

It's so tempting to...

I imagine all of us have completed that sentence at some point in our lives, for we all face temptations of one kind or another.

Temptation seems to fill the Bible as well: from the opening story in Genesis of the humans facing the possibility of eating the tempting fruit, to the three temptations Jesus faced in the desert near the beginning of his ministry, to the words in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples "do not lead us into temptation." It's even tempting to avoid this subject, for most of us don't want to talk about it. We might even feel tempted to tune out this morning's topic, thinking instead of things to add to our shopping list or wondering what might appear on television this afternoon.

The subject of temptation may come up during this season of Lent, the six weeks leading up to Easter, for we often view this as a time to give up something, thereby leading to the temptation to have whatever we want to give up, such as Sam, who attempted to go on a diet.

Sam's co-workers were pretty good about giving him moral support until the morning he walked into the office carrying a box of freshly baked donuts.

"What's with the donuts, Sam?" one of them asked. "I thought you were on a diet."

"I am," said Sam. "But I want you to know I wouldn't have gotten these donuts if it weren't for God."

That remark [needed] an explanation. Sam quickly supplied one. "You see, I was driving into work, and I knew I'd have to go right past the bakery. I just couldn't get those donuts out of my mind, so I decided to pray to God for help. 'God,' I said, 'if you want me to have a box of hot, delicious donuts, give me a parking place right in front of the bakery.' Sure enough, I found one on my eighth trip around the block."¹

I've often heard church folks point to the story in Genesis as an example of temptation, when the two people in the garden were warned to not eat the fruit that could offer them knowledge of good and evil. It's so tempting to misinterpret this story, and I offer three of those temptations:

First, it's tempting to blame our current struggles on the past mistakes of others rather than owning up to our own errors. Some refer to this Genesis story as original sin, implying that the error the man and woman made in the garden made ripples into our lives thousands of years later. We're not responsible, for their sin tainted us

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all, suggests this misunderstanding of the story. The story does suggest that humans feel temptation and can make bad choices, but it's not because of some past sin that has tainted us. Although what we inherit from our ancestors can impact our lives, we have the ability to move beyond those boundaries. We're each responsible for what we do.

Second, men have been tempted to blame women. Some suggest that since the woman first ate the fruit, it's her fault. But if we examine the text closer, we might notice that when the woman offered the man the fruit after the serpent's suggestion, we read, "she gave some to her husband, *who was with her*, and he ate." In another words, he was there all along and could have objected, but he went along with the temptation. This is not a story about blaming women or anyone else. Rather, I think it illustrates that we all experience temptation, so the point is not to blame one another.

Third, it's tempting to abuse the land since the man and woman were put in the garden to "till and keep it." Some have translated this phrase to mean have dominion, to rule over the earth, but the Hebrew words mean "to

serve and to preserve." Our role is to care for the earth, not abuse it.

It's so tempting to use the Bible to justify our inappropriate actions, to try and get it to say what we want for ourselves. I think that's why Jesus included in the prayer he taught his disciples, "Lead us not into temptation." But isn't that a strange prayer request?

One member of a congregation wrote a note and left it on the pastor's desk: "I've never understood why we need to pray for God to not lead us into temptation. Why would God lead us into temptation to begin with? And if there was some good reason for [God] to lead us into temptation, why would we pray that [God] would not do the thing [that] was best for us?"²

Some have suggested that we've been reading this prayer with the wrong emphasis, suggesting we need a comma in the prayer. The original Greek language did not have such a punctuation device to use, but some suggest that the focus is on "**Lead us** (pause) not into temptation, but from evil that tempts us." The focus is on following God's lead, who would never set us up for failure with temptation or evil. Whether you believe an external force creates evil or that evil resides within us

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in our struggles with life, it's not God who creates the evil or the temptation. God leads us whatever we may encounter.

During the many generations that worshipers have entered into Lent, many focused on giving up something or avoiding a temptation, but I wonder if we could instead find the positive aspect of temptation to try something new. Have you ever been tempted to talk with someone you don't know very well? That's a good temptation, for forming new connections can result in new friendships.

Or have you been tempted to try something new but were afraid of failure? It can be scary to move outside our comfort zone and try something new, but that can be a good temptation to add during Lent.

Or have you been tempted to speak a kind word to someone who hurt you? That also might be a good temptation to follow.

Maybe Lent this year could be about following the gentle nudge of a temptation of doing something new, such as

- initiating a conversation with a family member or friend who has been alienated from you for many years
- trying a new spiritual practice that quiets your mind and helps you focus on God's presence in your life
- offering kind words in a relationship that normally contains hostile words
- listening with an open mind to someone who holds a different political view than you do, and rather arguing or talking louder, you truly listen.

It's so tempting to take the easy path, to avoid the hard work of creating harmony in a fragmented world, but I think that creating peace could be a good temptation during Lent. You might even feel tempting to speak kind words and let go of hostility. That's a temptation worth following.

¹ HomileticsOnline.com, 2-26-23.

² Adam Hamilton, *The Lord's Prayer: The Meaning and Power of the Prayer Jesus Taught*, p. 104.