

Temptation
James 1:12-15

Sermon

Hobart, October 21st, 2012

Devonport, October 27th, 2012

Launceston, October 28th, 2012

© *Phillip C. Hopwood, 2012*

James 1:2-15

² Dear brothers and sisters,^{*} when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

⁵ If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. ⁶ But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

⁹ Believers who are^{*} poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. ¹⁰ And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. ¹¹ The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

¹² God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong,^{*} and he never tempts anyone else. ¹⁴ Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. ¹⁵ These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

^{*} Greek *brothers*; also in 1:16, 19.

^{*} Greek *The brother who is*.

^{*} Or *God should not be put to a test by evil people*.

INTRODUCTION:

I. TODAY WE ARE GOING TO FOLLOW UP ON THE DISCUSSION OF THE WORLD

A. BY TALKING ABOUT THE TOPIC OF "TEMPTATION"

B. WE TALKED ABOUT GOD'S LOVE FOR THE WORLD

1. In that he sent Jesus to rescue the world, to turn us all back to God, to bring us out of our sinful independence, into a love based relationship with God and one another
 - a) So we are to love the world, and all people
 - b) But not to get caught up in the anti-God, destructive ways of the world

S.P.S:

A. IF SOMEONE SAYS TO YOU,

1. "Chocolate." "Don't even dare to think about chocolate!"
2. What are we all going to do!
3. It is very hard for us as human beings to control what we think about and very often, what we do.

B. WE ARE TEMPTED TO DO OR NOT DO ALL SORTS OF THINGS, GOOD, BAD AND INDIFFERENT

1. Many times we end up feeling guilty, bad, weak and pathetic when we cannot stop ourselves thinking and doing such things

C. SO TODAY WE ARE GOING TO LOOK AT THE TOPIC OF TEMPTATION

1. Including looking James 1:2-27

D. PRAYER

BODY:

E. AS WE GROW OLDER AND WISER

1. We learn through many ups and downs and painful experiences that resisting temptation isn't as easy as we'd like it to be.
2. We learn that being told or commanded by an authority figure, a parent, teacher or other moral authority, or a set of rules or laws, that we must not think or act in a proscribed manner, doesn't do a lot to change our behaviour
 - a) Just as being told not to think about chocolate doesn't help us not think about or stop eating chocolate.
 - b) Hearing sermons or reading books about what we should and shouldn't do doesn't go very far in actually helping us to overcome temptations
 - (1) The promised formulas for instant vanquishing of our problems, or the guaranteed seven step programs to dealing with particular problems in our lives don't work
 - (2) And end up frustratingly disregarded like various health and fitness gadgets and remedies that we may have lying around the house
3. Resisting temptation is much more complicated than just being told what not to do
 - a) We are not computers or mechanical appliances that simply do what we are directed to do without resistance
 - b) We are complex beings, with an underpinning of all sorts of experiences, and built in tendencies and reactions and motives.
4. We are full of fear, insecurity, survival and protection instincts that are very powerful and complex
 - a) And in many cases hidden and unseen
 - b) And these inner defences and desires arise quickly and involuntarily and are hard to countermand and resist

c) They seem to have a life of their own that often runs contrary to what we have been told, or tell ourselves we shouldn't be doing

(1) Like not thinking about chocolate

A. IN THE BEGINNING WE KNOW HOW ADAM AND EVE FELL TO THE TEMPTATION TO BE INDEPENDENT FROM GOD

1. They had been instructed to eat of the tree of life, but not to eat of the second tree
2. Believing the serpent's lie, they fell to temptation
3. Believing that they would be more successful, more effective and significant people if they disbelieved and disobeyed God by taking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, living free and independently of God

B. FOR US TODAY

1. Just simply being told what to do, or think or not do and not think doesn't really get us very far
 - a) Sometimes it actually gets us more frustrated and may perhaps lead us to decide that either;
 - b) We end up with either callousness or guilt
 - (1) It doesn't matter what I do, and I'm past caring, and God clearly doesn't, so I give up on him
 - (2) Or it does matter, I feel rotten, but I give up because I just can't change, so I give up on me

