

The Nature of Sin and Temptation

Now the serpent was more shrewd than any of the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Is it really true that God said, 'You must not eat from any tree of the orchard'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit from the trees of the orchard; but concerning the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the orchard God said, 'You must not eat from it, and you must not touch it, or else you will die.'"

The serpent said to the woman, "Surely you will not die, for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will open and you will be like divine beings who know good and evil."

When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive to the eye, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some of it to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. (Genesis 3:1-6 NET)

While we have all read plenty of commentary on the Garden, the Serpent, the Woman and the Man, and a lot about whether God did or did not say what Eve claims, and even what the Serpent claims, there has been little enough about the meaning of verse 6. Please note the three ways in which the fruit was a temptation for her:

1. Good for food
2. Delight to the eyes
3. Desirable to make one wise

Now we fast-forward to a time closer to us, when the Serpent is at it again, with a totally different result.

Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he endured temptations from the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were completed, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up to a high place and showed him in a flash all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "To you I will grant this whole realm – and the glory that goes along with it, for it has been

relinquished to me, and I can give it to anyone I wish. So then, if you will worship me, all this will be yours.”

Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘You are to worship the Lord your God and serve only him.’”

Then the devil brought him to Jerusalem, had him stand on the highest point of the temple, and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,’ and ‘with their hands they will lift you up, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’”

Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You are not to put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Luke 4:1-12 NET)

Too often, what is missed in commenting on this passage is that each of these temptations was specifically linked to some of the notorious False Messianic Expectations. During the 400 Years of Silence the popular Jewish writings proposed all sorts of preposterous things that the Messiah would do for His People. These “prophecies” included that he would see to it no Son of the Law ever went hungry again. Indeed, the opulence of food would boggle the mind. Bread would become more common than the flat stones of the Judean Wilderness – which, by the way, bore a striking resemblance to the flat round bread everyone ate in the Mediterranean Basin those days. There was also the obvious hope that the Messiah would conquer every political foe, making the Jews rulers of the whole world. Finally, this Messiah would announce himself with stunning miracles, to include specifically leaping off the Pinnacle of the Temple – that far southeastern corner of the Temple terrace some 70 feet (21 meters) above the valley over which it extended – and land safely.

Note again here, the nature of the temptations:

1. Abundant food
2. Amazing spectacles to see
3. The arrogance of world rule

The Apostle John, arguably the one of the Twelve that first and best understood Jesus’ teachings, wrote in his first letter:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, because all that is in the world (the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the arrogance produced by material possessions) is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away with all its desires, but the person

who does the will of God remains forever. (1 John 2:15-17 NET)

Note how he characterizes the nature of worldliness:

1. Lust of the Flesh
2. Lust of the Eyes
3. Pride of Life

This is no coincidence. This is the trinity of fleshly desire, of fallen human nature. John founded his teaching on the clear pattern of Scripture. It's not some wild speculation to build a theology from this.

Lust of the Flesh: The appetites of the flesh are not inherently sinful for so long as there is a way to fulfill them righteously. What John is referring to here is the desire without restraint. In the Spirit, we know that we dare not quench our lust for sex in ravishing every delectable cutie that crosses our path. The desire is not itself wrong, but the lack of restraint is. How could the purposes of God be fulfilled in that? So it is with food. Paul says,

“All things are lawful for me” – but not everything is beneficial. “All things are lawful for me” – but I will not be controlled by anything. “Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both.” The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. (1 Corinthians 6:12-13 NET)

The question is not whether the fleshly appetites are evil, and if so, which ones. They are part of God's plan and are essential for human life. The question is: Who rules? Who decides when and how those appetites will be fulfilled?

Lust of the Eyes: This one is a little less obvious. We can understand the appetites of the flesh that we share with lesser creatures of earth, but they don't suffer from this one so much, it seems. What we have here is a perversion of the natural human inquisitiveness. Were it not for our curiosity, all humanity would still be living in caves and relying on hunting and gathering for sustenance. It is our nature to seek out something we have not yet seen or experienced, and it has brought us many great wonders of discovery and advancement.

Sadly, this can also be twisted to our hurt. Ever notice yourself drawn by fascination, and at the same time repelled by horror, at some particular sight? Ever wonder why so many people slow down at the scene of grisly auto crashes? Admit it: Don't you want to see? The responding policemen know this, but having worn rubber gloves all too often while collecting bits of human flesh, they are hardly curious anymore. Indeed, if you could hear them chatter, you'd be shocked at the casual language – and even jokes – with which they discuss the

job.

We could go on and connect this to the way pornography addictions work, but obviously the answer is that we have to stop somewhere, to draw the line. We have to let the Spirit rule in our hearts and obey when He says, "Don't go there. You don't need to see that." Again: Who rules?

Pride of Life: Most of us are likely to think we know this one. We would do well to recall that pride in accomplishment is no sin. If one is able to achieve by self-discipline and persistent effort against the odds, some pride is just. Such people have earned their place, and they are unlikely to use it for harm – so long as we are able to put that pride in its small place and move on to things we haven't yet conquered.

Clearly, John warns against pride in a position unjustly gained. Holding a noble title does not make one noble in every sense of the word. By God's grace, we know that the ideal for those of noble birth was to be truly a cut above the rabble, to rule by right, not simply demand the right to rule. Try telling Queen Elizabeth that the famed Eton is merely an academic institution like any local school. Eton is not known for turning out store clerks and soccer hooligans. History and legend alike are filled with ample material in this vein.

We are all tempted to gain an advantage in life over things that would frustrate us. In pursuit of the first two above, we might willingly seek some leverage denied others, and join the self-indulgent motto of the cartoon character, Hagar the Horrible: "I got mine!" Never mind whether we might seek that advantage for ostensibly noble causes. Tyranny is never so foul to you as when it claims to do what's in your best interest. Over every ruler at every level who does not acknowledge the Lordship of Christ as King of Kings, there is a dark cloud of evil waiting to drench all, including the ruler. Yet again: Who really rules?

Virtually every temptation of man can be associated with one or more of these three. Each is but a perversion of some righteous gift from God. That is, of course, no surprise: Satan creates nothing. He can only twist and pervert what God has done. He is the Master Pervert of the Universe.

(Note: This teaching has been around for some time in various forms. I am the author merely of this particular version.)

Ed Hurst

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