

SECOND WEDNESDAY IN LENT

“Overcoming Temptation”

Hebrews 2:18 Hebrews 4:15-16

Do you know someone who has lost their home because of debt that they couldn't pay back? For the past twenty years in this country, we have been a culture of excess and extreme. Many Americans have become obsessed with consumption and buying things that they cannot afford -- overpriced homes, boats, snowmobiles, expensive cars, and designer logos. But if you listen carefully to their souls, they will whisper something you may have never expected.

Do you know someone who is always in your face? She always has a complaint. She is easily angered. She is a real grouch. She is overbearing and demanding. But, as much as you don't want to listen to anything else she ever has to say, you should know that there is a pain deep inside her soul that makes her cry out.

Do you have a friend who drinks too much? He showed up drunk at your party. He said that he would come to your son's basketball game, but he didn't show up. He said it would never happen again, but he just got his fourth OWI. Have you ever heard the whisper of his heart?

Do you know someone who is addicted to online pornography? He seems to be on a never-ending and never-satisfying journey through the one and a half million such websites that are available on the internet. But, if you listen to his soul, it will whisper a secret to you that you may not know.

Hold up a mirror to each of these folks (and to ourselves), and they (we) may see a person we don't like. There are many who silently cry: “This is not who I wanted to be! I didn't start out in life wanting to be an alcoholic. I didn't want to be addicted to spending money. I don't want to be thought of as a nasty person. I don't want my kids to think that their dad is a dirty old man!”

Many people won't look in that proverbial mirror, not only because they don't like what they see in themselves, but because Jesus appears behind them. In the presence of Jesus they feel embarrassed. Some are defensive. They don't want to feel judged, and so they run away from God -- away from Jesus -- away from the church -- because they feel guilty.

But Jesus isn't there to condemn. He's there to save. (John 3:17, John 8:9-11) A good reason for this is because Jesus knows what it feels like to be human. He knows what it feels like to be tempted.

Tonight, I won't give you any complex theological formula that is

going to make you into a better person. Or that will make your friend or acquaintance into a better person. That's because there really aren't any. There are no formulas or equations for change except one -- give your life over to Christ, Who, Himself knows what it feels like to be human and to be tempted.

However, that being said, I would like to offer you some practical tools for avoiding the kinds of things that bring guilt and ruin into our lives.

A couple of weeks ago, I gave you one definition of "sin." Here it is again: "Sin" is an attitude or an action that is opposite of where God wants you to be. It is simply going in a different direction, a direction other than the one that God wants you to go in.

This is why sin destroys people. God wants our highest good, but to go in the other direction then, is destructive to us as individuals -- and to our families.

What I'm talking to you about tonight is not fundamentalism -- it is common sense. It is also common sense that happens to be rooted in scripture.

(Re: Galatians 6:7-8)

ACTIONS PRODUCE CONSEQUENCES. Every single choice that we make in life is going to produce a result, either good or bad. The key is to think ahead to the result that we want.

"Let's see -- would I like to get a mouth full of cavities? I would? Well then, I'll eat that bag of jelly beans and skip the toothbrush."

"Hmmm....do I want to avoid racking up a lot of debt? Well then, I'll pay with cash instead of credit cards."

"Do I want to pass that math test? Then I'll study. Do I want to flunk? Then I won't study."

"Do I want my children to respect me? Then I'll watch what I say and what I do. Do I want my children to *disrespect* me? Then, I'll just say and do whatever I feel like."

ACTIONS PRODUCE CONSEQUENCES. Now granted, we may

not always see ahead and accurately predict the outcome -- but more often than not, it's about applying common sense.

We ought to take sin seriously. Why? Because God takes it seriously. It isn't God's will for our lives and our relationships to be destroyed. But when we choose that which is destructive, destruction comes like an unwanted guest.

Just ask Tiger Woods. Just ask Bernie Madoff. Just ask anyone in your family or local community who has made bad choices. Ask them how it's been working out.

There was a young man who was hiking through the mountains. As he climbed toward the summit, he marveled at the world around him. Because of the elevation, the air became much colder the higher he went. At one point he stopped to take a breather when he heard a rustling near his feet. Looking down, he saw a rattlesnake. But before he could move, the snake spoke to him.

"I am about to die," said the snake. "It is too cold for me up here and I am freezing. There is no food and I am starving. Please, put me under your shirt and take me down to the valley."

"No," said the man. "I am forewarned. I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me."

"Not so," said the snake. "I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, you will be special. I will not harm you."

The young man resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake with beautiful markings. At last the young man tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it gently on the grass, when suddenly the snake coiled, rattled, and lunged, biting him on the leg.

"But you promised..." cried the young man.

As the snake slithered away he turned and said, "You knew what I was when you picked me up."

No one is so special that the consequences of sin cannot catch up with them. There are no exceptions. Are you tempted to go in a direction other than that which God has mapped out for you? Are you tempted to cheat? To gossip? To do something else? Just know what it is before you decide to pick it up and put it under your shirt. Sin is sin, and sin destroys us -- it destroys our relationships with other people -- and it destroys our relationship with God. Sin always comes back to bite us, no matter what.

Jesus knew what it feels like to be tempted to sin. It tugged at His sleeve the whole time He was on earth. Yet, scripture tells us that Jesus was

without sin. (1 Peter 2:22, 2 Corinthians 5:21) He never caved in to any of those temptations. Not even once.

Yet, we are told that even though Jesus is perfect -- He is **not unable** to empathize with us in our weakness.

In other words, we can avoid the rattlesnakes of life (aka “sin”) through prayer to Christ -- and by the very practical method of considering the consequences before we act on them.

In the Australian bush country there grows a little plant called the “sundew.” It has a slender stem and tiny, round leaves fringed with hairs that glisten with bright drops of liquid as delicate as fine dew. It is a very pretty looking plant.

Woe to the insect, however, that dares to dance on it! Although its attractive clusters of red, white, and pink blossoms are harmless, the leaves are deadly. The shiny moisture on each leaf is sticky and will imprison any bug that touches it. As an insect struggles to free itself, the vibration causes the leaves to close tightly around it. This innocent-looking plant then feeds on its victim.

Overcoming temptation is all about the choices we make.

AMEN.