C. TOM WRIGHT SUGGESTS THAT ONE OF OUR PROBLEMS IS THE WAY WE ENVISION WHAT IS RIGHT AND WRONG

1. And how we try to make such matters simplistic, black and white and within our control
 - a) Like Adam and Eve did
2. Instead of recognizing that life is much more complex
 - a) And in that complexity, we need to continually seek God's guidance through Jesus and the Holy Spirit

b) Rather than going by our own often shallow viewpoints, or by simplistic, black and white moral rules and codes that fail to deal with the complex realities of life

3. Wright elaborates on this;

We would like things to be simpler... We'd like to live, ideally, in a world without evil; but, since that doesn't seem to be the case, we'd settle for a world where everything was clear-cut.¹

4. He then talks about sport. And how two clearly identifiable teams make it easy to understand.

5. It is very easy to fall into the trap of looking at life, decisions, people and issues the same way.

6. He says;

One of the reasons for the abiding popularity of watching sport is that we know from the start who's who. We emerge from the murky world where we live most of the time - into the artificially bright light of a straightforward dualism.

We support this lot; that lot are the enemy. If our lads are the underdogs, so much the better; we get a nice buzz of moral superiority, and it's all the nice if we win against the odds. That what we want life to be like.

We watch sport because it allows us the luxury of a clear-cut dualism in a world where, for the most part things aren't that easy.

One of the disappointments of growing older, in fact, is the realization that nothing is as straightforward as it once seemed.²

7. Wright talks about how we tend to view one side or the other as the opposing team, as he puts it "preferring the quick certainties of youth to the humility of age."

a) It is so much easier to jump to quick, convenient, simplistic conclusions, to assume we have it figured out, and to rest in that presumed certainty—rather than face the probability that most things are far more complicated, and can't be so simply put in a black or white box.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*, Eerdmans, 1994, p. 85

² Wright, p. 85

8. Wright talks about how this black and white, all good or all bad way of looking at people, actions and issues is a form of dualism.
9. In other words simplistically categorizing things as either or, good/bad, right/wrong.
10. In religious circles, “fundamentalism” is all too often wired with this mental circuitry, this overly simplistic, and too often, judgmental way of looking at the world and God’s ways.

D. WRIGHT GOES ON TO APPLY THESE THOUGHTS TO OUR TOPIC OF “TEMPTATION”

The trouble with most views of temptation is that we are always hoping that Christianity will be more like sport and less like real life.³

1. What he is getting at is that we too often see temptation as something we approach like a race of sporting battle.
 - a) We will win if we work at it hard enough, and follow the right techniques.
 - b) We believe we can overcome bad habits, addictive behaviours, negative thinking etc. by fighting them like a sporting opponent, or winning a race.
 - c) This can lead to the idea that all we need is self-discipline and hard work and we can beat any personal problem, and that others can too.
2. When we fail to overcome a particular temptation, what happens?
 - a) We tend to think we aren’t trying hard enough, or we aren’t using the right rules or techniques, that we don’t have enough faith, or we aren’t spiritually strong enough.
 - b) So we try again, and perhaps again and again.
 - (1) In the end we may succeed, or succeed temporarily. But too often we fail, and either put more pressure on ourselves, or turn our focus elsewhere.

³ Wright, p. 85

(2) Perhaps feeling guilty and worthless, or trying to assuage the pain and shame by deciding it isn't such a big problem.

c) As we get older, we are often faced with such a series of these experiences, that our whole view of life and overcoming temptation comes under challenge.

3. Wright talks about this discouraging stage in our Christian lives, saying;

There are many Christians who are in exactly that position today. It all sounded so bright and cheerful when we were in Sunday school; but the clear morning sky has clouded over now, and the choice seems to be between pretending it's still all clear and bright and shining, on the one hand, and settling in for a long grey afternoon, on the other. A choice, in other words, between an artificial, enforced, continuing childhood and a gloomily realistic adulthood. Peter Pan on the one hand; Eeyore on the other.

