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Week 5 – Supplementary Resources

'YOU AND ME' Jon Buck

bronze edition of 5
215 cm high

The Psychology of Temptation

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The Bible begins with the mother of all temptation, the one that caused enduring grief, the story of Adam and Eve.

It's a marvelous story because it is so rich, not only theologically, but psychologically. John Mc Kenzie calls it "a masterful description of the psychology of temptation." (Bible Dictionary, "Temptation" p. 878) For the very first temptation of woman and man was one that aimed at the deepest drives of the human person.

What are these drives? Andras Angyal, a Danish psychiatrist who practiced in Boston in the mid-century, saw the human person in terms of two drives to which he gave the rather fancy names of autonomy and homonomy, but which I will call mastery and merger.

Mastery (or autonomy) is our drive to be independent, to be in charge of our life, master of our fate, our drive to self-expansion, assertiveness, to do our own thing. It is the drive to achievement, to accomplishment, the need to have an impact on one's world. It is reflected in the joy of achievement, whether it be the infant elated by crawling across a room under her own power, or the mountain climber scaling Everest "because it's there." It is the drive to action, "to do it myself", the urge to develop one's unique potential.

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SCULPTOR JON BUCK on

'YOU AND ME'

"From the very earliest time in our lives we are programmed to relate specifically to the faces of others around us. Perhaps in art this accounts for the fact that we feel less uncomfortable with images of the disembodied head than we do with other dismembered parts of the body.

In fact, the isolated head has been revered in many cultures and periods throughout human history and has often been a visual conduit through which societies engaged with some kind of spiritual dimension.

Comprising of two heads pared down to a generic minimum, my sculpture recognises this tradition but rather than the comfort of some form of otherness it depicts our reliance on each other - 'You and Me'. These two heads could represent any of us caught in the endless embrace of life."



“We seek partnership as well as individuality”

But, as God observed of Adam, it is not good for a man to be taken up with himself, not good for man to be alone. And the reason is that we have another drive, the drive to merger. We seek partnership as well as individuality. We seek to be part of something greater than our selves - a friendship, a family, a community, a common cause. We seek not only to develop ourselves but to invest ourselves, not only to possess but to share and to belong. We want to be individual but not separate.

Back to Adam and Eve. Adam seemingly had it made in Eden. God gave him dominion over creation. He was in charge of the whole world. He named the animals. He had all he required to make him masterful. Yet he was miserable because his other basic drive, basic need, had no outlet. And that is the drive to merger, to belong, to relationship, to community.

As noted, God saw it was not good to be alone and so declared, “I will make a suitable partner,” and then he created Eve. Adam was exultant. His recorded words were the first poetic remark in history, Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.

His unrecorded remark was, “Good God, this is a sight for sore eyes!” Now he really did have it made, as did his spouse, Eve.

Enter Satan, left of stage. Satan had fallen from grace because he could not tolerate God’s favor to this new creature, man. So he studied Adam and Eve to see what made them tick, and came to the same conclusion as Andras Angyal would a few millennia later.

Armed with insight, he planned his strategy in view of those basic human drives.

‘to be as gods...’

First he approached Eve. Satan proposed a notion that would fit snugly with the drive to mastery, to independence, to be in charge. He promised that if she and Adam would eat of the tree of knowledge that they would be like gods, knowing good and evil. Now what could be more masterful, more in charge, more independent than that? What could be better?

Today this proposal is still the mother of temptations, to be as gods, to decide for oneself what is right and wrong. It is still the basic temptation in the world today, the temptation to reject God’s norms of right and wrong, norms implanted in human nature and in creation, the temptation to reject divine authority, either direct, or mediated through the magisterial church, and become like gods ourselves.

