 6 : JUST ONCE MORE

Part of Jesus' teaching on prayer is these familiar words, *"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."* So we're going to think for a few minutes about how we can try and resist temptation. And I want to begin by asking you to think about flies and other such bugs. They have an enemy who is bigger and stronger and more clever than they, who has created all sorts of ways of leading them to their death, whether it is fly paper or cockroach traps or bug zappers. Their enemy is smart enough to deceive them by promising something desirable that then kills them.

Now you'd think after a while that the bugs would wise up, that they'd learn from their friends' experiences. You'd think that they might stop for a moment when they see that desirable light or smell that sweet smell and say to themselves, *"I'm not just going to blindly follow all my desires because my friends have done that and not come back."* But they don't. Instead they say, *"I know what I'm doing. I'm smart enough and strong enough to not get sucked in."* Only a bug would be that stupid, right? If only!

So what's going on? Why does it happen? Why do we choose to violate our values? Why do we voluntarily give in to what we know is going to be destructive? Why do intelligent people engage in stupid actions that we know we will be ashamed of? The Bible tells us that at least part of the answer is that we have an enemy who is bigger and stronger and more clever than we are. Paul writes in the book of Ephesians, *"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."*

And the fundamental identity of the evil one is *"tempter"* and his fundamental weapon is temptation. That is why Jesus teaches us to pray, *"Lead us not into temptation."*

There is a vital passage in 1 Corinthians 10 that will help us to think about this. It says this:

"Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.' We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test Christ, as some of them did—and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it."

I want to make three observations. First, expect temptation. When Jesus teaches us to pray, *"Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil,"* he doesn't mean deliver us from the experience of temptation because there is no human being on earth that hasn't faced temptation, including Jesus. We are to pray for deliverance from succumbing to temptation, from giving in to it and being destroyed by it. Nobody is temptation free which means our ability to resist it is enormously important.

I don't know whether you've ever seen any of the experiments on TV where children have been placed in a room with something sweet like a marshmallow, and then told that they will be left on their own in the room for five minutes and if they can resist eating the marshmallow they will get two when the person comes back? There have been numerous such experiments done and the results of them tend to suggest that the children that manage to resist the temptation grow up to be more balanced in all sorts of areas of life.

But what is your marshmallow? Maybe it's food, or the word S,A,L,E, or adult sites on the internet, or the bottle, or even the joy of passing judgement on other marshmallow eaters. Where are you most vulnerable to temptation?

The word that both Jesus and Paul use can be translated *"temptation"* or *"testing"*, and it reminds us of the stories of Adam and Eve being tempted and of Abraham being tested about his obedience to God. What is at the heart of its meaning is allowing yourself to be torn away from God. It is never a trivial business in the Bible yet we often trivialise the concept of temptation when we talk about being tempted by chocolate or cream cakes but in the Bible it concerns the very state of the human soul. Giving in to temptation is allowing yourself to be torn away from the God who loves you. And the tempter is not stupid, he's not going to say to us, *"choose death"* – he is far more subtle than that.

Paul begins this passage by listing four temptations. First, he talks about worshipping idols, second about sexual immorality and third about testing God. Now my guess is that if I asked, you probably would not say, *"I worshipped an idol today,"* or *"I committed an act of sexual immorality today,"* or *"I renounced God today by testing him."* But then Paul adds one more temptation – do not grumble – what about that one? How are you doing today there? You see the purpose of the evil one is to tempt you to separate you from God and it is usually the subtle temptations that prove the most effective. Whatever is most likely to do the trick – that's what he'll use.

And the evil one doesn't just tempt us to do wrong he tempts us not to do what's right. And perhaps one of the biggest temptations here is just busyness because it keeps us from spending time with God and we don't even know it's a temptation.

Now the evil one does not have power to destroy or harm us. He is by no means the counterpart of God when it comes to power. God is all-powerful. He only has one power and that is to tempt us. The temptation battle is the most important battle we will ever have to fight. And it may be that you are in it right up to your neck just now.

And the evil one will try and make it look as though the temptation battle is really not that important, that giving in doesn't really have any consequences, just as he did with Eve, and we have to acknowledge that he's done a pretty good job at trivialising it.

So we should expect temptation. But the second observation is that God is faithful and will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear. He will not allow the evil one to go beyond that point. He will not. That is the promise of Scripture and that should be a great encouragement to us. But it also highlights a very sobering point and that is that you and I can never rationalise our giving in to temptation by saying, *"I couldn't help myself, I just couldn't resist any further."* God does not leave that excuse open to us. James 4: 7 says, *"Resist the Devil and he will flee from you."* Maybe it's time to face the painful reality that our excuses simply aren't good enough.

