

Have you ever craved something so badly you'd do anything to get it? What about a McDonald's cheeseburger? Listen to what an eight-year-old Ohio boy did: After his parents had gone to bed after a busy day, he had a sudden urge for a Mickey D's cheeseburger. So, what did he do? Naturally, he went on YouTube and learned how to drive. He then put his four-year-old sister in his dad's van and actually managed to drive safely through four intersections before getting to a McDonald's drive-through about 1.5 miles from the house. When they got there, employees actually thought it was prank, but eventually they had the good sense to call the police once it was clear the kids were alone. In the end, the boy did figure out what he'd done was wrong and had a few tears, but both he and his sister got what they came for: They ate their cheeseburgers while waiting for their grandparents to pick them up.

Of course, that story could have ended tragically. And the reality is that stories like that often do. These are stories not just about the innocent cravings of an eight-year-old boy, but about real temptation. What happens in a person's life to cause them to pursue something that might destroy them in the process? This isn't just a theoretical question about other people, it's a question about you and me. I can't tell you how many people I know who've mortgaged their family or their ministry to pay the high price of sin. Why would we do that? It's a question we all face. As a follower of Christ, temptation dogs your path and attempts to trip you up at every turn.

But maybe the real question isn't so much about temptation but about the one **behind** temptation. Christians have always believed that behind temptation is a tempter. The question we all must ask is, *How does the tempter do his work? How does he approach us?* In 2 Corinthians 2:11 the Apostle Paul, no stranger to temptation himself, said he didn't want Satan to outwit him, and he wasn't ignorant of his schemes. So it's imperative we understand his approach or he will outwit us.

Adam and Eve in the Garden

Today I'd like us to go back to the book of beginnings—Genesis. In Genesis 3 we see a case study in temptation. But before we look at that story, let me give you some background from Genesis 2. The Lord had formed Adam out of the dust of the ground. The Lord then planted a wonderful garden in Eden. He filled the garden with every type of tree, all of them *"pleasing to the eye and good for food"* (2:9). He gave Adam the task of

working and caring for the garden (2:15). He urged him to enjoy the bounty of the garden, to satisfy his appetites on all the Lord God had made. Later, the Lord even provided a perfect helper and a companion for him named Eve.

There was just one restriction: The Lord said to Adam, *"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die"* (2:16-17). God had created Adam and Eve with desires, and had provided everything necessary to satisfy those desires. But he also created a limitation. They weren't autonomous; they didn't get to decide what was right and wrong. They had everything they possibly could have needed or wanted, but they were to live within this boundary set by the Lord God. They had the freedom to obey or not. And for a long time they did obey. Chapter 2 closes with the man and woman in harmony with one another, with God and with all creation. Life was good. But then everything goes wrong in chapter 3!

When the Tempter Approaches, He Comes in Disguise

In verse 1 we're introduced to a new character:

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made."

The writer doesn't tell us who this serpent is other than to say he was a wild animal the Lord God had made. But it doesn't take much to figure out this particular serpent was the embodiment of evil. If we go to the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, we read of *"that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray"* (12:9). So there's no question who this serpent is; he is Satan; he is our adversary.

But what's interesting about Satan is when he approaches, he comes in disguise, much like a costume. When I was a kid my brother and I switched off every year between two Halloween costumes. One was of a heroic dog named Rin Tin Tin, who starred in a TV show. The other was of the devil. That costume consisted of a mask with horns, red tights and a pitchfork. It was creepy, for sure, but that was our choice—you can be a heroic German Shepherd or a creepy devil. But here Satan doesn't appear as creepy; he comes in disguise. You might not like snakes but they were part of God's good creation. In fact, the New Testament says, *"Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light"* (2 Cor. 11:14). That's why we're told immediately he was crafty. Other translations say he was cunning or shrewd. When Satan

approaches you he won't come as a coiled snake, or as a sinister being with horns, or even as a roaring lion. Instead, he'll slither into your life, quietly, unobtrusively, almost like he belongs.

He'll come disguised not only in his person, but in his purposes. We read next that,

"He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

Notice he doesn't say, "I am here to coax you to disobey your Creator. I'm here to bring you down." No! He just wants to engage in a religious discussion. He wants to talk theology. He wants to talk about God. Notice he calls him *God*, using the Hebrew word *Elohim*. That's the generic term for God. But earlier in this verse, and throughout this narrative, the writer refers to him as *the Lord God*. That's the Hebrew name *Yahweh*, which is his personal name used by those with whom he has a covenant relationship. But the serpent refuses to acknowledge him as the Lord God because he's not in that kind of relationship with him.

