

Understanding Temptations

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, September 9th, 2018

“Now it came to pass... that God tempted Abraham” (Genesis 22:1, KJV)

The word, temptation, comes from the Latin meaning to try, attempt or prove. In essence, then, a temptation is a trial or a test, which is what it also means in the languages of the Old and New Testaments AND how it is translated in the newer versions of this story. So one of the *benefits* of a temptation is that it can help *prove* or confirm a person’s determination to do the right thing.

The story of Abraham being tempted to sacrifice his son, Isaac, is however deeply misleading. After all, God never tempts anyone, rather the *test* here was according to an appearance based on Abraham’s pagan roots prompting him to *think* God wanted him to do this. It is all explained in detail in the *Arcana Caelestia*, but for now let’s just be clear: all temptations come from **falsities and evils** which are what create the conflicts with the truth and good. The literal purpose of this story was to test Abraham’s obedience to what he *thought* was right, even though it contradicted God’s original promise of millions of descendants through Isaac. He passed the test but in Providence the deed itself was averted by another revelation from God. And, you know, this is how it is sometimes in our lives, too. We do what we *think* is right, only to find out there’s a much better way, but the commitment itself serves as a means to that end.

Generally speaking, though, we know what is right. We know it from the Word and we know it from the universal laws of civil life. So, for example, suppose a person feels the urge to take something that doesn’t belong to him; if he resists that temptation and walks away he can feel good about his decision even though he may also feel a little deprived. But thinking about it he will know he’s done the right thing and he’ll also be free of any concerns about a guilty conscience OR about getting caught. He might even reflect a little on what positive things he could do to *earn* the thing he wanted to steal.

The same sort of thing applies in almost every ordinary temptation, a key feature being that when we resist it we feel deprived. But that feeling is exactly why temptations are permitted. We have to recognize and address this sense of deprivation in order to grow spiritually. Why? – Because we are all born into self-centered, worldly loves, and in order to prepare for eternal life we have to go through a long process of learning to control and subordinate those loves to the higher principles taught in the Word. This is not easy, and presents us with an inevitable struggle – which our doctrines explain in the context of the spiritual significance of Naphtali, the name of one of Jacob’s sons which means “wrestlings.” We read,

“Temptation is the means by which the internal man is joined to the external, *for they are at variance with each other but are made to agree and to correspond by means of temptations.* The external man is indeed such that of itself it does not desire anything except bodily and worldly things; these are the delights of the natural person’s life. But the internal man – when opened towards heaven and desiring the things of heaven, as is the case with those who are able to be regenerated – takes delight in heavenly things. *And when a person undergoes temptations these two types of delight conflict with each other.* The person is not directly

aware of the conflict, because he is not aware of what heavenly delight is and of what hellish delight is, let alone that they are so utterly contrary to each other. But the angels of heaven cannot be present at all with a person in his bodily and worldly delight *until this has been made subservient*, that is to say, until bodily and worldly delight is no longer regarded as an end in itself but something which is meant to be *subservient to heavenly delight....* Once this has been achieved the angels are able to reside with that person in both; but in this case his delight becomes blessedness, and at length happiness in the next life” (AC 3928).

Notice here that the natural delights are not condemned *or withheld* from a person who is going through this process, but they are *subordinated* to higher, more important loves. Still, in the moment it *feels* like deprivation (just as it would have felt like a crushing deprivation for Abraham to have sacrificed his son). It can really feel as if we’ll *never* be truly happy without that thing we’ve wanted. In fact there are passages in the Writings that suggest it can feel as if a part of us must **die**, or *IS* dying, and this is why it’s so difficult, such a struggle. But the fact is that the death is only *apparent*, and not real. We have to go through that phase of thinking and believing we’re going to be miserable (which is really what is meant by the *despair* of temptations – not just the fact that we feel miserable, but that we feel as if the misery will last forever). Still, if we can hold on to the truth that it’s just a phase, and that the Lord can not only restore but *enhance* our delight as we overcome the temptation, then we can be strengthened to go through it.

Two Kinds of Temptation

One of the best definitions of temptation that we have is simply that it is an attack upon some love, the degree of the temptation being according to the degree of the love being attacked (AC 847, 1820, 1690:3). What this means is that you can’t really have a spiritual temptation unless you have some spiritual love that can be attacked. “Blessed are those who mourn,” the Lord said, “for they shall be comforted.” The mourning referred to here is the grief we experience because some worldly or selfish love seems to be getting the better of us. There’d be no grief if we just let go and gave in to the urge. On the other hand because there *is* some grief we can be sure of two things: (1) the Lord is with us despite the urge, and therefore (2) we’re *not* all bad. The fact that we’re having temptations does *not* mean we are bad. In fact what it all really comes down to is a battle of *influences* upon us, a battle in the last resort between good and evil *spirits* acting upon us! The question is, which influence will we accept?

But it is important to know as well that there are two kinds of temptations, those of the understanding and those of the will. They are very different – as we read:

“When a person’s temptation involves those of the understanding, evil spirits activate only the evil deeds he has carried out, which [in the story of Noah’s ark] are meant by the ‘unclean beasts’ [that entered the ark]. And with these they accuse and condemn. They even activate his good deeds as well, which are also meant there by the ‘clean beasts;’ but these they corrupt in a thousand ways. At the same time they also activate his thoughts, which are also meant [in the Noah story] by the ‘bird,’ and in addition they activate the things meant here by ‘things creeping over the ground.’ This kind of temptation however is mild and is perceived only through the *recollection* of such experiences, and a kind of mental anguish resulting from this.

