

February 10, 2008

Mark 1:9-13 / I Corinthians 9:24-27 / Luke 4:1-13

Luke (#9) - Temptation, Spiritual Warfare and the Need for Self-Discipline and Restraint in the Pursuit of Godliness

Whenever the topic of fighting temptation, resisting sin, or pursuing holiness arises in the church, you will almost always hear it approached from two seemingly opposite points of View — the viewpoint of Activism and the viewpoint of Passivism (not pacifism)!

The **ACTIVIST** believes that victory over sin and temptation is the result of much hard work, intense exertion of the will, great struggle and emotional effort and an almost military-like practice of spiritual disciplines.

As an athlete in my younger years (and a person who intended to have a life-long career in the military), that regimen appealed to me. I saw the wisdom of such a routine, realizing there are a lot of parallels between training the body and mind for physical competitions, and training body, soul and mind for godliness.

In fact, Paul also saw these similarities and pointed them out to the Corinthians (in our passage from I Corinth. 9) where he says: *“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever... I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”*

And that’s not all, Paul also tells us in Titus 1-2 that elders must be, *“self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.”* Older men in the church must be *“temperate... and self-controlled...”* The same goes for the younger women in 2:5, and every single Christian in 2:12: *“The grace of God,”* says Paul, *“teaches us to say no to ungodliness and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives.”*

Training, discipline and self-control, then, **ARE** part and parcel of how one becomes godly. In fact, in I Tim. 4:7, Paul tells Timothy (and vicariously us through him), *“train yourself in godliness”* (literally “toward godliness”).

And the Greek word we translated *“train yourself”* (sometimes translated “discipline yourself”) is an athletic word. It’s the Greek word *“gymnasia”* – the very word from which we get our English words *“gymnasium”* or *“gymnastics.”* The activity and training place of athletes!

So, there ***IS*** a sense in which this group is right! You cannot be godly without being disciplined! That is true. And the reason we can't be godly without being disciplined is because our natural human inclination (ever since the Fall) is to choose, or gravitate toward, that which is sinful. Sin comes more naturally to sinners (even redeemed ones).

Human nature left to itself (left to do what it wants, and pursue what it craves, and choose what it desires) will ***ALWAYS*** drift into sinfulness and away from godliness – always! Just as “water always seeks the path of least resistance (or the easiest path),” so also the same is true of human nature. And the easiest path is always the path of sin, because “sin” is simply the sinner choosing what comes naturally to them.

If we were godly by nature, godliness would come naturally to us, but it doesn't, because we're not! Which is why Paul says we must **DISCIPLINE** and **TRAIN** ourselves ***“toward godliness”*** — because it doesn't come naturally to us (sin does)!

Yet others hold the opposite point of view called **PASSIVISM**. They would say that personal effort, and strict training, and the military-like practice of spiritual disciplines that deprive the body's appetites (by fasting, and lengthy times of forced prayer, and other disciplines) actually stir up and excite the sin nature and thus produce the exact opposite of godliness!

They would appeal to verses like Colossians 2:20-23, where Paul says:

“Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ‘Do not handle!’ ‘Do not taste!’ ‘Do not touch!’? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

They would also appeal to such texts as I Corinth. 15:56: ***“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.”*** In other words, when you place yourself under some external restraint or legal requirement that you “must do or else,” it's like creating a “law” and the “law” (says Paul) gives power to the sin nature - the last thing we should ever want to do!

In fact, they would say Christ fulfilled the law for us precisely because He **KNEW** the law excites our sin nature and arouses sinful passions and thus makes salvation or sanctification by self-effort impossible!

If we didn't have a sin nature, it wouldn't be a problem. But because we do, the law provokes in us desires to rebel against God. *"Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment," says Paul, "produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death"* (Rom. 7:8-11).

"Better to let sleeping lions lie," they would say. Putting all these stringent requirements and forced disciplines or legalistic type restrictions upon ourselves / all this exertion of the will / and attempts to control every appetite and force the acquisition of new habits, simply makes things worse! It creates an internal backlash and spiritual battle that drives us backward instead of forward in the battle against sin!

Paul even seems to be saying that very thing in Colossians 2:23, *"Such regulations ('Do not touch!' 'Do not taste!' 'Do not handle!') have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence."* All these endless do's and don'ts appear to be wise and helpful, but they really do nothing, says Paul.