Notice also he doesn't come right out and contradict God, but rather he simply asks for clarification—Did God really say? It's like, let's evaluate this. He wants to hook Eve into a dialogue that opens her mind to a whole new realm of possibility. Remember it was Adam who communicated to Eve in the first place about not eating from that one tree. Perhaps the serpent is saying to her, "Are you sure you heard him right? Is this really what God said? How can you be sure?" When we start asking that question, "Did God really say...?" we start down a dangerous path. But the way the tempter approaches us, you'd never know it. He comes disguised in terms of his both his person and his purposes.

When the Tempter Approaches, He Distorts God's Word so We'll Doubt God's Goodness

He not only comes disguised, he also distorts God's word. Remember, God had clearly said, "*You are free to eat from any tree in the garden...*" But the serpent implies God was far more restrictive. Look what he says, "*Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree?'*" So now he's shifting Eve's focus from the abundant generosity of God to his one restriction. He's distorting God's word so she'll doubt God's goodness, "How could God possibly not let you eat from any of these wonderful trees? What kind of God is that? He makes all these wonderful things, but then he denies you the freedom to enjoy them."

But Eve is quick to jump to God's defense. Look at verses 2-3,

"The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

It's like she's defending God, "No, God said we **can** eat from all the trees in the garden, but that one tree, that tree in the middle, we can't eat from that, we can't even touch that." Wait a minute.

Is that what God had said? No. He didn't say anything about not touching the tree in the middle of the garden. She added that restriction herself. She's now become holier than God! She's ratcheted up the standards to go beyond what God really said.

Of course, religious people have been doing that ever since. We think we're doing God a favor. The speed limit says 65 mph, but I'll go 45 mph just to be safe. The reality is when you do that you're becoming more dangerous. God doesn't need any help with his laws. This was Jesus' primary beef with the Pharisees. They built a kind of hedge around God's law, adding 613 of their own laws to his laws so you couldn't even get close to breaking one of his laws. There's danger in that.

But look what Satan has done—he's succeeded in getting her to focus on that one single tree. Notice how she calls it, "that tree in the middle." Back in chapter 2 we read there were two trees in the middle—the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But now she's just focused on that **one** tree she can't eat from. It's also interesting that back in chapter two God had said, "You are **free** to eat from any tree..." but notice how she quotes God as just saying, "You **may** eat..." Satan loves to shift our focus from all that we're **free** to enjoy to that one thing we can't have. And that thing, whatever it is, becomes our focus, in fact it becomes an obsession. You'll do anything to get it. I've seen people turn their backs on all the blessings God has poured into their lives to get that one thing, even if they have to sin to get it.

Now that he's got her to focus on that one thing, he moves in for the kill. Remember that God had warned of what would happen if they ate from that tree, "*You will certainly die.*" But Satan twists that just a bit and sneers in verse 4,

"You will not certainly die."

He doesn't deny death is a possibility, just that it's not a certainty. It's like there's not anything you have to immediately worry about. Sometimes we who say we believe the whole Bible believe it until we face that one thing we want but can't have. So we begin to rationalize. We find a loophole. "He can't really mean that. You will not certainly die."

We read something like this, "*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life*" (Gal. 6:7-8). Does God really mean that? Are there really massive consequences for my choices?

The adversary will do all he can to distort the truth of God's word so you'll doubt God's goodness. He goes on in verse 5,

"You will not certainly die. For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

He's saying, "Look, the benefits of this fruit will far outweigh the possible cost. Your eyes will be opened. You'll be like God; how could that be a bad thing? And you'll no longer need someone to tell you what's right and wrong. You'll be able to define that for yourself. You'll know good and evil."

What he's promising here is autonomy, what we sometimes call freedom. It's a lie the world tries to sell us every day. "No one has the right to tell you how to live your life. You should do what's right for you." That's why Frank Sinatra's old song *I Did It My Way* is still the song of choice at so many funerals. What kind of God would withhold from you that kind of freedom, that kind of knowledge?

But is a parent not good because he sets limits and boundaries on what a child can and cannot do? Is a child not in the greatest danger when he or she decides to move beyond those boundaries and limits? Maybe God takes sin seriously because he's serious about you, because he loves you, because he knows the devastation sin can bring in your life.

So when we move beyond his limits, thinking we know what's best for us, we do so to our own peril. Charles Colson wrote, "Americans have achieved what modernism has presented as life's great shining purpose: individual autonomy, the right to do what one chooses. Yet this has not produced the promised freedom; instead it has led to the loss of community and civility, to kids shooting kids in schoolyards, to citizens huddling in gated communities for protection. We have discovered that we cannot live with the chaos that inevitably results from choice divorced from morality."