“When however someone’s temptation involves things of the will, it is not so much his deeds and thoughts that are activated. Instead there are evil demons, as evil spirits of this type may be called, who inflame him with the evil desires and the foul loves in which he is steeped, and in this way direct their attack through the person’s very desires. They do this so wickedly and secretly that one cannot possibly believe it is they who are doing it. In fact they worm their way in no time at all into the life of his desires, and almost instantaneously twist and convert the affection for good and truth into the affection for evil and falsity. They act in such a way that the individual *inevitably thinks that these things come from himself and flow forth of his own free will*. This kind of temptation is very severe, and is felt as inward pain and burning torment” (AC 751:2-3).

Still, remember that the torment is because of the conflict with other, *good loves* the person has from the Lord. So it’s never as grim as it seems. Indeed, the teaching is that “As long as temptation lasts, a person assumes that the Lord is not present, for he is being harassed by evil demons, so harassed in fact that sometimes he has so great a feeling of hopelessness as scarcely to believe in the existence of any God at all. Yet at such times *the Lord is more present than that person can possibly believe,*” and closer than ever fighting for us and with us *against the temptation*, keeping us in freedom (AC 840, 1947). If He weren’t, we would simply give in.

Temptations and the Lord’s Prayer

With that in mind we might wonder why we are taught to say in the Lord’s Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation” – as if He ever does! But the reason again, quite simply, is that it feels to us *as if* He does. After all, we think, if He allows it, and in the end it’s good for us, He must be instigating the process. But of course that’s not true. He is leading us – always – but in this case it is OUT of temptation, not into it, and when we say the prayer we are reminded of this fact – perhaps especially if we pause after the words, “Lead us,” and then add “...not into temptation.” In fact, several parts of the Lord’s Prayer are written this way: “Give us this day our daily bread;” “Forgive us our debts... Deliver us *from* evil...” None of this is ever in question, but when we say the words we are reminded of the importance of our part in receiving these benefits.

Examples and Illustrations

So at the risk of stirring unpleasant memories, what are some common examples of spiritual temptations in our lives? And what are the benefits that we might gain from overcoming them?

One major temptation we almost all face is a desire to say something negative about another person. But you know, sometimes this is necessary. The question is, what’s the purpose of the criticism, and who needs to hear it? On one hand recognizing some disorder for what it is can strengthen our resolve not to go there. On the other hand raising concerns among those who don’t need to know can be very discouraging – on many levels. Think how much better you feel in the long run if you just bite your tongue, or having taken counsel, charitably approach the person you need to criticize directly.

Another illustration comes up all the time in marriage, where one of the partners feels unhappy with something the other partner is – or isn’t – doing. Again, there is that feeling of deprivation

which often leads to self-pity and some form of acting out. But if we can recognize this as the *test* that it is, and trust the Lord to lead us *through* it to a happier, higher level appreciation of each other, then it will all have been worth it – indeed eternally worth it.

One more example: no doubt we all know how challenging it can be to tell the truth, especially “the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Very often it seems as if a partial truth will do just fine, especially if it involves something personal we’d rather not share, or if it seems likely to cause trouble. But it’s never the truth that causes trouble; it’s the half-truth, or the misconception, or the outright falsity that causes trouble and therefore causes the temptation. Self-disclosure can feel pretty threatening, but in some situations it can be completely disarming and lead to a much better understanding than could ever be achieved otherwise. As for telling the truth about someone else, we might well ask the question, “How do we really know?” And is there more to it than we may ever be *able* to know? Questions like this can help us maintain a truly charitable and helpful perspective.

Benefit of the Holy Supper in Temptations

Finally, now, it has been some time since we commemorated the Lord’s Supper here, and so as we prepare to do this we may well ask the question, “How might our temptations be impacted by this act, or *vice versa*?” If we feel we’re in the midst of a nasty internal conflict isn’t there a risk of *profaning* the sacrament, and so doing more harm than good for our spiritual lives?

The answer is, of course there’s always a risk. But the risk is not from doing what the Lord has prescribed; it is from doing it hypocritically, that is, from a foolish, selfish motive. If you know what you need to do, or even if you just want help figuring it out, and you want the Lord’s support to do that, then this is for you. Feeling unworthy is NOT a reason to stay back – provided you are not actively engaged in something you know is wrong. Rather it is one of the specific resources that the Lord has provided to help us connect with Him and get the support we need.

The bread and the wine in themselves do not provide this, nor does the act of coming forward to receive them, but when we approach this railing understanding that the bread corresponds to His pure love for us, the wine to His perfect wisdom about us, and our reception of them to our sincere desire to be nourished by these things, then the tangible experience of participating can really strengthen us. And if the idea of this symbolism seems too abstract as we struggle, then all we really need to do is think about the Lord Himself offering these gifts to His disciples, and imagine ourselves re-enacting their experience, being filled with the same anticipation and wonder that they felt as He prepared to lay down His life for them (see TCR 709).

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis* 45:1-11
 Children’s talk on good coming from evil

Matthew 4:1-11 on overcoming temptations by the Word
The New Jerusalem #187-195: selections