The Struggle with Temptation

Odds are by now you have said the words “lead us not into temptation” more than once as part of the Lord’s Prayer. But sometimes that can be easier said than done. Because before us all the time are temptations to do things we shouldn’t do; things that maybe bring momentary pleasure, but ultimately don’t bring us closer to God and in some cases push us further away from Him.

Each year at the start of Lent, we reflect on Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert; this year’s Gospel from Mark is the shortest, and we don’t get the details about the specific temptations, which have often been looked at as symbolizing sensual pleasures, power, and ego. That said, no matter what category a temptation falls under, we all have them. So what do we do about it?

Sometimes, we can fall into the trap of justification. “It’s a secret, no one will ever know.” “Just this once.” “What’s the big deal?” We justify, we try to forget, we give in, and then we make believe that all’s well. Certainly we are forgiven if we are contrite, but we also want to truly try to avoid things that are bad for us. So, what are we to do?

As a starting point, remember that wonderful virtue called temperance. It regulates the appetites. There are many things we might be tempted to do that we can in fact do but just should not do to excess; drinking; eating rich foods; vacation and leisure time; hobbies; etc. Temperance helps us to make sure these things don’t get out of control. When we are temperate, we are reminded that we need to also work, serve our family, volunteer, help others, pray, etc. Temperance helps us with temptation by reminding us that we aren’t called to be expert golfers or video game players but saints.

Then there there are the things that are always just plain wrong; for these, we should ask “how can I get rid of this entirely from my life?” They can apply to all kinds of sins.

When looking at the question “what can I do to make this sin go away,” start with mercy. If you feel it is serious enough to go to confession, go. Bring it to God in prayer. Don’t hide from it. Be accountable. And it may be something you have a really hard time overcoming, or that crops up again and again. Don’t wallow in shame, but pick yourself back up and reach out for God’s mercy - because it is always there for us. God is love, and God loves you and me.

With that though we want to try to take steps to “avoid the near occasion of sin” as we say in the Act of Contrition.

Here, after a sin has occurred, look at what caused the temptations to increase. We you really tired or overworked or stressed out? Maybe you procrastinated on something which led you to cheat. Or the stress caused a sin of the flesh or imprudent use of alcohol. Maybe you are around people who are causing you to make bad choices. Sometimes certain situations or being in certain situations like the kid in the candy store can make combating the situation really difficult.

Another thing to do is to pray. Jesus prays in the desert. That connection Jesus has to His Father is in part what helps Him overcome the temptations. When we pray, we receive strength and grace. God knows what we are going through, so bring it to Him in prayer and ask for His help. You also might find a favorite saint had similar temptations that you did.

Also, do you talk to people whom you can trust? We talk about sports, the weather, what's on TV, but how about talking about deeper things? We can sometimes have a hard time with that. Don't be afraid to find a confidant, a good friend, or someone you can open up to. If you are married, that person is your spouse - remember they are there to help you. But married or single, it can help to have others who you can open up to. In confession, you can ask for advice too on a particular sin (or make an appointment with a priest for an individual confession for a longer conversation). But you might know someone who knows you inside out, who you can turn to for advice and counsel. Sometimes a person may have battled the same thing you have battled too - so seek these people out.

It's also a good idea to remember that fortitude can entail running away, quite literally. Maybe you are in an environment where the temptations are really getting to you. Think of the old Three Dog Night song "Mama Told Me Not to Come" about the man lamenting why he went to the crazy party his mom told him not to go to. Well sometimes you are in a situation and just leaving is the best option; going for a walk, to the gym, doing some work, and not being idle; these can sometimes make temptations go away.

You can also look around and see if there are things that cause temptation and make adjustments. If it's the computer, keep it in a public place so people will see you on it. If you spend too much at the casino, keep a limited amount of cash on hand when you go so you don't overspend. Or if it's alcohol, have a very limited supply on hand. If it's the TV just cancel certain cable channels if you know they have things on you don't need to be watching. By removing things from the environment, it can really help in the battle.

Lastly, don't give up! Remember, you will have setbacks; we all do. But remember, God's love is always there for us and He forgives seventy times seven.

Lent has been called the "springtime" for the Church, as it's a time of new growth. It really is a wonderful time of year because it helps us to grow closer to God and learn how to respond to the love that God gives us. Temptations won't ever go away, and we will fall many times, but with God's grace we can pick ourselves back up and learn how to respond better to the love that He gives us by choosing good and avoiding evil. The Cross reminds us how seriously God takes sin. Let's take it seriously too by looking to what Jesus did for us, and asking for His help to do what He did in overcoming the temptation of the Evil One. It's not an easy battle, but we are not in it alone, and together with God, we too can make the right choices and go from sinners to saints.

God bless,

Fr. Paul