And the reason I can't simply say the standard things about temptation is that I suspect you'll read it in Peter Pan mode and react to it in Eeyore mode. You will hear me saying that everything is clear-cut: there's a straight choice between good and evil, and you've got to put on the spiritual armour and fight the good fight of faith. And you will go away thinking, "That's all very well for him; my life is more complicated than that."⁴

4. Wright goes on to ask how we can take a more mature, complete, realistic approach to life's issues and temptations.

5. And how we can "get to grips with the things that prevent us from following Jesus" as we very much want to do.

II. JAMES

A. THE APOSTLE JAMES SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS, AND FINDING A WAY THROUGH THEM

James 1:2-27

⁴ Wright, p.85-86.

Faith and Endurance

² Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. ³ For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. ⁴ So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.

1. Growth and overcoming temptation is a life long process

⁵ If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.

2. We need God's wisdom, rather than quick fix, simplistic ideas

⁶ But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. ⁷ Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. ⁸ Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.

3. The big issue, the pivotal choice is between God's way and the world's

B. CLEARLY WE ARE CALLED TO ENDURE TRIALS AND OVERCOME TEMPTATIONS

1. But we are admonished not to try do so based on our own simplistic human thinking.

a) God is the only one who can bring us through these problems

⁹ Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honored them. ¹⁰ And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. ¹¹ The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements.

2. We can do all we like with our own resources, abilities and ideas, but in the end we fail.

¹² God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

3. If we trust in God, and don't seek simplistic, unrealistic ways of viewing life,
4. We don't expect to knock over every wrong attitude and habit with a few simple steps and in a few days
5. We are prepared to walk with God on a life long journey, trusting Jesus and the Spirit to help us understand and deal with the complex realities of life, then we will be rewarded.
 - a) For them to share in our lives, and us share in theirs, minute by minute, day by day, year by year
 - b) Transforming our hearts and minds bit by bit as we grow in God's wisdom, patience, humility and love

¹³ And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, "God is tempting me." God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else.

C. GOD DOESN'T TEMPT US

1. He leads away from temptation
 - a) At its heart, the temptation being talked about is the temptation to live our lives, our way, following our short term views and desires, living independently and opposed to God
 - b) God clearly never tempts us to do that, just the opposite

¹⁴ Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away.

¹⁵ These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

2. Temptation comes from our human selfishness and desire to get what we want, quickly and easily
 - a) We can so easily get enticed and entangled in these sinful destructive ways
 - b) We see it all too often in young people, but we can see it in those of all ages, including our own lives

¹⁶ So don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ Whatever is good and perfect comes down to us from God our Father, who created all the lights in the heavens. * He never changes or casts a shifting shadow. * ¹⁸ He chose to give birth to us by giving us his true word. And we, out of all creation, became his prized possession. [firstfruits of his creatures]*

D. IN THE END IT IS GOD, WHO IS IN CHARGE

1. He sent his Son and Spirit to give us new birth, a new start, a new life; to redeem and transform us
2. He is the source of truth and light, the source of wisdom and strength for overcoming those things which do change and cast shifting shadows over our lives and all creation

E. JAMES GOES ON TO SPELL OUT SOME OF THE AREAS WE GET TEMPTED IN

Listening and Doing

¹⁹ Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. ²⁰ Human anger does not produce the righteousness* God desires.

1. Being simplistic, wanting fast answers, thinking we can figure out what is best and do it without really listening, thinking, praying, studying, learning, walking with God over the long haul—doesn't work
 - a) We need to be patient, humble, meek. We need to be realistic about life, ourselves, and other people, and not be quick to get angry and give our opinion
 - b) This doesn't produce the true righteousness God desires

²¹ So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls.

2. This is a process. A humbling, surrendering process.

* Greek *from above, from the Father of lights*.

* Some manuscripts read *He never changes, as a shifting shadow does*.

* Greek *we became a kind of firstfruit of his creatures*.

* Or *the justice*.

