

Lent 3C

March 7, 2010

Hymns: 302 - 116 - 453 - 104 v1

I CORINTHIANS 10:1-13

CURE FOR THE COMMON TEMPTATION

***Know The Devil's Strategy Against God's Saints.**

***Know Your God And His Strength To Stand.**

Dear Worshipers – at one the same time, Saints and Sinners

Radio preacher and best-selling author Chuck Swindoll once spoke to a group of pastors. He told about a man who was mountain climbing in the Sierra Mountains of California. In one particularly difficult section of his climb, he pulled himself on to a ledge only to find a six-foot timber rattlesnake looking at him with his mouth open and tail rattling. The man froze. The rattler struck. The man moved so that the snake's fangs barely missed grazing his neck. Still, the snake's fangs got caught in the man's pullover sweater. He could feel beside his neck the snake trying to get loose, so the man reached back to grab the rattler's head.

Unfortunately, this caused him to lose his balance and fall back, rolling down an incline with the six-foot rattler still attached to his sweater. His progress came to a halt on a ledge against a little bush. Finding himself leaning over a cliff with a large rattlesnake wrapped around his head, he got a death grip on the snake's head and began to squeeze. He said later he could feel the hot venom dripping down his neck from the snake's fangs that were still caught in his pullover. He squeezed for a long time until he was sure the snake wasn't moving anymore. Keeping his death grip on the snake's head, he began to work the fangs out of his pullover. He unwound the snake from his head and kept squeezing. He squeezed so hard that his hands seized up and he was forced to walk down the mountain with the snake still in his grip. When he got back to camp, his buddies had to pry his fingers off the snake.

After telling this story Swindoll looked around at this group of pastors and said, "There are some of you fellows right here who are feeling the hot venom on your neck right now. You have played with sin, and it is about to take you down." That's powerful storytelling. You might think a group of pastors would not need to be reminded of the power of sin. You would be wrong. To be a human being is to be tempted.

In today's text from I Corinthians, St. Paul is speaking to people who are, for the most part, recent converts to Christ. They have come out of a decadent culture, much like our own American culture has become today. He is reminding them of how easy it is to slip back into the old ways. He takes them back to the story of the Exodus from Egypt. While Moses was on the mountain the people slipped back into the idolatry and sexual immorality that had been part of their life in Egypt. Their backsliding offended God and their punishment was severe. Paul writes, "*The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry. We should not commit sexual immorality,*" Paul continues, "*as some of them did--and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did(on another occasion)--and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did(still another time)--and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us*"

Strong stuff--just like Swindoll's story about the snake. Still, many of us need to heed the warning. **Slide 2** To be human is to be tempted to sin. Even Jesus was severely tempted by Satan in His life – most notably, in the wilderness and in the Garden of Gethsemane, though without sinning. If the only perfect man Who ever lived could be tormented with temptation, none of us is exempt. Paul tells the Christians in Corinth, ***No temptation has seized you except what is common to man.*** This morning let us find a **(NO slide) Cure for the Common Temptation.** Towards this end, we must know the devil's strategy against God's saints, and know God and the strength He holds out to us to stand against temptation.

At the zoo in Forth Worth, Texas, is a building where tropical birds are kept. **(slide 3)** The hallway where the people walk is dark; the birds are in lighted cases of glass. All along each side of the building is a long case that looks like a tropical rain forest. It has a miniature waterfall, a pool, trees, and all sorts of plants. Among the trees and rocky ledges the small, brightly colored birds fly. As people watch this, they eventually become aware that there is no glass between them and the birds. They could reach in and touch the birds if they chose. Why don't the birds fly out? A sign above the cage explains that the birds are afraid of darkness, and when it gets dark, they go to sleep. They love the light and will not deliberately fly from the light into the darkness. That's a major difference between tropical birds and humans. Given the right circumstances we will wander into the darkness.

Satan is more than happy to lead us there, and because of the sinful, human nature in us, we often are more than willing to follow: Sexual immorality, greed, envy—you name the sin, they are all part of our human experience.

There is a cartoon that has two characters saying: “How come opportunity knocks only once, but temptation beats down the door every day?” It’s true. The temptations are limitless in this world, and Satan is right there to work our old Adam. I once asked my wife to help me shed some unwanted pounds. And so she stopped serving me late night snacks with fat and carbohydrates in them. Instead, Jean substituted celery. While I was unenthusiastically munching on a celery stalk one night, a TV commercial caught my attention. As I watched longingly, a woman spread gooey chocolate frosting over a freshly baked cake. When it was over, I turned sadly to Jean. “Did you ever notice,” I asked, “that they never advertise celery on television?”

