

TEXTS: Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7  
Matthew 4: 1-11

“Tempted by the Good”  
By Rev. Mark Strothmann

Late one Sunday night several years ago, I gave into temptation. I decided to watch a movie on cable TV called *Chocolat*. I had heard good things about this movie, but had never seen it.

To watch this movie was not exactly a guilty pleasure, but I did know that the subject matter was tempting: chocolate. This movie takes place in 1959. A single mother and her young daughter move into a rather dour and uptight French village and open up a chocolate store in an old bakery. Oddly enough, the movie has a religious subplot because she decides to do this at the beginning of Lent. When she first arrives in town, the mayor comes by for a visit and chastises her for opening up a bakery during Lent. When she tells him that it will be a chocolate shop, not a bakery, he is even more horrified. Later on, after the chocolate shop has become a big success and is beginning to disturb the tranquility of the village, he sternly warns her that he will make sure that her shop will be closed by Easter!

Lent has become the season of the church year when we think about temptations. For many people, like the mayor in the French village, Lent is a time to resist temptations like baked goodies and chocolate. Resisting these temptations during Lent has become a spiritual discipline—something people do to be closer to God. Needless to say, it would be good to resist temptations all year. Why do we think about doing it more during Lent?

The reason is that Lent is a period of preparation for our celebration of Easter. Easter is the celebration of new life given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. The new life we celebrate includes the forgiveness of sins. We believe we receive new life and forgiveness of sins only when we respond to this gracious gift from God. Our response is repentance, which requires resistance to the sins of life that separate us from God. As we prepare to celebrate Easter, there is an urgency to put our house in order. We are trying to prove, at least to ourselves, that we can resist the temptations of life and turn to God before Easter.

So, as a spiritual discipline, we give up something for Lent. Usually, we select a temptation that we indulge in during the rest of the year. People who are not even members of the church do this because they believe there is some sort advantage to resisting temptation for at least 40 days. And surely there is: Giving something up for Lent does bring us closer to God and also helps us resist temptation all year long.

However, there are several problems with this approach. In the first place, many of the temptations we are trying to resist are what I would call “good temptations.” Many of the objects of desire we give up for Lent are good things necessary for human life.

Various foods and drinks seem to be high on the Lenten hit list. And yet, we also need food and drink for survival. It is good that we are tempted to eat and drink. Otherwise, we would die of hunger and thirst. The problem is that we overindulge. We eat and drink too much. We even become addicted to substances that, when used in moderation, are good, but when taken to excess are harmful. To correct this problem, we give things up for Lent. And yet, much of what we are trying to give up, when used in moderation, is necessary for human life.

This leads to a second problem: We cannot really resist temptations, even though we often think we can. Since many temptations are closely related to things necessary for human survival, it is easy to understand why we so often step over the line and begin abusing the gifts God gave us for human life. For example, the human instinct

for survival often leads us to overindulge because we want some extra, just in case we won't have enough for next time. Sometimes we will hoard food when others are hungry because we are saving for a rainy day. This instinct for survival is reasonable, but is also harmful to ourselves and others. Many of us know this. This is why we follow spiritual disciplines like fasting during Lent. We believe these disciplines will help purge away our natural inclinations for overindulgence and excessive hoarding.

Such practices can be helpful but they also do not solve our basic problem: Temptations to misuse the good gifts of God are still a part of human life. We might call this the paradox of temptation. Oscar Wilde once said, *"I can resist everything but temptation"*. This sums up the human dilemma: We can be sincere in our resistance to evil, but we still struggle with temptations to misuse the good.

Stories of Biblical temptations are an important part of our religious tradition. They reveal that temptations are often good and reasonable. They often involve necessities for human survival.

For instance, the first temptation in the Bible is the story of Adam and Eve. We all know the story well, but let's review the main points. God had told Adam and Eve they could eat from any tree in the garden, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. After the serpent told Eve they would not die if they ate from that tree, Eve began to rationalize her desire to eat its fruit. She was thinking about human survival and prosperity:

- The fruit on the tree was good for food.
- It was pleasing to the eye.
- It would make human beings wise.

God had told them not eat this fruit, but Eve, and then Adam, did it anyway. It was for a good cause, the survival of human life. Needless to say, this decision to disobey God was really a choice for death. Even though Eve's decision seemed reasonable, every human being since then has died outside the garden.

Another important Biblical episode is the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. Here again, the temptations offered to Jesus by the devil were good and reasonable. (As you think about this story, remember that Jesus was both human and divine.)

In the first temptation, the devil appealed to Jesus' human side: Jesus was hungry after forty days and nights in the wilderness. The devil challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread for food. It was a good and reasonable temptation because humans need food for survival. Jesus refused.

The devil's other temptations appealed more to Jesus' divine side, although they also reflect basic human desires for survival and power. The devil urged Jesus to use his divine powers to save himself from a dangerous stunt. Jesus refused.

The devil also tempted Jesus by offering him all the kingdoms of the world. Again, Jesus refused.

Why did Jesus refuse the devil's temptations? After all, they seemed so reasonable. Jesus did not give in to the devil because he wanted to accomplish his mission on his timetable, not the devil's. Jesus was also warning his followers about the temptations of life. Many temptations seem very reasonable, but beware especially when pursuing a good cause. We need food and drink for survival. Some people think it is also good and noble to test the limits of human life with heroic feats of adventure and daring. Other people also believe it is good to dominate the world, especially if we are pursuing good and noble causes like freedom and democracy. All of this may seem like a good idea, until we start making deals with the devil. Some once said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. The temptations of the devil make us go down the wrong road when we intended to do good. The devil's bargain often seems like a good idea, but it turns out to be too good to be true and we have gone down the wrong path.

The basic human problem is that we think we can make our own decisions about good and evil without taking God in consideration. Adam and Eve thought that knew better than God, so they ate fruit from the forbidden tree. It was a good and reasonable thing to do: the tree was beautiful, the fruit was good, and they received wisdom. They were making their own decisions without thinking about God.

Jesus was able to resist temptation because he had been sent by God to save us from our sins. Jesus did not defy God. Indeed, he had the mind of God. He knew that these temptations would lead only to sin and death, even when they seemed so good and reasonable. He trusted God to save him, even when he could have saved himself. He knew that if he trusted God, he would receive the gift of eternal life.

All of this puts our struggles with temptations in perspective. The Lenten tradition of resisting temptations can be very helpful, if we remember that we cannot purge our lives of temptations by our own effort. For example, the Lenten discipline of fasting cannot taking away our need for food. The point of spiritual disciplines is not to overcome our natural human inclinations. Rather, the point is to get right with God and confess our sins before God.

During Lent as we endeavor to resist temptations, let us confess that we have misused the resources of the world for our own survival. We have pursued the good without consulting God because we believe we can save ourselves. We have not trusted God to provide all that we need. To make this confession is the true purpose of our Lenten disciplines like fasting. As you resist that cookie or piece of chocolate, remember to confess your sin so that you can celebrate the gift of new life that we receive on Easter through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Let us pray.

"To the God of all grace,  
who calls you to share God's eternal glory  
in union with the Christ,  
be the power forever!" AMEN