3. What is the basis for it?

- a) Humbly letting God's mind, his written and living word to be planted in our hearts, and to grow day by day
- b) God's word, the life of Jesus, who is God with us, is the only thing that has the power to save our very beings

²² But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.

F. JUST READING GOD'S WORD FOR INSPIRATION OR BRIEF ENCOURAGEMENT WON'T DO IT

1. We need to be hearing and living it, applying it to every aspect of life on an ongoing basis

²³ For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. ²⁴ You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. ²⁵ But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

G. GOD'S WORD HELPS US SEE MORE AND MORE ABOUT OUR INNER MOTIVATIONS AND ATTITUDES, OUR WRONG THINKING AND ACTIONS

1. But being aware of these things is only the start.
2. It is like reading instructions on making a cake, or training your dog, then just ignoring it all and doing it your own way

²⁶ If you claim to be religious but don't control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.

3. It is easy, and appealing to state that we are good people. But the fruits reveal how deeply we have changed.
 - a) And that change is a long term, deep and profound journey—not just resisting the temptation to break a few black and white rules that are mainly physical do's and don'ts rather than deep profound and lasting change of our inner hearts and attitudes

b) Change of the depths of our nature and motivation, our view of God, ourselves, our neighbour and our world and our relationships with each and all of them

²⁷ Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.

H. THIS ILLUSTRATES THE SELFLESS, CARING, COMPASSIONATE HEART AND MIND THAT GOD IS BUILDING WITHIN US

1. Through studying the written word, and the life of the living Word
 - a) We come to see more and more the mind and life of God
 - b) How God is a true “Paraclete”
 - c) How he has loved our suffering humanity, and out of his nature of grace, compassion and deep love, has acted to come and be with us in our problems
 - d) To sit with us, to stand with us, to walk with us, to fight with us and for us
2. And this is the life God calls us to share in, in and through his Son
 - a) So the genuinely “religious” life is going to look like Jesus’ life did
 - b) We are to be “paracletes” like him
3. So before we conclude, let’s go back to the subject of temptation that James was talking about, and pick up some more of what N.T. Wright says about it

III. TEMPTATION

A. WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON TYPES OF THINGS TEMPTATION IS ASSOCIATED WITH?

1. Things!
 - a) Things like what we suggested we don’t think about at the beginning...

2. We tend to think of overcoming temptation as resisting the urge to engage too much or to consume too much of physical things, and physical experiences

B. THIS MAKES IT SEEM LIKE THE SPIRITUAL IS GOOD, AND THE PHYSICAL AND MATERIAL IS BAD

1. But that is the type of simplistic thinking we discussed earlier
2. When we list the fruits of the spirit and the fruits of the flesh in Galatians etc., how many of them are focused on physical things?
3. Ceasing to be physical beings would not remove us from almost any of those sins and temptations

C. AS WRIGHT SAYS;

The dualistic division of the world into good things and bad things simply won't do. There is such a thing as a distinction between good and evil, but we can never get at it by expressing it in terms of different parts of the created world. Chocolate is the creation of the good and loving God, just as much as bread. Sex, despite what you'd think, to hear some people talk, was God's wonderful idea all along. Alcohol is such a great thing that Jesus once went to a wedding and made lots more of it.

Is that dangerous talk? Only for the dualist, who wants everything black and white. A serious Christian will realize that sin comes not in the thing itself, but in its wrong use; not in a part of God's good creation, but in the attempt to use that good creation as though it were our toy, or our trash.⁵

D. SADLY, SOME RELIGIOUS PEOPLE END UP WITH ALL SORTS OF ISSUES

1. because they come to associate some physical things, even parts of their own bodies with evil
2. They can end up with all types of odd habits, and taboos like some religious groups do, not using electricity, not drinking, not playing games or dancing, observing days etc.