Thus this second group says "Godliness is attained through **TRUSTING** and not **TRYING**. Passive surrender and not strict rigorous exertion! It comes by the soul being **STILL** and **RESTING** in the finished work of Christ, and not by **STRINGENT FORCED EFFORT** which only serves to stir up sinful desires and rebellious passions."

But you know, as one who has struggled with this issue from both sides, listening to and trying each method, I have to say there is wisdom and truth to both arguments — which is why Paul alludes to **BOTH** remedies in the battle to resist sin and temptation.

SOMETIMES I do need to fight temptation with all my might, and discipline myself in godly habits or they will never become habits!

And at **OTHER TIMES** I need to realize that my strenuous efforts are part of the problem (if not the entire problem) and on those occasions what I must learn to do is REST in what Jesus has done for me, heeding Isaiah 30:15 where God tells his people (who are busily doing everything they can to avert disaster): *"In repentance and rest is your salvation; in quietness and trust is your strength..."*

Paul wisely understood the need to balance both perspectives, since the first, by itself, can produce people who seem more like Marines than Christians — people who are very strict and regimented and disciplined, but tend to have little patience or empathy for people who struggle with sinful habits. (I know, because I was there! That was me in the first 4-5 years of my Christian walk. In fact when we first got married it drove Nancy crazy!)

And the second perspective, by itself, can produce people who are patient and compassionate and empathetic enough, but sometimes soft-peddle sin, and lack the self-discipline or self-control to resist temptation (which is again, an argument for BALANCING BOTH)!

And I tell you all that, because depending on which side you're on (and you probably do tend to one side more than the other) it could easily lead to you not taking this text seriously enough, or taking it so seriously that it leads to self-abuse (like people trying to win the battle against sin and temptation (as the monks did) by fasting for 40 DAYS!)

Paul then seems to advocate a balance of the two (correctly understood). And in today's passage, which emphasizes the activist battle motif, Jesus gives us clues (through His example) as to how can make progress in our fight against the THREE main areas of sin — "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (as John called them, and the order in which we find them in today's text).

So FIRST, let's look at how Jesus overcomes the "lust of the flesh" (meaning simply the natural cravings and appetites of the body which are not necessarily sinful, but can be)! In verse 1 we find Jesus returning from His baptism "full of the Holy Spirit" which had come down upon Him on that occasion. And now we are told it is that same Spirit which leads Him into the desert to be tempted of the devil for 40 days. A time in which Jesus would teach His bodily appetites who was boss by fasting those entire 40 days!

What was it? Nearly SIX weeks of "basic training" in spiritual warfare. In the art of godly control over physical appetites. An intensive course in self-mastery — which teaches us that the body makes a wonderful servant but a horrible and tyrannical master!

LISTEN: If you start pandering to every whim and wish and urge and desire or passion of your body (even good and necessary ones) you will lose your soul in the process! Because a person who is a slave to their bodily appetites (obsessed by or pandering to their every bodily urge or desire) will never progress far in the Christian life, if at all.

Why? Because the body and its appetites were NEVER meant to be our MASTER, consuming our thoughts, dictating our moods, and calling for our habitual and slavish service to their every whim and desire!

Our bodies were created by God to be our SERVANTS, doing what we tell them to do and NOT telling us what we must do! They are meant to work for us and do our bidding and carry out the tasks necessary to achieve our life purposes.

And as far as our appetites, they are merely to remind us to eat, rest, sleep and so forth — but they were NEVER meant to control us, or our moods, or our actions, priorities or lives!

My mother used to say, *“Eat to live, don’t live to eat.” “Work to live, don’t live to work.” “Tell your body what it needs to do for you, don’t let your body tell you what you must do for it!”* That’s a role reversal that was never intended to be! Or we could say, it’s sin, since sin is “missing the mark.” Sin is doing something in a way other than what God intended!

There are few who do not know how the body and its appetites can be as demanding as a spoiled little child, controlling your moods, and dictating your actions, and interfering with your schedule, and making you irritable, and getting you to violate your principles, and distracting you from your objectives.

But that’s precisely why the “lusts of the flesh” must be brought under your control. The Fruit of the Spirit is... “self-control” or “self-mastery” — a trait Steven Covey pointed out as one of “The Seven Habits Found in All Highly Effective People.”

Your stomach shouldn’t be the one that tells you when you must eat, and how much you must eat; you should tell your stomach when it’s going to eat, and how much it will eat!

