

**Sermon preached by Pastor Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, March 11, 2007**

## **THE TRUTH ABOUT TEMPTATION**

### **1 Corinthians 10:13**

Do you remember the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*? The movie is about a young musician and composer in Portland, Oregon, who takes a teaching job at a local high school in the 1960s to provide for his family while he tries to write the one historic opus that would bring him critical fame and define his life as a musical composer. At first Mr. Holland (played by Richard Dreyfuss) believes his teaching job is only temporary. He is determined to write his magnum opus, composing at his piano after putting in a full day teaching. But as family demands increase and the pressures of his job multiply, Mr. Holland comes to the realization that his dream of leaving a lasting musical legacy is merely a dream.

Throughout the movie, Mr. Holland's marriage is in tumult, in part due to the challenge of raising a deaf son, in part due to his obsession with music. While directing the school musical, the now middle-aged teacher is intrigued by the beauty and musical talent of a student named Rowena. As Mr. Holland affirms her abilities, Rowena becomes attracted to him. She tells Mr. Holland that she has decided to go to New York City to pursue her own dreams, but she wants him to go with her. Rowena tempts him with the chance to escape the constraints of his current life and finally be able to write music. After the final performance of the school musical, Mr. Holland meets Rowena at the local drug store where the bus picks up passengers. Her eyes light up as she sees him approach, but then she notices that he has no luggage.

"You pack light," she says in jest.

Mr. Holland doesn't acknowledge her attempt at humor, but hands her a slip of paper with the name of a couple he knows in New York where she can stay.

"This isn't the way I imagined it," Rowena admits reluctantly.

"But it's the best way," says Mr. Holland, finding the inner strength to resist temptation.

Later that night, Mr. Holland walks into his bedroom where his wife appears to be sleeping. He looks at her tenderly and says, "I love you."

She looks up at him and responds, "I know."

Aware of the victory he has won by honoring his wedding vows, he takes his wife in his arms and holds her.

Temptation. Mr. Holland faced a powerful one, a temptation not uncommon or unusual in our culture. But, thank God, he found the strength and resolve to resist, and he did not give in to it.

This morning I want you to consider with me what God's Word has to say about temptation. The trouble with temptation, of course, is that it is just so tempting. And some temptations, as Adam and Eve discovered in the Garden of Eden, are terribly hard to resist.

Oscar Wilde said that he could resist anything but temptation. And Mark Twain said the way he dealt with temptation was by yielding to it. Too often that is what we all do. I do it. And so do you.

We do it – that is, we give in to temptation of various kinds, though we need not – because our sanctification is not yet complete. I'm talking specifically now to those of you who have received and embraced God's saving grace in your lives through faith in Jesus Christ. I'm talking specifically to those of you in whom Christ has come to take up residence as Savior and Lord. I realize that not everyone here today may yet have come to know Christ as Savior and Lord in your life, though I pray you will. Even today.

For those of us who know Christ and trust in Him, even though we belong to Him by faith, there is still a war going on within us, as Paul describes in Romans 7. Although in Christ our sins have been forgiven, our sinful nature has not yet been obliterated. Puritan theologian John Owen described our situation this way:

However strong a castle may be, if a treacherous party resides inside (ready to betray at the first opportunity possible), the castle cannot be kept safe from the enemy. Traitors occupy our own hearts, ready to side with every temptation and to surrender to them all.

That sinful nature, not yet completely rooted out from within us, is the traitor in our hearts that is ready to surrender to every temptation.

James points to the origin of temptation in our own sinful nature and desires in James 1:13-15, where he says:

When tempted, no one should say "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

While some people make light of it, temptation is a deadly serious matter. I want to give you a biblical perspective on it, especially in light of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13. Listen to it again:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

There are four truths about temptation I want you to take hold of today.

## **1. TEMPTATION IS INEVITABLE**

The first thing to understand is that temptation is inevitable. In one way or another, temptation comes to everyone. Paul does not say: “If you are tempted.” He says: “When you are tempted.” Temptation is inevitable. It is a fact of life. No one is immune. No one is exempt. Not me. Not you. Not Billy Graham. Not Ruth Graham. Not Abraham or Sarah. Not Joseph. Not Moses. Not David. Not Paul. Not William Wilberforce or John Newton. No one. Not even Jesus Himself.

