

## Temptations

Readings: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1 – 11, Psalm 32

Have you noticed that the meaning of words is changing all the time? Blind people are now visually challenged. Disabled are differently abled. Dwarves or midgets are little people. Re-cycling is up-cycling and so it goes on. Some of this is probably good. Not all visually impaired people are completely blind.

However we run the risk of being so pc that we don't talk the truth anymore. One example of this is how we downplay sin. Someone once left a church I was part of because they didn't like the confession at each service. Rather than seeing it as a vehicle for freedom, they viewed it as being too negative.

I wonder what they would have made of the following quote:

*Nothing is more dangerous than misunderstanding evil. Evil has an irremediable stubbornness about it. And it must be recognized, it has to be constrained, but it can never be resolved. St. Augustine said, "Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself."*

William Sloane Coffin, Jr.

"Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside yourself." Evil is a strong word. We don't like to think of evil at all, let alone to think that evil exists within us.

Some of you may have seen the movie Amadeus about Mozart. The movie also tells the story of a lesser known composer Salieri. Salieri's life is eaten up with envy because he knows Mozart has the greater talent. Salieri's envy grows to the point where he hastens Mozart's death. Guilt stricken Salieri makes his confession to a priest while still resenting his lesser talent.

When we talk about the problem of sin, we often focus on moral or sexual sin. I suspect because that kind of sin is often obvious and it's easy to pick on those who don't have the same standards we do. Scripture talks about money far more often than it talks about sex and this should be a bit of a wakeup call for us.

Last week Jean introduced our Lent series by saying that we ought to be being transformed into the likeness of Jesus. We need to be co-operating with the Holy Spirit as he works on our Christian character. Over Lent we are going to take a spiritual health check. We are using a lot of material from *The Glittering Vices* written by Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung. Today we consider how we are doing with envy and greed.

Both are common sins. Both have a shared beginning. They come from a sense of lack; from deep-seated feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. Years ago I was involved in a particular ministry in a church along with another woman. We both fulfilled similar roles. The pastor asked me if I would consider leading worship on a Sunday. He didn't ask the other woman. One day, apparently out of the blue, this lady let fly at me. She gave me a huge bullocking over something very trivial. It wasn't until much later that I realised she had wanted to lead worship but hadn't been asked.

If you have a very healthy self-esteem; more correctly if you never doubt that God loves you and will provide everything you need, you can switch off now. **It is only totally whole people who never experience envy or avarice.**

Let's take a deeper look at what those sins really are before we look at some practical ways we can allow the Spirit to deal with them when they arise.

Envy is similar to but not the same as jealousy. Jealousy may make us get a flash car like the neighbours so we can keep up with them. Greed may make us do the same thing. But envy is something more sinister. Envy wants the thing the other person has – their thing. Salieri wanted Mozart's talent and fame. He wanted Mozart's demise so that the fame could be his and his alone.

Avarice tends to be more focused on money and stuff. Envy is focused on the qualities of another person. It comes from comparing oneself unfavourably with others.

Jean told us that each one of the deadly sins comes from a root cause of pride. Envy and avarice are no different. Envy says that I must be the best or I am nothing. Greed says I must have the best or I am nothing.

Both sins undermine our trust in God. Envy doubts God's love and so tries, sometimes in subtle backstabbing kinds of ways, to build ourselves up. Avarice is a lack of confidence in the providence that God has for us – it subtly accuses God of not knowing or providing what we need. **Both sins ultimately take God off the throne and put ourselves there.**

That's serious. Christians are not meant to be judgemental of others. Neither are we meant to be harsh with ourselves. But we must be honest. Romans 12:3 says "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment." When we are honest with ourselves and God, God will not only forgive us but will transform us.

So what is the transformation we need? Do we need the Lord to take away our envy and our greed?

Well yes, we do. But we need more than that. We need a revelation, a clear picture of just how much God loves us. When we realise how special we are to God, we don't need to compete with others for God's affection.

Most of us know the story of Eric Liddell, portrayed so wonderfully in the movie Chariots of Fire. He runs against Harold Abrahams in the 100 yard sprint. The two characters are so different. Harold is a driven man because he is afraid to lose. He hates losing. At one stage he says "If I can't win, I won't run." Contrast that with Eric who comes from an entirely different perspective. When Eric runs he feels God's pleasure. He feels that pleasure whether he wins or loses – it is in the running. Eric comes from a place of rest in Christ. He has nothing to prove. **Yes he likes to**

**compete and do his best but he has a calm confidence that, win or lose, he is a champion in God's eyes.**

Jesus was taken into the wilderness to face temptation. The Spirit led him into the wilderness. Had he given in, he would never have been able to fulfil God's mission for him. Jesus was totally secure in his relationship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. He knew God's Word and he knew how it applied to his life. He relied on the Holy Spirit to bring to mind the right words at the right time. Unlike Adam and Eve he refused to believe the lies the enemy spoke. We mustn't believe those lies either.

So there are some very practical things we can do to prepare ourselves for when temptation comes.

1. We can store up God's Word in our hearts or simply use a concordance. Luke 15 is one of my favourite chapters. The stories which portray a loving God constantly seeking his wandering ones are so reassuring. Listen to this Scripture:

But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
... you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you ... Isaiah 43:1 - 4

2. We can change our behaviour regardless of how we feel. Remember the adage Jean shared with us last week. "Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny." Our behaviours do shape our character.

So when we feel envious of another we might consider how we can bless that person, secretly without getting any credit for it. When we feel the need to buy something totally unnecessary, or to hoard stuff, we might choose not to buy it, or we might choose to buy it for someone else instead. Generosity is a great antidote to avarice.

3. We must take whatever opportunities we can to allow God to love us. If we let him he will break down the walls of self protection we build up over the years. He breaks them down in order to fill us up. I said early on those who are whole are not envious or greedy. They have no need to be better than others or to have better stuff than others. because they know God loves them just as they are.

Jesus taught his followers one prayer. He began by telling us to call God "Our Father". This is an invitation to intimate relationship with the one who loves you deeply. You may have heard of breath prayers. A breath prayer is a very brief prayer that is aligned with our breath. From the Lord's Prayer, we can use "Give us

this day (in) our daily bread (out). Jesus is the Bread of Life. (John 6:33, 51) Our hunger - physical, spiritual, emotional, is met in him. Yes it's a journey. When I began preparation for this sermon I thought, "whew, thank you Lord that neither of these things apply to me." To my shame I have seen that both do. My transformation is not complete. I have confessed the attitudes the Lord has revealed in me and seen where they come from. I have named my attitudes as sin, for that is what they are. I've asked him to come in to the areas of insecurity and lack that I experience.

Psalm 32:5

I acknowledged my sin to you,  
and I did not hide my iniquity;  
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"  
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

I will need to do that again and again. I've discovered afresh that he wants to be my daily bread. Because of his great love for me, for you, for each one of us, he will forgive us and draw us to himself again and again. As we feed on him, as we allow ourselves to love and be loved by him, we will make progress, trust more, sin less.

Sermon reflection questions

1. In what secret ways do you compare yourself unfavourably to others?
2. How does society foster various forms of comparison?
3. How do you find yourself accumulating unnecessary goods?
4. In what ways can you be less grasping and more generous?
5. In what ways can church work out the principals of abundance and generosity?