That’s what Jesus does here in the wilderness. He tells His stomach it is not going to eat for 40 days, and when it proceeds to tempt Him to do otherwise, He refuses to give in! And PLEASE, do not say to yourself, “Oh that was easy for Him, He was God.” To say that is to deny His full humanity, and the temptations that came His way because of that full humanity (as I have pointed out before).

As R. Kent Hughes points out: *“In assessing this temptation we must note that this was a real temptation. Jesus body was real... He had been without food for (2 days short of) 6 weeks, a characteristic time of crisis for such fasts. He felt like he was sinking, even dying, and ravishing hunger convulsed Him.”* He wasn’t simply acting! It was a real, lengthy, agonizing fast, but one that was necessary to show the appetites who was boss!

In fact, other people have fasted longer than Jesus did! The longest known fast by human being was either 52 or 55 days, in jail, by a member of the IRA. Though, if one does go beyond 45-50 days, the body will come to reject food even when it is eaten (which is why that man had to be brought back gradually through intravenous feeding).

I knew a girl (in the D.R.) who fasted for 21 days on water alone. I fasted for 7 days on water alone, for the same reason — to make my body (and especially my stomach) my servant and not my master (because I had always struggled with my weight, or been its slave, and as a Christian I didn't want that anymore).

Yet it wasn't that 7 day fast that brought those appetites under control. In fact, it wasn't until 16 years later when the crime got so out of control in Honduras in 1997. One friend was murdered, another was shot in the head and lost an eye / the partner of another was killed with an AK-47 / another had his whole family held on the floor at gunpoint as 6 men robbed his house / four others were robbed at a restaurant / an embassy worker was shot in the head / one man (who left to attend Biblical seminary here in Hatfield) was robbed coming into our Wednesday night Bible Study / and two other girls were robbed at gunpoint two weeks later at the same Bible study. And as a result the WHOLE CHURCH decided to fast one day a week for an entire year for the violence to diminish.

And after that year, for the first time in as long as I could remember, my struggle with my weight ended (in large part) as a result of training the body in the discipline of prayer and fasting.

And it's not just EATING. It's all the lusts or appetites of the flesh that need to be brought under the Lordship of Jesus through the "discipline of training ourselves toward godliness"— the craving for things, sex, shopping, drugs (even prescription ones) TV, movies, sleep, busyness, money, etc., etc., etc....

Jay Adams says it best when speaking of godly discipline he writes: *"Discipline... is something that the Christian church lacks in our time. (Yet) It is high time that we all recognize that God requires us to discipline ourselves by constant practice in obeying his revealed will, and thus exercise (or train) ourselves toward godliness. What does this involve? In Luke 9:23 Jesus says it involves 'taking up your cross daily.' He does not mean denying yourself 'something.' There is no idea of doing penance in this (which is what Lent usually focuses on.) Rather, Jesus insisted that Christians must deny the self within them. By the*

'self' He meant the old desires, the old ways, the old practices, the old habit patterns that were acquired before our conversion. They became so much a part of day-by-day practice that they were second nature to us. We were born sinners, but it took practice to develop our particular styles of sinning. The old life was disciplined toward ungodliness. That's why Jesus says the believer must daily "deny" (literally "say no to") the self..., take up the cross as an instrument of death upon which to crucify the self every day... It is not enduring a trial... Taking up the cross means... putting to death the old life patterns of the old man. "

It means saying NO to appetites that are out of control. It means saying NO to urges that are ungodly. It means saying NO to sinful habits and replacing them with godly habits, *"Until one by one all the old habitual ways are replaced by new ones... When a Christian daily orients his life toward godliness through discipline, something... truly amazing takes place... it becomes habit... Whenever we do something long enough it becomes part of us... You don't think about it at all. You just do it without thinking about it. That is the capacity that God gave us... The practice (or discipline) of godliness leads to a life of godliness. It makes godliness natural. If you practice what God tells you to do, the obedient life will become part of you."*

And then he tells us the one thing we must realize above all else: *"There is no simple, quick, easy (magic) way to instant godliness. It takes training, exercise and discipline."*

The problem is we live in a very impatient society that wants instant everything and wants to work at nothing! And because of it godliness is disappearing off the scene—even in the church.

Then **SECONDLY**, Jesus is tempted with the "lust of the eyes." What the Bible would elsewhere call envy — the very thing God forbids in the 10th Commandment. Satan takes Him up to a high place, and shows Him in an instant "all the kingdoms of the world." And he says to Jesus, "It can all be yours if you'll just bow down and worship me."