The Bible tells us that just as He was about to begin His public ministry, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert, where for 40 days He was tempted by the devil. It was not the only time in His life that Jesus experienced temptation, but it was a time of concentrated testing.

Hebrews 4:15 tells us, in fact, that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses – He knows what we go through – because He was tempted in every way, just as we are. He was not exempt from temptation. He was tempted in every respect, in every way that a person can be tempted, in the same way that you and I are tempted. The difference between Jesus and us is that He never gave in to temptation. “He was tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.” While you and I often give in to temptation, Jesus never did. Not in the desert. Not in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His crucifixion. Not while on trial before the Jewish leaders or Pilate. Never. He never yielded to temptation. He never sinned.

And the fact that He never gave in means that Jesus knows far better than we do the full force of the tempter’s power. Because so often we give in so easily to temptation we don’t know how strong it can be. Only those who resist temptation to the end, as Mr. Holland did, for example, know how powerful the temptation can be. C. S. Lewis wrote about this truth in *Mere Christianity*:

No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.  
A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means.

This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of (an enemy) army by fighting it, not by giving in. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later.

That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness.

They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it.

Jesus knows temptation, because Satan took his best shot at Jesus. The enemy of our souls unleashed everything in his arsenal in an attempt to bring Jesus down. But none of it worked. Jesus stood firm. He never gave in. And He stands ready to help us stand firm in the face of temptation.

Temptation is inevitable. It happens to everyone. But giving in to it is not. Yielding to temptation is not inevitable. You and I don't have to give in to every temptation, or even to those particular temptations that seem to have a hold on us.

Not everyone is tempted in the same way. Or by the same things. What tempts me to sin may or may not tempt you. The places where you are particularly vulnerable to temptation may be different from my vulnerable places. The point is that temptation is inevitable. And universal. It doesn't mean you are unspiritual if you find yourself tempted in some way. Temptation happens to everyone. It is a fact of life. You can count on it.

Temptation, as Paul puts it, is common to man. You may be in a constant battle with evil thoughts or lustful desires. You may be on the edge of entering into an illicit relationship. You may be tempted to cut corners at work in order to get ahead. You may be tempted to cheat at school, or to cheat on your taxes. You may feel as though you've somehow gotten boxed into a corner and the only way out is to compromise your moral principles. Whatever it is, you are not the only one who has ever had to face what you are going through. You are not the only one who has had to deal with the challenges or pressures you are dealing with. Others have been where you are. Many have given in to temptation in those situations. But others, thank God, by the grace of God, have not given in. They have stood firm in the face of temptation.

Temptation is an inevitable part of living in this world, but giving in to it doesn't have to be. Yielding to temptation is not inevitable.

## **2. TEMPTATION IS NOT SIN**

The second thing to understand is that temptation is not in and of itself sin. The crucial thing is what you do with the temptation. What matters is how you deal with it.

We know that temptation is not sin because the Bible tells us that Jesus Himself was tempted and yet was without sin. Temptation only becomes sin when we yield to it and give in to it in some way.

The late Dick Halverson, long-time pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, and then Chaplain of the U. S. Senate for 15 years before his death, pointed out that many godly men and women are plagued by thoughts that sometimes cross their minds – vile, selfish, lustful, uninvited thoughts that pop up unexpectedly at the most surprising times.

These thoughts, he said, are not sin. They do not become sin unless you entertain them, unless you play with them in your mind, unless you encourage them and feed them with imagination.

A fleeting lustful thought is not sin. But if you dwell on that thought in your heart and mind, if you play it out in your imagination, it has become sin even if you never act on it.

Temptation itself is not sin. So don't beat yourself over the head when temptations come uninvited. But do not intentionally put yourself in positions where you know you will be tempted, if you can avoid it. There is a Danish proverb which says: "No one can be caught in a place he does not visit." You get the point. If you know that by going to a particular place or event you will be tempted to do something you shouldn't do, don't go there. You cannot be caught in a place you don't visit. And you cannot give in to a temptation that you avoid.

