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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:13

1 Corinthians 10:13 “No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to humankind. 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 endure it.”

Temptations are as natural as anything in the human experience. Sweets, laziness, television, shopping, people-pleasing temptations range all the way to alcohol, sex, pornography, tobacco, opioid painkillers. Temptations are as natural as anything in the human experience. You are all tempted on a daily basis. You might be tempted even right now to tune me out. The Apostle Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians that temptations are common to all people. The urges you feel are felt by others; you are not alone. But it feels like you’re alone in your temptation because no one likes to talk about their temptations. Temptations are embarrassing to talk about with a parent or spouse or friend. Temptations can also be damning to talk about with those same people. What will they think of me if I tell my parents I’ve been tempted and lured in to trying alcohol? What will my friends say about me if I tell them I’ve been tempted to click on those dirty online ads? We don’t even like to think about mentioning our temptations to binge eat all the cookies in the house.

Temptations are something for the privacy of our own minds, but it’s in our own minds where such dark thoughts take hold. And when they fester long enough, people will often give in; and when they give in, they can keep giving in until out of nowhere we’ve developed a habit, a problem, an addiction. When temptations become addictions, then there is a huge problem. Temptations can be averted, but addictions can take a lifetime to overcome. So, let us not allow our temptations to get the better of us.

This is a little bit of a gross story from *Homiletics Magazine*, but I think it illustrates well how temptations can get too far away from us. “Paul Harvey tells an incredible story describing how Eskimos kill a wolf simply by coating several layers of frozen blood on a sharp knife sticking out of the frozen tundra. Apparently, the wolf picks up the scent, and after circling the knife warily begins licking the frozen blood. He begins to lick faster and faster as the desire for blood literally drives the wolf wild. So great becomes his craving that the wolf never notices the sting of the sharp blade on his tongue as the blood being consumed gradually becomes his own. Morning finds the wolf lying dead in the snow. Temptation lures each of us just as the bloody knife attracts the unsuspecting wolf. We may warily respond at first, but we soon become consumed by the desire of the moment, never noticing the deadly sting of the sharp blade of “sin” as the blood consumed eventually becomes our own.”¹

Anyone who has ever walked alongside someone with an addiction knows that often they do not realize how much they are hurting themselves and those around them. People with severe addictions cannot see the hurting they cause; they can see only the temporary fix to their addictive problem by going to get more.

In our little town of Hagerstown, we have now all been affected by the Opioid Crisis. We all know someone who has allowed the simple temptation to ease physical pain go too far to the point of altering their life and in some cases ending their life. At a recent HARC meeting, that’s the Hagerstown Area Religious Council, I heard a chaplain in our town say that some

¹Larry E. Davies, "Turning points: A bloody knife and growing hair," sowseeds@hovac.com. retrieved from homileticsonline.com on 5/31/19.

communities across the country are giving up on responding to opioid overdoses with ambulances because they have become too common and reoccurring. For people like paramedics, it has become disheartening and completely frustrating to save an addicted person's life on an ambulance run only to have to save the same person when they are released from the hospital later that day and go right back to injecting an opioid.

Someone who finds themselves in such a crisis might wonder in a moment of clarity where it all began, how such addiction started. Some alcoholics prone genetically to alcoholism would say it started with a first sip. Addiction starts with the simplest of temptations. The 12-Step program that has assisted many people in breaking addiction to alcohol has also been morphed to help other addictions, but it begins with a powerful, truthful statement in step one—many of us know it as “admitting we have a problem”; but the full statement from alcohol.org is “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and that our lives had become unmanageable.” The hard-to-define line when a temptation crosses over to an addiction is when we lose power.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians, says that God “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 endure it.” There are two sides to this statement. The first is a reminder that God is with you through any temptation, which is an important reminder for someone who is struggling. But the other side of this statement comes down to how much can I bear. And why would God allow me to be pushed to the brink?

I believe the key here is that God believes in us sometimes more than we believe in ourselves. God, along the way, even every step of the way through addiction, will and does provide us outs and opportunities to change; and God believes the human spirit is strong enough to change. God believes that so much about us that God has built the entire system of salvation around the very fact that humans are strong enough to change, to repent, and to believe. God believes in us sometimes more than we believe in ourselves. Because the reality is, when we start into the habits of temptation or eventually addiction, we start to believe that there is no turning back. This becomes our new normal. This is what we have become. God doesn't buy that, but we do. We begin to believe that we've been tempted beyond what we can bear, and so we are lost and blinded to what God sees. For God sees just another child needing to admit he or she is powerless in and of themselves but that they are also most powerful when they allow God to work in their lives. God provides the way out.

Whether we see it or not, God sends us people and messages that could be our out if we would but listen. So, what are some of those outs that God is always sending us.

The first and simplest out is God's gift of conscience. You have a conscience. Paul claims in Romans 2:15 that everyone has a conscience, some semblance of law and ethics written on their hearts, —believers and nonbelievers alike. This is our first line of defense against temptations. We feel it in our hearts not to give in to peer pressure as the outcast at school is mocked. We are tempted but, at our core, we know it's wrong. We might be tempted to yell at the store manager for making a mistake, but we feel something in our core that says that would be wrong. The conscience is our first line of defense when we are tempted.

But often the conscience is co-opted by a variety of forces: emotions overpower the conscience, cultural norms manipulate our sense of what's right and wrong, and peer pressure is awfully strong. So, our second line of defense against temptation is one another, our brothers and sisters. We set out to look out for one another and we seek to be people that confide in each other. When you have a witness, fighting a temptation is easier. It's why Alcoholics Anonymous requires addicts to have a sponsor, someone who knows what it's like but wants the

best for you. It's why in the church we encourage prayer partners. So, if you have some temptation that has you bugged but your conscience is confused or blurred, talk to a brother or sister. Youth—find a trusted adult, a mentor, someone willing to pray with you.

Next, I want to talk about scripture's role in dealing with temptation. You might recall that when Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness after his baptism, Jesus responded to all of the devil's taunts with scripture. "You shall not live on bread alone." "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." Developing a regular habit of scripture reading can make you better prepared to understand why something is wrong and why your conscience is throwing up red flags. A Brother or Sister might be able to point you in the direction of scriptures that could help, and they may explore them with you. Scripture can be an excellent tool in dealing with temptations that are becoming more problematic.

Lastly, I must say that sometimes temptations become so problematic that addictive behaviors emerge. Binging alcohol is a problem. Binge eating is a problem. Consuming pornography is a problem. Routinely getting angry and displaying anger inappropriately or violently is a problem. Some of these issues require professional help. People hate the idea of professional help, but if you don't want to cross the temptation-addiction line, God might be sending you professional counselors, support groups, chaplains, and social workers to help you out. God might send you a professional because God believes in you always and God believes that together, you and God can overcome your deepest temptations.

Now, before you all leave feeling bad about yourselves, I need to reiterate what Paul said about temptations being natural to the human experience. He talks about even those ancient Hebrews giving in to temptation after witnessing God's mightiest miracles of parting the Red Sea and providing food from heaven. Being tempted is not a sign that you are unfaithful. Being tempted is a sign that you are human. Your faithfulness will be tested in how you respond to temptations. And so, I urge you to respond with God's help, because together with God and your church, no temptation need get the best of you. Amen.