⁵ Wright, p. 87

3. Others can end up with mental problems or just become so anti physical things that their lives become dull and joyless
4. Of course others are so focused on getting instant thrills and satisfaction out of the physical that they become shallow and often addicted to the point of self-destruction

E. THE BATTLE WITH THE FLESH THAT PAUL TALKS ABOUT

1. Is not a battle of the spiritual against the physical
2. But our natural rebellion against God and his ways.
3. Tom Wright explains this;

The temptation which feels as though it's appealing to the 'real you', to your deepest instincts and longings, is in fact starting from something which is good, and suggesting that you elevate that out of its proper and God-given context into a different setting where it will give you a thrill, rather than the God-designed satisfaction; a shot in the arm, rather than sustenance for the long journey.

What feels like a part of the real you is in fact the habit that we get into of rebellion, of using our God-given world, God-given personalities, and our God-given bodies, as if they were simply ours to use and abuse as we like, to give an artificial boost to our flagging self-esteem.⁶

F. SO OVERCOMING TEMPTATION, OUR BATTLE WITH THE FLESH INVOLVES

1. Learning to curb our short term thinking, desires and lusts to feel good, or look good,
2. Learning to stop using people and things so we can boost our self-esteem, or deal with our fears

It is learning to live with and relate to others and the material world according to God's principles of love and humility, practicing life according the fruits of the spirit, as opposed those of the flesh

⁶ Wright, p. 87

a) As Wright adds;

...the answer to temptation is to find out, perhaps painfully and over a long period, what it is about you that is at this moment out of shape, distorted, in pain. Then one may begin to find out, again often painfully, how it is that God longs to help you to get what is distorted back into focus; to get what is crooked back into shape; to get what is bruised and hurt back into health.

That will take time; it will certainly take prayer...⁷

⁷ Wright, p. 88

CONCLUSION:

A. SO, OVERCOMING TEMPTATION IS A LIFE LONG PROCESS

1. It is not a simplistic matter of just stopping thinking about chocolate, or avoiding other physical things or experiences
2. It is not a fight against our bodies or the material world, all of which God created good
3. It is a matter of using all things as God created them to be used
 - a) Living in our bodies, in relationship with God, our fellow humans, and the earth, the way Jesus did
 - b) And continually letting him live his life in us and through us
4. This is not an instant, or seven step or seven day process, or even a seven week or seven year program

B. THIS IS A LIFE LONG PROCESS

1. One in which we travel slowly at times, and even downhill
2. But we know we never lack the love and involvement of God along our life journey
3. He forgives us our sins, the times we make our choices, and act our own way
4. So we continually pray for God's grace and wisdom
 - a) For Jesus to partner with us, and guide and empower us through the Spirit

C. AS WRIGHT CONCLUDES;

Recognize that every moment, every second of your life, is a moment when the gracious God longs to give you the good gift of his presence and his love, and has some specific response from you which he longs to evoke,

which will enrich and enhance your humanness in the way that rebellion never can.

Often the sharpest temptation comes at the critical moment, when God is waiting to bring you round a corner to some unexpected blessing or gift.

In the light of all this, and in the power of the Spirit, make your choice, and act on it gladly, giving thanks to God.

And if you fail, God's love does not. ...It is that love, ultimately that is our chief weapon against temptation.

To know that I am loved, loved deeply, thorough and through, gives me the security to reject the ways of pride and fear; to reject the false alternatives of Peter Pan and Eeyore; to choose the way of self-denial which is also the way of self-affirmation, and to reject the way of self-hatred which leads not to holiness but to despair.

To know this love, and act out of answering love, is one of the central features of following Jesus.⁸

1. May God continue to draw us further and further into his life of love, and further and further from those attitudes that tempt us to go our own way, away from him

D. PRAYER

⁸ Wright, p. 89

NOTES

GOSPEL READING

Matthew 18:1-14

¹ About that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?"

² Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. ³ Then he said, "I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. ⁴ So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

⁵ "And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf* is welcoming me. ⁶ But if you cause one of these little ones who trusts in me to fall into sin, it would be better for you to have a large millstone tied around your neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea.