Temptation is everywhere when you are weak. And don’t feel virtuous just because you are able to refrain from some of the more popular vices. Even doing nothing can be sinful, that’s why there is a category of vices called sloth. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his crew arrived at the island of the lotus-eaters. The inhabitants of this island ate the seeds of the lotus plant. Eating these seeds drained the crew of all desire to do anything but lie around. Some of them ate the seeds and promptly forgot about their homes and families. They had fought the seas, the monsters and the elements—they were never more alive than then. Now they didn’t want to exert themselves. Their only desire was to lie around, looking forward to their next meal of lotus seeds. Thus, the first generation of slackers, or couch potatoes, was born. Think about the times when your sin was not something that you did, but which you failed to do!

No one is immune to temptation. Paul writes, “*So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to [humanity] . . .*” Paul was writing to church people who had gotten the idea that because of their commitment to Christ, they were somehow immune to the temptations that vex the rest of humanity. Some of you will remember the disgraced television evangelist Jim Bakker. The judge who conducted Bakker’s bankruptcy trial had this to say about him, “That fellow was very religious. He could have accomplished no end of good. But he did not recognize the temptation of greed. He thought his success was God’s blessing. It was, in reality, the devil’s temptation.”

Jim Bakker is not the only believer to whom that has happened. Paul is warning the members of the church at Corinth how easy it is to fall into temptation. Some of them had gotten the idea that they were beyond such temptation. How about you?

Slide 4 Other believers in the Corinthian church needed convincing that sin really matters. Some of them had been influenced by the Gnostics. The Gnostics separated the flesh from the spirit. To the Gnostics, the flesh was not important, neither were the sins of the flesh. Sin simply didn’t matter in the eyes of the Gnostics. Here is where many believers are today. “Yes, I give into temptation from time to time,” they will say, “but does it really matter?” As one put it, “Remember, there are Seven Deadly Sins . . . one for each day, so . . . have a nice week!” So we sin--is it a big deal? After all, God always forgives.

Some sins may destroy your health, they may destroy your marriage, they may destroy your standing in the community, ANY sin left unrepented will eventually destroy your soul. There is simply no scenario by which sin improves our lives. It may give us a high for a while, but ultimately we grieve the day we first gave into temptation. **Slide 5** Paul uses graphic examples from the Old Testament to show that temptation can be a killer if you give in to it. But he also adds this word of grace: “***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.***” That is good news, isn’t it? **We do not have to give into temptation.** I know what some of you are thinking--too bad. Many people operate under the assumption that the average person cannot resist temptation, it’s too strong. Well, it is strong. If you are in a tempting situation, you need to flee from it.

Archie “Grandpappy” Campbell played the doctor on television’s “Hee-Haw.” A patient told Doc Campbell his arm was broken in two places. The doctor said, “Well, stop going to those two places.” It’s an old joke, but it’s good advice. If you are in a place where you are being tempted, get out of there! End that relationship. Quit stopping off at that bar. Cut out those late night snacks. Temptation is strong, but God is stronger. Do your part to remove yourself from temptation and God will help you overcome it. “*God is faithful,*” writes Paul. “*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.*”

Slide 6 The secret to resisting temptation is to stay connected to God and to stay connected to other believers. Jesus taught us when we pray to say, “Lead us not into temptation.” That ought to be part of every believer’s prayer. The best way we make ourselves more immune to temptation is to stay in the fellowship of other believers. Besides making us want to run from God, sin also makes us want to isolate ourselves from other believers. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more disastrous is this isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed, it poisons the whole being of a person.

And so, sin and a bad conscience push the person out of the community of believers, and being away from other Christians prevents us from receiving the benefit of accountability and the means of grace. It’s a vicious cycle. As the saying goes, prayer prevents us from sin, and sin prevents us from prayer. If you’re harboring sin in your life, confess it now and receive God’s forgiveness. Clear away what’s preventing you from connecting with God. The alcoholic never dreamed he would end up in the gutter when he took his first drink. But he could remember saying, ‘One drink never hurt anyone.’ The man who cheated on his wife never dreamed he would lose his wife and children because of yielding for one fleeting moment. But he could remember thinking, ‘Who will ever know?’ The fish who took the bait never dreamed a hook was inside and he would end up in a frying pan. But he couldn’t see the man standing on the shore with a fishing pole at the other end of the line.

Families are being torn apart, lives are being ruined and even being lost by the oldest vices known to humanity. The more things change, the more they remain the same, as the saying goes. Temptation and sin really haven’t changed much since the Israelites were in the wilderness 3,400 years ago, or Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden six or eight thousand years ago. And Satan hasn’t changed. Jesus warned Peter that fateful Maundy Thursday night, **(slide 7 – leave on to end) *Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers!***

Fellow Christian, know that Satan has desired to sift you as wheat also. Know that your Lord Jesus is before His Father’s throne praying for YOU! And you should pray too – pray that you not fall. Pray that for the sake of the cross of Jesus Who intercedes for you, that you might be forgiven those times when you have fallen. Then, flee from temptation. Flee from sin, and flee to a stronger connection to God and your church family. Much is at stake, perhaps even your very soul. And finally, when you have turned back – strengthen your brothers (and sisters). Know that you are an important blessing to one another as we all seek to flee the darkness of sin, and come into the light of Christ. These are the cures for the common temptation. Amen.