

Confronting Temptation

Since the beginning, we as humans have been very good at making excuses.

For instance, when Adam and Eve disobey God, and take the fruit from the tree of knowledge, there is no accountability. Rather, Eve blames the serpent, and then Adam blames Eve.

We do this today as well. From “the dog ate my homework” to “it was his fault” and “she made me do it!” as kids, to as adults when we say things like “look at what you made me do” or blame our parents or spouses or coworkers for problems, one thing that can be tough to do for us all is to have some humble pie and say “I was wrong.”

Now to be sure, others can lead us into temptation (more on that in a moment), and some excuses can be valid and need to be confronted. A person who had a traumatic relationship with a family member, or who suffers emotional abuse, or has a very sensitive conscience or poor self-image, these are serious things. But it is also true that our shortcomings as humans are things we often don't like to think about.

Lent gives us a sacred time to really confront the things in our lives that are preventing us from being the kind of people we want to be. So a good question to ask as we begin this holy season is to think about how we can look at the sins we are prone to commit and reduce their presence in our lives.

As a starting point, we own up to them. When we go to confession, we ask for God's blessing, but we name the sins. It's our chance to say “yes God, I made a mistake, and here they are.” This should not fill us with any anxiety, but rather hope, knowing God is merciful. Adam and Eve's first instinct is to hide when God is in the garden, for they know they are naked and have sinned. And while there is a consequence, being expelled from the garden, ultimately there is also a response of mercy that we see in Jesus. You may have seen a painting or an icon of Jesus bringing Adam into heaven; I recently saw another beautiful image of Mary meeting Eve who is looking nervous while Mary smiles at her with loving affection. Such is our God; sin has a consequence, but the answer is also the mercy seen in the Cross. God loves us so much, so we need not fear talking to Him about what we battle (as if He doesn't know already!). So make a regular act of contrition, and seek out the sacrament of reconciliation as a regular part of your spirituality; it gives us the chance to name our struggles but to also hear those powerful words “your sins are forgiven, go in peace.”

Peace though is something we want to attain, because our souls are disordered; the battle with the devil and sin is life long. God is there to pick us up, but we also respond to that by trying to become better people. We learn from our mistakes. Confession, the Eucharist and the sacraments give us grace to go into spiritual battle.

This week we hear about the temptation of Jesus in the desert. So how can we strive for victory like our Lord?

As a starting point, we can look at what led us to sin in the first place. Much like a coach reviews the film after the game with the team to learn about what went right and what went wrong, we can do this with the sins we commit. Were we more tired or was there something going on in our life that caused us to do something we shouldn't have? Do some things happen more often at certain times of day, or when we are alone and no one is around? Are bad channels coming in on the cable box, or do we need to make sure the computer is off at certain times or kept in a public place in the house (the same thing with our phone?). Are there things we can't control like alcohol use that mean we have to make sure there's none around? Maybe we're procrastinating until the last minute which causes us to cheat on homework. Or maybe we need to work on fortitude and dealing with conflict that causes us to lie, or not speak up when we see someone making a bad moral decision. Perhaps social media causes you to become constantly angry and blow up at people online. Each sin happens in part because we allow it to happen, but we can learn from the past and take concrete steps to try to avoid them in the future. Some things need more control; other things need to be gone completely.

Second, do you surround yourself with good people? Sometimes people lead us to do things we shouldn't do. Most of us have friends all over the map in terms of how they lead their lives, and that's quite alright. (Indeed I'd say it's a good thing to have friends who maybe aren't as catechized or church-going as we'd like because it gives us an opportunity to evangelize). But sometimes there are people who just cause us to do bad things; they pressure us to watch things we shouldn't, cause us to gossip all the time, or take us away from important responsibilities to family, school or work. Make sure a friend is someone who respects you. We all get into trouble with our friends sometimes, it's a part of life. But there are also people who can take advantage of us, or just cause us to change as people into people we don't want to become. Remember friendship is about making one another better.

Third, can you ask for help? Years ago I saw a story on what I believe was "20/20" and it was on the topic of do men really have a hard time asking for directions, something that was more important in the days before GPS devices on our phones and cars. I believe they concluded it was in fact something many men struggle with. But all of us can have a hard time asking for directions to heaven. Just as Alcoholics Anonymous has people help one another stay sober, we need one another in our battles with sin. Finding a good friend who can give helpful spiritual advice can be a big help in the ongoing battle with our sins.

Fourth, develop an action plan in time of temptation. Sometimes when the temptations come, we can fight them by putting that plan into action. For instance, with sins of the flesh, it can help to busy oneself with other activities; when tempted to gossip, we can change the conversation; when tempted to be slothful or put things off, we can make a checklist and get things done before moving onto leisure activities; or if we feel ourselves losing our temper, maybe leave the room for a bit, take a deep breath, or go outside. Putting those plans into action can be really helpful in reducing sin in our lives.

Lastly through it all, talk to God. Bring your struggles to prayer. Think about them before receiving Communion and know God is journeying with you to give you strength. Don't beat yourself up if you fall back into old habits. Keep going to confession knowing God forgives seventy times seven and loves you so very much. And know that God is loving and patient, and will help us take those final steps towards sainthood no matter what it takes. Believe in yourself, for God believes in you.

Sometimes people ignore sin in their life and pretend it's no big deal. Other times people beat themselves up so much and struggle so much with shame. The healthy way is to acknowledge the reality of sin, but also the reality of God's love, and, working with Him, know that we are both forgiven, but can take the steps together towards ultimate liberation.

Have a very blessed Lenten Season!

Fr. Paul