⁷ "What sorrow awaits the world, because it tempts people to sin. Temptations are inevitable, but what sorrow awaits the person who does the tempting. ⁸ So if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one hand or one foot than to be thrown into eternal fire with both of your hands and feet. ⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It's better to enter eternal life with only one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.*

¹⁰ "Beware that you don't look down on any of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels are always in the presence of my heavenly Father.*

Parable of the Lost Sheep

¹² "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost? ¹³ And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he will rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn't wander away! ¹⁴ In the same way, it is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish.⁹

James 1 God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

James 1:14 Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away.

1 Timothy 6:4-12

⁵ These people always cause trouble. Their minds are corrupt, and they have turned their backs on the truth. To them, a show of godliness is just a way to become wealthy.

⁶ Yet true godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. ⁷ After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. ⁸ So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content.

⁹ But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.

Paul's Final Instructions

* Greek *in my name*.

* Greek *the Gehenna of fire*.

* Some manuscripts add verse 11, *And the Son of Man came to save those who are lost*. Compare Luke 19:10.

⁹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Mt 18:1-14). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

¹¹ But you, Timothy, are a man of God; so run from all these evil things. Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.

¹² Fight the good fight for the true faith. Hold tightly to the eternal life to which God has called you, which you have confessed so well before many witnesses.

¹⁰

A. N.T. WRIGHT ON TEMPTATION

It's kind of ironic that what finally got me over the hump of deciding "should I start a blog?" was reading N. T. Wright, since I'm not an amateur theologian, have never read *The Resurrection of the Son of God* etc., and have to ask my brother to remind me every so often what the New Perspective is. This is from a book of his sermons, *Following Jesus: Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

In his sermon/chapter on Temptation (pp. 83-89), close to the beginning he says what he won't do: **"I don't simply want to say things which run along the surface, and which well-taught Christians have heard many times before (83)."**

- Thank you, N.T.! He put his finger on a problem which has been bothering me for years, ever since I *began* (not finished) seminary. And I always feel guilty and superficial when I think "I've heard it all before." To be begin with, I'm reminded of the quote of Margaret Thatcher I've always loved (though I'm not a Thatcherite): "Of course it's the same old story. Truth usually is the same old story." After all, what do I expect, a freak show? One could say the same thing about the Bible - "I've read it all before, I know what it says." Second, it's not as though all those repeated hearings have actually sunk into my heart - it's not as if I've really learned the lesson to the point of living a changed life. And third, I know that sometimes the issue is my mood and the way I've been living life lately. The most trite or manipulative sermon in the world can still do a person good who's in the right place to hear it.

I used to fear that, once a person has gone to seminary, they can never again hope to be edified by sermons more than once in a blue moon. But now I think that's a load of crap. A) Because there are so many different traditions and types of preaching, which I think is really cool. (In fact, sometimes I think it'd be neat to be a sermonologist, if that's even a discipline/word). Manny Ortiz's preaching at Spirit and Truth was totally different from Phil Ryken's at 10th Presbyterian in Philly (thank goodness), both were totally different from the preaching at the Episcopalian churches I've gone to...to give just a few examples. B) Even if I were to go to theologically conservative presbyterian churches for the rest of my life (my seminary was presbyterian), I still think the potential should be there for me to be

¹⁰Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (1 Ti 6:4-12). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

surprised and edified and convicted through the years. Happily, I know of two really good examples of this kind of preaching: my brother's, and my own pastor's (but again, I rarely get all that much out of his sermons, for involved personal reasons I may go into later).

Anyway, I've felt guilty for being tired of the sermons I hear for all those reason – yet also thinking that there are different ways to preach a sermon (though should I expect one preacher to master more than one way? don't know, probably not – I think I write all my papers the same way), and that maybe some of the sameness could be mitigated if pastors were willing to not end with the "gospel" (you can't do it but Christ has done it for you) every time (heresy? is there anything so terrible about a sermon every once in a while just ending with: Do it!), and more importantly, if they put more effort into preaching to where they think their particular congregation really is, rather than preaching to a general audience, or just expounding the timeless, unchanging truths of the nascent reformation.

