

Temptation

When I came to the desert of Saudi Arabia, I couldn't help but think of the parallels between my military deployment and the forty days Christ spent in a desert not far from here. As the Bible said, "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil." (Matthew 4:1) It was soon after the beginning of Lent when I headed into my trial of temptation. Though I knew it was a military order that led me to my desert, I wondered if the Spirit was involved and what I could learn from the experience.

The story of Jesus' temptation is well known to us. He was hungry and Satan encouraged him to turn stones into bread. Satan then tried to trick him into testing God by putting himself in danger. Finally, the devil gave Christ the opportunity to cash in on worldly pleasures by simply joining the dark side. Fortunately, Jesus knew who he was and from where he came and he knew his self-control was greater than the power of temptation.

It wasn't wrong for Christ to want to feed himself, or for him to trust God for his protection, or for him to want to enjoy the pleasures of earthly life. Some people believe that self-denial is the only path to being a good Christian. I don't think God would have provided us all of these earthly pleasures if He didn't expect us to enjoy them. We must look more closely at what temptation is and how we should deal with it.

Temptation has more to do with why rather than what. Christ was purifying himself in the desert to please and grow closer to his father. The temptation was to break that eternal relationship for the chance to relieve a temporary need. We often make this mistake when we use our treasures and talents to fulfill our temporary needs instead of using them the way we know God wants us to. We may not see pursuing the latest electronic gadget to increase our personal status rather than adding that money to the collection plate or opting to play golf on Sunday morning in place of Mass as temptations, but they are. We are missing the opportunity to enhance our relationship with our father in exchange for our short-term pleasure.

Maybe you avoid that trap and have developed a wonderful relationship with our Lord and Savior. You could now fall victim to another temptation. We can be tempted to feel superior to others in our community because of our Christianity. This was Satan's goal in proposing to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you' and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" (Matthew 4:6) The Devil was appealing to that human need to prove we are right. We don't even have to act Holier Than Thou to fall into this trap. Simply feeling superior to another because of your Christianity or your wealth or social status instead of feeling blessed for being graced by God is bowing to temptation. How much better it would be to have people say that you walk humbly with God.

We have a wonderful example of how to handle these daily temptations. The temptations Jesus lived with were so much greater than ours. Imagine having the power to command angels, or turn stones into bread. We can't do any of that but our temptation remains the same. Break your relationship with God and make your life "easier". Satan gave Jesus the option to rule over the entire earth but Jesus was wise enough to know he would be giving up ruling over heaven and earth. Satan wasn't really offering Christ anything he didn't already have. Some have sold their souls to the Devil for riches so

they'd never have to worry about money again. The fallacy here is that they never had to worry about money to begin with and having more of it won't eliminate the worry. If we can consider our eternal life in our decisions rather than the few years we exist in this life, we can choose better.

Don't let me take a superior attitude. In my desert experience I often gave into temptation to fulfill my immediate wants and needs and had to come crawling back in prayer asking forgiveness for my weakness. There were obvious failings like openly cursing in frustration. There were more subtle missteps like passing on a chance to lift someone else's spirits because I was feeling down, or taking a superior attitude when I needed to remember my role as Christian servant.

Ultimately, temptation seems to boil down to that which draws us away from the two greatest commandments: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39). When we keep our relationship with God in the forefront of our mind and when we think of others before we think of ourselves, we avoid temptation. That seems pretty simple but I have no illusions that my battle with temptation will last much longer than the battle I waged in the desert.