### **3. GOD IS FAITHFUL**

The third thing to understand, when you face temptations or tests of any kind, is that God is faithful. Never forget it. It is a familiar refrain in the Bible.

In Psalm 145:13, David says:

The LORD is faithful to all His promises  
and loving toward all He has made.

Psalm 100:5 says:

The LORD is good and His love endures forever;  
His faithfulness continues through all generations.

In Lamentations 3:22-23, Jeremiah cried out:

Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,  
for His compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is Your faithfulness.

In the opening of 1 Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul says to the Christians in Corinth:

God, who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ  
our Lord, is faithful.

Again, as he comes to the close of his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24:

May God Himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The One who calls you is faithful and He will do it.

Finally, in 2 Timothy 2, Paul writes:

Here is a trustworthy saying:  
 If we died with (Christ), we will also live with Him.  
 If we endure, we will also reign with Him.  
 If we disown Him, He will disown us.  
 If we are faithless, He will remain faithful,  
 for He cannot disown Himself.

God is faithful. Never forget that. He cannot be untrue to Himself. When God makes a promise He keeps it. When He gives you His word you can count on it. So when God says He will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear, He means it.

He promises to be with us when we experience temptation. You may or may not feel His presence at every moment. You may or may not sense His presence with you when you are being tempted. But God is right there with us when we are tempted. Whatever the temptation is.

And He promises to protect us. He will not leave you defenseless in the face of temptation. Paul says that none of us will be tempted beyond what we can bear. Even though God allows temptations and tests to come into our lives to refine us and to make us strong, He will not allow Satan to bring more pressure in your life than you can handle. Not on your own but with the help of the Holy Spirit.

There may be times when you feel helpless to resist temptation and you feel like you can't take it any more. You may feel overwhelmed by the allure or attraction of some temptation. You may think it is irresistible. But it is not irresistible. Not if you practice those two things we talked about last Sunday: discipline and dependence. The self-discipline that says no to sin and yes to God, and an attitude of wholehearted dependence on God.

Personal self-discipline isn't enough. We need both discipline and dependence. We can only do it with God's help. In the power of His Spirit.

Do not forget that God is faithful. And He simply will not let anything come into your life that you and He cannot endure together. That is His promise to you. God is faithful. His grace is available and sufficient for you. He will protect you when you are tempted. If you let Him.

#### **4. GOD WILL PROVIDE A WAY OUT**

There is a fourth thing to understand about temptation. When you are tempted, Paul says, God will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Whatever the temptation, there is always a way out. Whatever the temptation, there is always a way of escape.

Sometimes, if we're honest about it, we don't really want a way out, because the truth is that we like certain temptations. But God always provides a way out.

Sometimes the only way out is to turn and run. Literally. To remove yourself from the tempting situation. Sometimes you just have to run for your life. Like Joseph did when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him.

Sometimes the best way to escape temptation is just to stay clear of those circumstances where you know you will be tempted. Just don't go there. Don't put yourself in tempting or compromising situations.

Sometimes the way out is to call for the help and support and prayers of a Christian friend, or a small group of Christian friends who can help us stand firm in a time of testing.

Sometimes the way out that God provides is the spiritual strength and grace we need to stand firm in the face of temptation without backing down or giving in.

Sometimes the best way out of temptation is to do what Jesus did in the desert: Quote Scripture. Lean on the Word of God. Hide it in your heart so that you will not sin against Him.

James 4:7 says:

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

It is in willing surrender to the gracious rule of God in our lives and in active resistance against the devil that we gain victory over temptation. Moment by moment.

Because of what Christ has done for us on the cross, we have been given the power to say no to sin. We have been given the power in Christ to resist temptation and to live in obedience to God. We can't do it on our own. We can only do it in the power of Christ who has come not only to take up residence in us, but, as we sang this morning, to reign in us.

May it be so in us. May it be so in you and me. And may God be glorified as we resist temptation and walk faithfully with Him. Amen.