Satan was successful with Eve. The interaction between the serpent and Eve illustrates the ordinary sequence in temptation. **Step # 1 is resistance.** Eve told the serpent, God said, You shall not eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, you shall not even touch it, lest you die. Next, **step # 2: hesitation.** The serpent went on with his guile. You certainly will not die. God knows well that at the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like Gods who know what is good and what is bad. Hesitation is our first, and usually last mistake. (3:2)

Step # 3 Weakening. The woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for gaining wisdom. (3:6)



And finally, **step # 4: surrender**. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. (*Genesis 3:6*)

Resistance, hesitation, weakening, surrender. I would submit that whereas Eve was persuaded by her need to be independent, masterful, Adam was sucked into the same temptation by the drive to merger, or as we commonly call it today, social pressure. Eve was the first Lady Macbeth. She wanted power, prestige. Adam didn't seem very keen on pursuing prestige, but he didn't want to rock the boat. It is not good for man to be alone; and the threat of being alone is very scary, especially when the person or persons pressuring us are important to us, loved by us. We may think we know how hard it is to resist social pressure, the fear of not belonging, but without doubt we underestimate its power. Try saying grace before lunch at a public restaurant and you probably will feel that pressure, because while we all want to be independent, yes, we also want to belong, to be part of a wider society. So it is very hard to go against social custom, or 'the group'.

Adam and Eve were a twosome, but group dynamics were operative. "We stick together" is a presumed slogan of any bonded group, and disagreement within the group is easily seen as disruptive of relationship. . It takes a great deal of intestinal fortitude (guts) to go against a popular proposal when one senses opposition will be unpopular.

The first temptation was not openly to disobey God. That would be too crass, though accurate. The devil always sugar-coats prospective sin as something good. To know good and evil, to gain greater wisdom, would surely seem to be a good. Temptation

to some prospective action always promises a measure of autonomy, achievement, relationship, love; some aspect of one or both basic drives of human nature. When we fear that one of our basic needs will not be met we experience an upsurge of temptation.

Scripture often casts the devil as a principal agent of temptation. Today it is not fashionable to speak of the devil, much less to believe in him. Screwtape, C. S. Lewis' letter-writing devil, makes a big point of how advantageous it is for the lowerarchy of devils to be considered a pious myth.

Still, we can't blame the devil for all temptation. Neither can we blame God. St James makes much of the accusation that God tempts us:

"Surely God who is beyond the grasp of evil tempts no one." (*James 1:13*).

Some pious writers suggest that we ask ourselves in face of temptation, "**What would Christ do?**" Perhaps an even clearer discernment results from the question, "What would Satan do?" We still like to harbor the notion that God is somehow responsible for some temptations. Our unspoken delusional projection is that my responsibility for giving in to temptation is reduced if God is behind it. Adam, when he was caught red handed with that apple responded to God that "The woman whom you put here with me — she gave me the fruit from the tree and I ate it". Adam was using a double whammy.....blaming Eve and God for the temptation. By pointing to God's involvement and Eve's pressure Adam fooled himself that his part in this fiasco is minor.



We are very adept at blaming others for our failures. Billy Joe Shaver's song, Black Rose, has a somewhat more honest approach:

***"The devil made me do it the first time.
The second time I did it on my own."***

God does not tempt us but he does test us. He told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac to test Abraham's trust. The book of Wisdom tells us that God tries the souls of the just as gold is refined in the furnace. (3:5). Temptation, says Wayne Oates, is the crucible of human character formation. "The internal forum is the arena of temptation, where behavior is debated, scrutinized, and assessed before God in the same way Jesus wrestled with temptation in the wilderness."

So, when our basic drives for independence and belonging, our basic drives to mastery and to merger, are not met or come into conflict with one another, we become more vulnerable to temptation. When our fundamental needs are met in healthy fashion we have a sense of well-being, of contentment, of security, of calm strength for handling temptations against our basic values. But when these basic needs are not met we become more vulnerable to sedating the pain with sex, alcohol, drugs, gambling, or cynicism which Jacques Barzun calls the alcoholism of the intellectual. Add to this list the addiction that looks virtuous, namely, work, and one that looks harmless, investing oneself in trivia, which leads to stagnation.

"The hardest task in psychological or spiritual life is to be honest with oneself"

The hardest task in psychological or spiritual life is to be honest with oneself. We are all adept at kidding ourselves with denial, rationalization and projection. Theology and

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psychology intersect in our internal lives when pride prevents us from being honest with ourselves. The sickness of Judeo-Christian culture is "the person alienated from himself."