And sometimes I fear that I've sinned knowingly too many times, I've hardened my heart against the truth and now the normal, basic truths leave me cold. So it's really good to hear a preacher saying he doesn't want to say the things that well-taught Xians have heard before! I know preaching is hard, but some preachers honestly seem like they're on autopilot (to be fair, this is more Episcopalian preachers than the presbyterian ones I've been bashing).

He goes on to say what a typical sermon on temptation will probably look like: - either we'll hear about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, that he succeeded where Adam and Eve failed [my addition: or, in reformed circles, that he succeeded where you and I fail - I know that's true but hearing over again that I have his record doesn't free me from the very real and painful grip of sin], and where Israel failed, or Gen. 3 will be unpacked (Eve trusted to her own decision-making power; Jesus stuck with Scripture).

"And I suspect you would feel sad at a sermon like that. Most of my readers have been there, done that, and don't feel satisfied with it. Good advice might conceivably help, but it hasn't helped all that much in the past. Xians seem to me to divide into two groups these days: the first lot don't think that sin matters very much anyway, and the second know perfectly well that it does, but still can't kick the habit."Yesss!!!

"Preachers, in fact, often follow St. Paul and appeal to an innate sporting instinct: there's a race to be run – and you want to win, don't you? That's fine when you're young and strong and there's an apparent chance that you might win. But what about when you're middle-aged and overweight and the very idea

of running for anything except the odd bus fills you with a deep foreboding? ... It all seemed so bright and hopeful when we were in Sunday school, but the clear morning sky has clouded over now, and the choice seems to be between pretending it's still all clear and bright and shining, on the one hand, and settling in for a long grey afternoon, on the other." Yes. I look back to college (which wasn't sin or problem free), the year between college and seminary (ditto), and seminary (ditto), and think, where did my joy, my enthusiasm, my belief that the Gospel was real and that it mattered go?

So what's the solution? I have to admit, I've heard all three of his points before, many times (mostly Tim Keller sermons). So this is a moment where the saying applies that the truth usually is the same old story — not that there are only these three ways to break out of the cycle, but still, these ways are legitimate, and they're worth repeating. Maybe all I'm really looking for is a fresh illustration or way to apply stuff. So his three points are:

1. Realize that "temptation always takes as its starting point something which is in itself good." My first thought is, most reformed people I know don't need to be reminded of that — they are *all about* Christian liberty. Still, if I think about this enough, I realize there may be a sense in which I believe with my head that romance, for example, is good, and yet I'm so filled with wrong thoughts and images and examples of it, that I have very little notion of what a God-given romantic relationship would look like.

2. "the flesh", as Paul uses it, refers not to the body, but to human beings in rebellion against God. This isn't new, of course, but I like how he fleshes that out: The temptation that we think we have to give into to be happy is "starting from something which is good, and suggesting that you elevate that out of its proper and God-given context into a different setting where it will give you a thrill, rather than the God-designed satisfaction; a shot in the arm, rather than sustenance for the long journey."

3. "...the answer to temptation is to find out, perhaps painfully and over a long period, what it is about you that is at the moment out of shape, distorted, in pain. Then one may begin to find out, again often painfully, how it is that God longs to help you get what is distorted back into focus; to get what is crooked back into shape; to get what is bruised and hurt back into health." This will take time, prayer, possibly fasting, and definitely help, i.e. spiritual guidance.

"In the meantime, while you're working on the long-term project, what about the temptation which will creep up on you before you're even started? The first thing to do is thank God for making you human; for giving you life and all that it means, for giving you responsibility to think and choose. The second is to pray for grace to use that responsibility wisely. The third is to **recognize that every moment, every second of**

your life, is a moment when the gracious God longs to give you the good gift of his presence and his love, and has some specific response from you which he longs to evoke, which will enrich and enhance your humanness in the way that rebellion never can. If you don't follow Jesus in this precise moment, you are going to miss out."

<http://ichsteh.wordpress.com/2007/06/19/nt-wright-on-temptation/>