And Hughes is right when he says: *"It was Satan's to offer. He was not lying when he told Jesus, "for it has been given to me and I can give it to anyone I please." To be sure, Satan had a limited, derived sovereignty, but it was in fact his. Jesus would three times call him "the prince of this world." And Paul would call him "the ruler of the kingdom of the air," (Eph. 2:2) and "the god of this age." (II Cor. 4:4). So the devil's offer was legitimate."*

And what was the temptation? For Jesus to achieve the goal He came for without having to endure all the pain and suffering and mockery and betrayal and crucifixion. He could have it all by simply breaking the first and second commandment and kneeling before Satan in worship. But Jesus would make no concessions with Satan in the slightest way — even though He was surely tempted to do so! He had to be tempted to take Satan up on it, because a temptation that doesn't entice someone is not really a temptation at all!!!

Actually the temptation offers Jesus the very thing He came to accomplish, except it offers it to Him in shortcut fashion. One day, as we read in Philippians 2, ***“Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Him Lord over all.”*** He will be King and Lord over all the kingdoms of the earth! Satan merely tempts Him to have it now, instantaneously, without any pain or waiting — the easy way out.

Sound familiar? The promise of wealth without work! / Marital bliss simply by reading a book! / Power and influence and prestige without winning the hearts of people through humble service! / Unity without compromise or change. / Goals met without the hassle of having to wait! / Life without struggle! / Heaven on earth without having to wait for anyone or anything! It's the lure of Satan, my friends. The “quick fix” or “easy way out” almost always is!

So, what is a Christian? It's NOT a person who isn't tempted by such things. We'd be liars to say we aren't on occasion. No. A Christian is a person who in spite of being very much tempted by all those things, chooses to do things God's way, and refuses to violate their principles, or sell out on God, or go back on their word, or trade away their dignity or godly character for the lure of material things. They discipline themselves to do right.

And imagine the difference it would make if we did! In a book entitled “The Day America Told the Truth,” based on an extensive public opinion survey which guaranteed anonymity, it was found that: ***91% of all Americans lie regularly / 33% of AIDS carriers have not told their lovers they have AIDS / And when asked what they would be willing to do for \$10,000,000.00, 25% said they would abandon their families; 23% said they would become a prostitute for a week, and 7% said they would kill a stranger.*** Think of it. In a gathering of 100 people, seven of them would be willing to kill you if the price were right, and they knew they could get away with it! (That's 70 people in a crowd of 1000!). Yikes!

Another study showed that: ***33% of the general public confessed to driving drunk / 75% had admitted to stealing work supplies for personal use / Of the 8 billion dollars of***

inventory shortages in department stores, 10% was due to clerical error; 30% to shop-lifting, and a whopping 60% (16 million dollars a day) was due to employee theft.

And it doesn't necessarily have to do with poverty. It's not true that people steal because they're poor. Most often they steal because they covet. For the study also found that *"a resident of Beverly Hills (CA) is more likely to have used illegal drugs, committed a crime, or had an extramarital affair than someone from the impoverished South Bronx of NYC."*

Which brings us to our **LAST** temptation – an appeal to the pride of life. That is, that we can purposely do outrageous, unwise, unnecessary, and even sinful and hurtful things, and have God or expect God to somehow intervene to reverse the outcome! That is, tempting God to jump at my beckon call, because even though I know I shouldn't do something, I think I'm so important that He will be forced to save me from the consequences anyway.

Satan tempted Jesus to jump off the spire of the temple (about a 450 foot drop) because God had promised in His word that *"He will command His angels...not to let His foot strike against a stone."* And Jesus responded, *"It is written, you shall not put the lord your God to the test."*

In other words, *"We should NEVER force God's hand to act on our behalf by doing stupid things and expecting God to change the rules of nature for us! We can't go around doing 450 foot swan dives off buildings and expect God make up for our foolishness! We can't stick a gun in our mouth and say: "Okay God, You're going to have to turn this bullet to cotton when I pull the trigger!" We can't purposefully do sinful or idiotic things and expect God to intervene to save us from the consequences!"*

You can't sleep around, or knowingly do things that hurt people and expect God to take care of all the problems you create because of it! / You can't steal from your employer and expect that God will intervene to keep you from getting fired if you get caught!

Though God does often save us from our foolish and unwise actions (and I say that from experience) we must **NEVER** test Him through purposeful, premeditated, foolish or sinful acts intended to force His hand.

Like it or not (and most Americans don't) we must train ourselves toward godliness, until it becomes like sin was to us — second nature. There are no quick magical fixes!!!