You see, it is because God is good that he sets these boundaries and limits upon us. What kind of father would not warn his son or daughter about playing with fire? In his goodness and love, God places moral boundaries around us and created us to thrive within them.

When the Tempter Approaches, His Goal is for Us to Assert Our Independence from God

But Adam and Eve bought the lie. The writer says in verse 6,

"When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it."

Eve made a three-fold evaluation of the fruit. She was actually right about all of it: it **was** good for food, it **was** pleasing to the eye, and in a way it **was** desirable for gaining wisdom. Back in Genesis 2 we're told all the trees in the garden were pleasing to the eye and good for food. I imagine that included the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And wisdom, ultimately, is a good thing. She was drawn to these things, like the moon pulls in

the tide. The Bible calls this lust—desire twisted in towards self. It's funny how lust works. You can lust after good things; things God created. Sin is often trying to meet a legitimate need in an illegitimate way. The New Testament talks about the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Here we see all three at work: the lust of the flesh; it was good for food. The lust of the eyes; it was pleasing to the eye. And the pride of life; it was desirable for gaining wisdom.

Even though that tree possessed those qualities, God said not to eat from it. But she ignored that and, in essence, set herself up as in charge of her own life. This is the heart of sin: deciding what's right in our own eyes. Every sin since that first sin has been but a variation on that theme.

You might have wondered where Adam was through all of this. Well, he was right there with Eve the whole time! Instead of providing protection and leadership for Eve, he passively abdicated. "Okie-dokie, Honey, whatever you say." Perhaps his original sin wasn't eating the fruit, but it was not putting up a fight. God had given him the right to rule over all the creatures in the garden. He could have just thrown the serpent out. So he was every bit as guilty, if not more, than she was.

Finally, we see the consequences of their choice in verse 7,

"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves."

And that's the end of the story, or maybe I should say the beginning of another story.

The serpent, having accomplished his task, disappears from the scene. He didn't really care about Adam and Eve, and he doesn't care about you either. Jesus called him a murderer. And in this story we see that, but even before that, we see that he's a deceiver. How does the tempter tempt us? He comes in disguise, distorting God's word so we'll doubt God's goodness and assert our independence from him.

So what do you do? How do you respond to this truth about the tempter? First of all, you need to be alert; you need to be on the lookout for him. C.S. Lewis famously said we can fall into one of two errors about Satan: either we take him too seriously or we don't take him seriously enough. I think most of us fall into the later category. Make no mistake, the tempter is real and he has a strategy to bring you down. He really doesn't care about you; he just cares about you in relation to Jesus Christ and his kingdom. Are you aware of what his strategy is to accomplish that? Be alert.

Second, don't go into this fight empty-handed. You must arm yourself with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, each time he

responded, "It is written...it is written...it is written." You need to have more than a general acquaintance with God's word; you need to study it like you would a map to buried treasure. You need to memorize chunks of it so you can pull it out and plunge it deep into the tempter's heart when he comes knocking at your door spewing his half-truths.

Third, you need to know your triggers. For most of us, we get into trouble when we're tired, stressed, lonely or bored. Before he committed adultery with Bathsheba, King David was bored, playing Call of Duty in front of the TV set instead doing his duty as commander-in-chief. The enemy loves to capitalize on what I'd call our unmet needs. Do you have a perceived need that's not getting met? That's the target the enemy will aim at. Again, he'll try to convince you that a good God would never withhold something from you that's a legitimate need. Why? So you'll go after it yourself, even if it means moving beyond the boundaries he's created.

Fourth, you need to know that victory is possible. You know the verse: ***"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. 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" (1 Cor. 10:13). How is that victory won? We need to know when to flee and when to stand. When it comes to temptation, we're told to flee. Run! Get out of there! When it comes to the tempter, we're told to stand. Resist him. Defy him. See through him and stay aware of his strategy: He comes in disguise, distorting God's word so you'll doubt God's goodness and assert your independence from him.

One more thing: learn to keep short accounts. What that means is run to the cross whenever you fall. When we sin, the Spirit of God will convict our heart so that we will run to the cross, confess our sin, and see it under the blood of Christ. In the book of Revelation, Satan is described as one who accuses us day and night, but it says we will triumph over him ***"by the blood of the lamb, the word of our testimony, and that we died not loving our lives so much as to shrink from death"*** (Rev. 12:10-11).

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.