

May 18, 2025

“Tripping on Temptation”

Matthew 4:1-11

Genesis 3:1-7

*Note: sermon is influenced by “Following Jesus” by N.T. Wright, Eerdmans 1995

Intro:

Sometimes the sermon title and the Scriptures read in the service aren’t very subtle. For instance, this morning as you looked at the screen and saw the title of today’s sermon – Tripping on Temptation, or you listened to our Scripture lessons for the day, you might have thought, “Oh I know what this is going to be about”. And then if I make some sort of opening statement like “Don’t think about chocolate”, some of you might draw the conclusion that this is going to be another one of those sermons where the preacher tells us all about the evils of temptation and how we should all be able to avoid them and how we should resist being tempted and we will leave with nothing more than an annoying sense of guilt over something we probably haven’t even done yet.

Or, you might simply be thinking about chocolate and will tune out the rest of what I say.

From Genesis to Jesus:

Temptation shows up early and quickly in the human narrative. It all starts back in Genesis 3; Adam and Eve are enjoying life in the garden of Eden, and along comes the serpent (where did he come from?) and begins to question Eve about what is right and what is wrong, and most significantly the instructions that God had given to them. “Did God really say...” This is a teasing thought and challenge for Eve. She wants to wrestle with it intellectually and come up with the best counter. She is not under temptation at this point, because the serpent hasn’t given her any verbal direction to take the fruit. It is Eve, working to sort everything out for herself, who opens up the crack for temptation to sneak in. She responds with her own spin on what God had said. (“We aren’t even allowed to touch the tree...”) This allows for the temptation to get a foothold because now she is pondering the

potential of one more thing being given to their dominion as humans – whether they could actually touch the tree or eat the fruit. Where she should have just leaned further into the instructions that God had given (don't eat the fruit), she instead went in her own direction (also, don't even touch it), giving more trust to her own resilience, rather than trusting that God knows what He is doing and sticking with that.

Matthew's account of Jesus' successful resistance to temptation provides a contrast to Eve's story, but also brings its own challenge to applying these passages in our own lives. Jesus' temptation is seen as the contrast to the Adam and Eve story – where they failed (it was a "they" failure, not just an Eve issue), and gave into temptation, Jesus successfully resisted it. Where Eve struggled to keep a true hold on God's word, Jesus was able to answer each temptation with an appropriate Scriptural reference. Jesus' success also stands in contrast to the Israelites' failure to be fully faithful to God in the wilderness.

When you put the two passages together, it is reasonable to come to this conclusion: copy Jesus, don't copy Eve, and especially don't copy Adam who just stood there and took the food without any challenge or objection. Temptation is easy to resist if we only remember to put on the armor of God and stand firm in our faith. Which is all nice and easy for the pastor to say in a sermon, someone might think, but my situation is far more complicated than that.

The truth of dealing with temptation is that the easy instruction doesn't help us with the deeper root of the issue. We might think that resisting temptation is harder for some than others because we have different levels of temptation, but Paul is clear that we all face temptation in equal measure – "No temptation has seized you except that which is common to man." We all face the same attraction to and risk from temptation. The difference is that what someone else is tempted by might not be a temptation for you. But there are common roots to all kinds of temptation and understanding those will help us understand how we can begin to resist when temptation does come our way.

Commonality of Temptation:

What makes temptation, temptation? Certainly it isn't because the things we fall prey to are universally appealing – what is tempting for me, my wife Cindy wouldn't even consider, let alone be tempted by. N.T. Wright suggests three aspects of temptation that help us understand how temptation works.

Firstly, though, I need to make clear that temptation isn't always cut and dried, good versus bad. It would be nice if there were clear lines in every situation, but more often than not things are less clear. Life is often more complicated than simple right or wrong.

Wright suggests that the first thing to know about temptation is that it takes as its starting point something which in itself is good. Since some of you might still be thinking about chocolate, let's stick with that. Chocolate is part of God's good creation – it is a good thing. Temptation entices us to use that which is good in a manner that is not good, or better stated, not in the good way that God intended his creation to be used. There is a deep heart issue here that most of us have probably never thought of. Wright says, "When faced with temptation, Christians are often tempted, at a level far deeper than the surface temptation, to hate some part of God's good world; to hate, even, some part of their own bodies, or some part of their own psyche."¹

Obviously, gaining awareness (even subconsciously) about how negatively we view ourselves doesn't feel good. Giving in to temptation is a way we can seek to give an answer or find relief from that discomfort. And this is the second point – temptation acknowledges that since we feel so negative about ourselves, we need – no, deserve – a shot in the arm that will boost our feelings and lift us out of that low place. So we take the thing that is good and shift it out of the context God has given it and into a context that feeds our own insecurities and need for something "more". This is the place of human rebellion and where sin lives.

¹ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1995), 87.

The third thing we need to remember about temptation is that while the immediate moment of giving in might feel good, at some point, taking that which God intended as good and making it into something else will hit us with guilt and self-hatred – that because we have succumbed to the temptation, we must be the worst creature that has ever existed. Satan wins in that cycle, because then we need something more to lift us out of that greater self-loathing, and feeding us temptation becomes so much easier.

Conclusion:

The long journey out from that trap begins with the search to find out, often painfully, what it is about you that is out of shape or distorted or in pain, that Satan is trying to convince you to cover up. This journey will require prayer, wise counsel and spiritual guidance from others in the body of Christ, and seeking to find out just how God desires to help bring healing into your life.²

While that long-term work is going on, how do you deal with temptation that seeks to sneak up on you and derail you before you even get started?

Wright suggests that we should first thank God for making us human, with all that means (weaknesses included!); and because we are human, for the responsibility that we have to think and choose.

Secondly, pray for the grace to use that responsibility wisely.

Finally, and probably most importantly, remember that God wants to give us the gift of his presence and love. It is when we stray from that love and presence that temptation most easily finds its way in. The good news is that even if we fail in our consistency in following closely to God, His love does not fail. His love can be grieved – meaning that He is saddened by the choices we make that lead us away from Him, but His love never goes away. His love, and having knowledge and experience of this love, is the greatest weapon we have against temptation. It is

² Wright, 88.

this love that gives us the true security that temptation falsely tries to provide. The love of God cuts through our insecurity, fear and pride.³

To follow Jesus is to know this love, and that is the greatest gift.

Let's pray.

³ Wright, 88–89.