

## 425 Devices and Desires

In this Lenten season our attention is drawn towards the tougher side of Christian discipleship - temptations, trials, sufferings, self-denial – none of which is easy or pleasant at the time, but all of which we can cope with better when seen in the context of the mercies of Calvary and the glories of the empty tomb.

In particular we are no strangers to temptation, described so aptly in the Morning and Evening Prayer of Confession in the Prayer Book as “the devices and desires of our own hearts”. Now our being tempted is not sinful in itself; indeed in a way it is heartening, for it shows that our consciences are still active and open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We can assume that Queen Jezebel for example did not even know what temptation was as her idolatrous wickedness was so entrenched, so her “sorting out” Naboth and his vineyard for her weak husband Ahab would have caused her no soul-searching at all (I Kings 21).

In temptation the devil offers us an attractive option, designed to provoke our desire and then our decision of acceptance. Thus in Jesus’ temptations at the start of His ministry the devil offered Him the Shortcut, the Quick Fix, the Secret Deal, by which Jesus could simply and quickly achieve all He wanted. But Jesus rebuffed these “dangled carrots” with His “It is written” responses, and before long we read of His “stedfastly setting His face towards Jerusalem” (Luke 9.51, KJV). There is the example for us – recognise, refuse, rebuff, and then remain watchful in future.

But at times we do not quickly recognise the temptation for what it is, for the devil much prefers to mask what is happening. Instead we give this temptation space, allowing desire to take root and the possibility of our giving-in to grow. Thus Eve in her innocence, not realising what was going on, fell to “the wiles of the devil”. She was soon followed by Adam, who realised very well what was going on, and promptly sided with his wife in sinful defiance of Almighty God our Creator.

A temptation always promises benefits – improvement, blessing, fun, progress – and always offers justification – reasonableness, entitlement, harmlessness, normality. When such thoughts gather pace in the mind we see why the fashionable cry of “Just do it!” becomes so effective. In passing it is interesting to note how TV advertising follows this same pattern, moving from perceived dissatisfaction, through desire for

betterment, then reaching the oh-so-obvious solution – just buy our special shampoo!

Succumbing to temptation, that is, our going against the Lord's will knowingly or unknowingly, is when sin enters the scene, bringing in its wake regret, misery, and ultimately physical and spiritual death (Romans 6.23). From Eve and Adam onward, it took, at His Father's bidding, the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, the "seed of the woman", to put in place the Escape-Route from this sinful mess (egs., II Corinthians 5.17-21 / Luke 22. 41-42 / Mark 15.34).

Now not all desire is sinful; for instance our chief desires are to love the Lord our God with all that we are and have and do, and to love our neighbours as ourselves, through faith in Jesus Christ as Lord (Matthew 22.40). So when faced with any desire we pause, and ponder it prayerfully in the light of God's Word, with the Lord and with one another. Who or what is the source of this desire? Does this sit comfortably with God's Word including His commandments? Is the Lord content with my doing this? What would be my motives? As far as I can tell, what would be the effects of this action if I did it? As I contemplate these things, can I still "get through" to the Lord? – or is my longing to fulfil this desire now dominating all else? No wriggling, no passing the buck! We work with the Lord over this matter until we reach the answer that is in line with Him and His Word.

It is interesting to apply "temptation-checks" such as these to notable scriptural examples, to appreciate how easily these sinful fallings could have been avoided "if only ...": Adam and Eve; Cain; Abram, Sarai and Hagar; Aaron and the golden calf; Achan; David and Bathsheba; Peter's denials; and so on.

We can then apply them to our own past and present situations, drawing on the ample promises of support and reassurance which the Lord has given us: I Corinthians 10.13 / Hebrews 2.14-18; 4.14-16 / I John 1.7-2.3 / ... . We repent, confess, ask for and receive, fresh forgiveness from God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. Then we continue to fight the good fight of faith, resisting the devil and his wiles with effective use of the whole armour of God (I Timothy 6.12 / Ephesians 6.11).

For Yes indeed, when it comes to those "devices and desires", and all else – "thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (I Corinthians 15.57).

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