The third observation is more encouraging because Paul says, *"But when you are tempted God will also provide a way out."* That's good news. God will provide the way for us to resist temptation. I think there are 3 actions that you and I have to take to find that way out. God will not just take the temptation away; we actually have to resist it. So how do we do that?

First, if I had to name the greatest single emotional resource to help us resist temptation it would simply be the word, *"joy."* The book of Nehemiah says, *"The joy of the Lord is our strength."* But what does it mean to say that joy is strength? Well, it means that to resist temptation we have to arrange our lives around joy. Experiencing God-honouring joy may be the single greatest weapon we have to resist temptation. But conversely, joylessness is always a setup for vulnerability to sin and disobedience. One writer puts it like this; *"Failure to attain a deeply satisfying life always has the effect of making sinful actions look good."* The more I think about that statement, the more it makes sense to me.

But the joy of the Lord is our strength. Don't let the joy get choked out of you by all your duties or responsibilities in life. Maintain balance and perspective otherwise succumbing to temptation will seem so much more attractive. If we are basically happy in our lives the strength of temptation will be diminished. Loneliness, boredom, resentment and busyness are all things, which rob us of our joy and increase the appeal of temptation. And temptation is the offer of the illusion of joy, never joy itself.

If you are experiencing authentic joy then the offer of the illusion of joy is just not going to be very tempting. The joy of the Lord is our strength so the question is what do you need to do to increase the joy factor in your life? What are the activities and relationships that give you authentic, God-honouring joy? Maybe it's nature or music or friends or physical challenges. When we pray, *"Lead us not into temptation,"* then we need to pray help us to find things that will fill us with joy. And each one of us is responsible for doing that, for arranging our lives around joy. No one else is going to do it for us.

The second way out is that we desperately need to develop relationships of accountability. Temptation always involves a covert element. If you think you can handle sin and temptation by yourself then you are sadly deceiving yourself and you will fail. We all need to have someone that we can go to and say, *"This is my marshmallow and I want you to regularly ask me how I am doing with it, and if you are concerned about my behaviour I give you permission to challenge me about it."*

Now that may seem scary to you but when you are tempted you need to have someone to call. In twelve step programmes like alcoholics anonymous they talk about a sponsor. Everyone needs that support and if it is to be found anywhere then it ought to be in the Church. This is one of the characteristics that mark genuine community but too often in our churches we only experience what you might call *"pseudo-community,"* because we pretend like we don't have a marshmallow problem. I can guarantee that every single person here has a marshmallow problem and we can either pretend that we don't or we can make ourselves accountable to each other and do something about it. Admitting we aren't perfect is the first step to experiencing more of God's grace. If you don't have someone you can turn to like that then start praying that God will find one for you.

So we need to arrange our lives around joy, we need an accountable relationship and then the third way out that we can do something about is to immerse ourselves in Scripture. We do not know the Bible well enough. Not in the sense of knowing a bunch of Scripture verses that we can recite to impress people, but so that our lives are transformed by its contents. You know, the best way not to eat a marshmallow is not by trying really, really hard not to eat it. It is by making sure that you are eating better stuff on a regular basis.

So what feeds your life? In the account of Jesus' own temptation, the tempter came to Jesus and tempted him 3 times but Jesus was so moulded by Scripture that not only could he quote it but his course of action was directed by it. It was for him a way of life, not an on the spot reaction to a particular situation. Jesus' mind was so washed in the word of God that he lived in its' reality to the point where he could see through the Devil's subtle deception and say, "*why would I choose death?*"

The more we get to know Scripture, the more wisdom and advice it will give us to help with our marshmallows. You and I have to remember the damage that giving in to temptation will do to our lives, relationships and souls. We have to make use of the ways out that God provides for us. And for those who know they have failed to resist temptation, then please remember that our God is gracious and forgiving and he will give us the strength to resist the Devil and see him flee. No matter how many times we have fallen God can help us to get back up and overcome, but it becomes so much easier when our whole lives are immersed in following God instead of having to rely on our own strength to make a split second choice. The reason Jesus managed to resist the Devil's temptation was not that he had some sort of superhuman self-control but that he had spent all of his life up to that point immersing himself in God's word and ways. How we need to follow his example.

Perhaps you might spend some time in prayer offering to God those areas of your life where you face temptation. The words of Jesus will help you with that:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. **Amen.**"