

Temptation is a universal experience. Nobody escapes temptation. A man may escape the calamity of ill-health, or the hardship of being poor, or the peril of being rich; but there is one thing nobody escapes, and that is temptation. We all know the voice of the tempter, and it speaks with a strange subtlety. It seems to know just where we are weakest, and most likely to be off our guard. It presents evil to us in the form we are most likely to accept. You know that voice. I know that voice. It speaks to us in our language in the most appealing way. It is a voice not easily silenced. That was the voice Jesus heard in the desert where he prayed and fasted and struggled with the tempter of his soul.

Not only is temptation the common lot of all believers, but no one reaches a point where he or she is immune from it and no one is delivered from the possibility of succumbing to it. There is one place in Martin Luther's Table Talk where he says "Young fellows are tempted by girls, men who are thirty years old are tempted by gold, when they are forty years old they are tempted by honor and glory, and those who are sixty years old say to themselves, 'What a pious man I have become!' Every stage of life has its own temptations. You know that as well as I. Look back over your life and you can pretty much divide it up into various segments according to the various temptations that were especially strong during those years.

But if temptation is the common lot of all believers it doesn't mean that we have to give in to our temptations. It was also Martin Luther who said, 'You cannot prevent the birds from flying overhead, but you can stop them from nesting in your hair.' He was talking about temptation. You cannot prevent temptations from coming upon you like a flock of starlings in the summer, but you sure can keep those temptations from nesting in your hair and messing up your life. And that's what this sermon is about. How can we keep the birds of temptation from nesting in our hair?

There are two different schools of Christian thought on this matter. **We may label them as the 'flirt' and the 'flight' school.** The flirt school is popular, especially among, up-to-date Christians confident of their spiritual acumen. Its motto seems to be: "If we are not allowed to sin, at least there's no harm in being tempted." There are many rationalizations for this school, such as "We need to learn how our non-Christian friends think, to develop understanding, to become better communicators." You will see these avant garde Christians at the X-rated movies in order that they can 'observe with critical awareness the new depths of depravity to which the film medium has sunk.' Or you will see them getting drunk on Friday nights at the bars, under the pretext that Jesus ate and drank with sinners. They not only let the birds fly over their heads, they sprinkle their hair with bird seed and invite the birds to nest there. I don't recommend flirting with temptation. To court temptation is foolish. As far as it is sensibly possible, it should be avoided. To do this is not cowardice or timidity; or naïvete; it is simply sanctified common sense.

Now, if those who flirt with temptation are found among the liberal Christians, the 'flight' school is more popular among the traditional and conservative Christian. One Christian writer has called it 'Rabbit hole' Christianity. He pictures Christians like rabbits who poke their heads out of the ground and warily look around for any birds of prey about to swoop down upon them and then make a mad dash to the next closest rabbit hole where they attend a bible study, then dash to another rabbit hole where they have a prayer meeting, and then dash to another hole where they enjoy Christian entertainment. They are always dashing to some Christian meeting, fleeing the hawks of temptation. The difficulty is that if one flees all the time, one

may forget what temptation really looks like. One may become so concerned about fleeing temptation that they ignore the world altogether, both its social problems and its spiritual needs.

The worldly person often does a number of things that the Bible clearly designates as wrong and that the average, conservative Christian tries, more or less successfully, to avoid. They easily recognize temptations to commit adultery or to steal. The point of real difficulty comes, however, with those temptations that are so well disguised that they are not recognized as a danger. Traditionally all temptations have been divided into three categories; the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Most evangelical Christians are quite good at recognizing the temptations of the flesh, such as adultery or drunkenness. We are also quite good at recognizing the sins of the devil such as astrology, witchcraft, horoscopes and that sort of thing. But the sins of the world do us in every day and we don't even know we are being tempted. Envy, hatred, pride, gossip, murmuring, discontent, jealousy, spitefulness, intolerance, impatience, conformity to the world nest in our hair without our ever noticing.

The thing that conservative, flight school Christians find it hard to understand, so often, is that temptation is not so much sexual seduction or the enticement of alcohol as it is the struggle to keep faith, to maintain hope, to live at peace with our neighbors, to love them, to keep the faith in the face of threatening loss and impending defeat and humiliation. The problem is that so often we don't even realize we are being tempted with these things and we end up letting the birds nest in our hair and we go around like fools thinking about how pious and what good Christians we are.

Let us take a closer look at our Gospel lesson this morning to see ~~farther~~

Let's take a closer look at our Gospel lesson this morning to see how we can keep the birds of temptation from nesting in our hair. Let me remind you of the circumstances. Jesus has been baptized by John. He has had a profound spiritual experience and heard a voice: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased". He goes up into the mountains to fast, pray, and meditate. Our text says, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."

A first step in keeping the birds of temptation from nesting in our hair is to recognize that temptations often come upon us most vehemently when we really begin to take a stand for Christ. I can remember when I was a high school junior. I was the president of our school Youth For Christ club. As a Christian leader I wanted to set a good example to other Christians so I decided to take my Bible to school with me on top of my other books. I can remember quite clearly, the exact time and place that I first decided to carry that Bible to school. I was in the hallway of my home walking toward my bed-room door early in the morning before school. Just at that moment of decision there spoke within me a voice saying, "Why in the world are you taking that Bible? People will think you're some kind of religious fanatic. What's it going to do for your popularity? And besides, there isn't even any God!" It was a chilling experience that I have never forgotten.

That experience contains a principle. When you and I really take the Lordship of Christ seriously, say in the area of politics or social issues or private, personal morality, or in the area of our lifestyles and how we spend our money, you can be sure that the birds of temptation are going to swoop around your head fast and furiously and try to find a place to nest in your hair.

Jesus is a prime example. He was coming off a spiritual high. He had

just been baptized. God had just spoken to him from heaven declaring Him to be God's Beloved Son, and Jesus is immediately put to the test. So we too must be on guard whenever we have had a spiritual high in our lives. You may have just made a commitment to Christ. You may have just taken a giant step of faith. You may have just had some tremendous victory over temptation. You are really feeling great. You are exultant. You have taken some dangerous stand for Christ at the risk of popularity or job. Take heed, because just in such situations you are most apt to fall. How many men and women have made a commitment to Christ and immediately fall into the temptation of self-righteousness, pride, and contempt of those who have not yet been enlightened.

Secondly, if we want to keep the birds of temptation from nesting in our hair we must recognise that 'we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.' We need not simply better education or more will power or better knowledge of the Bible. We need the whole armour of God to stand against the wiles of the devil. Jesus was tempted by the devil and so are we. All temptation comes, ultimately, out of the pit of hell. Whenever we are tempted, if you listen closely, you will hear the beating wings of darkness and smell the sulfur from the lake of fire.

It use to be when Christians spoke of the devil people would laugh. But after Buchenwald and Belsen, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after ten years of the slaughter of the innocents not yet born, people are not so likely to laugh at the idea of a devil. The world, in fact, often finds it easier to believe in a devil than in a loving, heavenly Father. But we may believe in the devil and

yet, nevertheless, fall prey to his wiles. Many of you have read C.S. Lewis's brilliant little classic, The Screwtape Letters. The book is a series of letters from a senior devil, Screwtape, to his underling and apprentice, Wormwood. Wormwood has been given the assignment of seeing to it that one average, middle-class Englishman never makes it to the Father's house. Screwtape advises his apprentice not to tempt this man with big sins. Don't even tempt him not to go to church. Rather, encourage him to go to church and then tempt him to congratulate himself on what a great guy he is for paying God the compliment of attending a house of worship. Don't tempt him to blaspheme Christ. Everyone knows that Jesus was the holiest man who ever lived. Rather, get him to pay compliments to Christ while ignoring his commands. Jesus warns us that the devil's techniques are insidious. In our time we have heard a great deal about infiltration. The CIA infiltrates the Kremlin and the KGB infiltrates our government. But infiltration is nothing new. It started back in the Garden of Eden when a snake slithered his way into Paradise and this technique has been used ever since.

One of the devil's tricks is this. When we choose evil, usually we get what we want at once and pay for it afterward. When we choose good we have to pay for it first before we get it. Peter Marshal illustrated this with a reference to school exams. If you chose good grades you had to pay months ago with hard study, the giving up of some pleasure and recreation. But if you chose to have a good time, you began that long ago, and you have had your fun. You did not pay then, but you are paying now in your frantic, last-minute cramming for your exams, and your paying is not over yet. There will be further deferred payments later in your life.

That's how the devil tempts us. He wants to persuade us to choose things

that we do not have to pay for right away. Usually they are cheap and sordid things. 'You want it,' the devil says. 'Charge it. Pay for it later.' But the bills always come due. And what is often worse, they are not all presented to you. Payments have to be made by those close to you. People that you love have to pay for the sordid things you purchased so cheaply from the devil. Don't let the birds of temptation nest in your hair. Recognize where those birds come from. They are bats out of hell. We wrestle not against flesh and blood but against the devil and the wild beasts within us. But Jesus suffers temptation with us. He show us how to deal with the hour of temptation. By himself confronting the Evil One, he shows us how to recognise this dangerous presence in our life and where to seek salvation.

Thirdly, if we are going to keep the birds out of our hair we need divine aid. Jesus was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, but he feared no evil. Angels attended him. In the hour of trial there is help from above for us as well. 'He will give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways... thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder... and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet'.

But we have not only the angels to help us in time of temptation, we have the Risen Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us, praying to his Father. The Lord once said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not.' And Christ prays now for us. What better incentive to yield not to temptation than that!

Because Christ is our brother, we are not alone in our temptation. He suffers it with us, down to the lowest depths which Satan might conceive. And because he is the Lord who stands in the purity of heaven beyond the

reach of sin we may pray him to keep us from temptation. We are certain of his love to all eternity. Christ not only marches beside us in our war against sin and temptation as our brother; He is also the divine Son of God who upholds us from on high. The knowledge that we are sheltered by his power gives us that peace which the world cannot give or take away from us. How uncertain is the peace that the world gives! But the peace of Jesus, which the world cannot give or take away is the peace of that certainty that Christ is Lord of all the events which surge about us- the trials that come our way and test our faith and the temptations that swarm around us like summer flies.

So the greatest help against temptation is our personal devotion and ~~commitment to Jesus Christ within His church. Charles F. Andrews, the~~ English missionary who was so great a Christian worker and servant of humanity in India that it was said his initials stood for Christ's Faithful Apostle, once told how his conscious, active life as a Christian began when he was eighteen. Though he had been brought up in a Christian home, he was becoming indifferent to Christ and falling into sins that would ultimately have wrecked his life. One night, as he knelt to pray, there came to him an overwhelming realization of the holy presence of Jesus Christ. He struggled with a sense of his own evil life, and at last the voice of Christ seemed to bring forgiveness and love in place of darkness and despair. Andrews wrote later:

Since that time, during more than forty-three years of incessant struggle, journeying to and fro throughout the world, I have never lost the assurance of Christ's living Presence with me. He is not a mere vision, he is no imaginative dream, but a living Presence who daily inspires me and gives me grace. In Him, quite consciously, I find strength in time of need [quoted by Jack Finegan in *Like the Great Mountains*, p. 54].

The grace of Jesus Christ that strengthened and empowered C.F. Andrews is equally available to all others who seek him in the struggle with temptation. In him we can be more than conquerors.

Let us pray: Almighty God, whose blessed Son was led by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan: Come quickly to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*