It may surprise you to know that this quotation comes from Sigmund Freud. On the other hand, the Danish thinker and commentator Soren Kierkegaard said, "Through the unspeakable grace and help of God I have become myself." Thomas Merton, reminding us that we are truly made in the image and likeness of God, proposes, "In finding our true self we are more likely to find God."

We have scanned the psychological dynamics of some commonplace temptations. Now we turn to the temptations of Jesus which may look gross but really are very subtle.

The temptations of Jesus

The temptations of Jesus represent the only autobiographical section in the gospels. We know about all the other great and critical events in the life of Jesus from witnesses. The glory of the Transfiguration and the wrenching turmoil of Gethsemani come to us through persons on the scene. The temptation story comes to us directly from Jesus. There were no witnesses. It appears that he especially wanted the disciples and us to know about this personal experience.

What did Jesus wish to convey by telling these episodes? He wanted to underscore how he shared our human identity in all things but sin, in all things including temptation.

The story of Jesus' temptations warns us that the devil is not a myth. The first temptation,



you recall, followed Jesus' forty day fast. He was hungry. Satan prompted: "If you are the Son of God command these stones to turn into bread." (Mt. 4:3) Jesus was at the beginning of his public life. He had made this forty day retreat to hit the ground running, so to speak, fortifying his commitment to the father's will.

So too with us; we begin to seek the kingdom of God with enthusiasm and single mindedness. However, fervor cools and we are tempted to cut corners. We wonder about doing something more practical, more humanly satisfying. We reduce some prayer or spiritual practice, and invest our efforts into something more satisfying, more productive, all of which represents "making bread". Note that the temptation was not to do something bad, but to do something apparently more useful. So too, when our first enthusiasm for a deeper spiritual life wanes, we look to other undertakings which offer more personal and immediate fulfillment.

"We all have our particular temptation to turn stones into bread"

We all have our particular and peculiar temptation to turn stones into bread. When we find ourselves changing course, cutting into our prayer life we need to take counsel. Are we seeking our own will, our own fulfillment? "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete His work." (John 4:34)

The second temptation occurred when he devil took Jesus to the parapet of the Temple and proposed: "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down for Scripture has it, He will bid His angels take care of you, and they will support you with their hands that you may never stumble on a stone." (Mt 4:64). Taking

this temptation literally, we judge that we haven't even a remote prospect of this sort of experience. Yet we do have moments when we expect God to supply some spectacular help, and want to assert our own personality rather than seek the will of the Father.

Anyone who gets serious about their spiritual life has some variety of this temptation. God may draw the beginner with inner consolation, and later, when He moves an individual to spiritual growth which requires one to give without counting the cost, we may want that inner glow of consolation continued. We have our moments wishing for a vision or two. It's a temptation that recurs in spiritual life, when, after plodding along for a while, we want some signal that we are getting somewhere. It springs from the drive to mastery, from the false premise that what we accomplish is what counts, rather than from staying steadily on course. We ignore the words of St Paul, 'This is your sanctification, the will of God.' (I Thess. 4:3)

Mother Teresa recognized the temptation when she said,

"God has not called me to be successful; he called me to be faithful"

We test God by asking for a special sign over and above the ordinary clues of providence in our lives. The spiritual program we began with commitment loses its glamor and our enthusiasm fades into routine. The old question arises: "Is this all there is?" Thus comes the temptation to pressure God, like Zachariah who asked, "How can I be sure of this?" (Lk 1:18) We bring upon ourselves the temptation to seek signs.



It is not that God will not give us a sign. But he gives the sign of his choice. The second subtle temptation is to require God to give a stamp of approval, preferably spectacular approval, to force a sign from him.

The third temptation makes the devil look rather preposterous. He took Jesus to a great height (Luke), a high mountain (Matthew) and showed him the kingdoms of the world. "I will give you all these," he said, "If you prostrate yourself in homage before me." (Mt 4: 9)

Satan seems to be so exasperated and disorganized by Jesus rejection' of the first two temptations that he now seems to have lost his composure and is making a fool of himself. But we should give the devil his due. Having failed twice he actually was using his best strategy.

The first temptation was to do something harmless, to make bread. It was the temptation of too much self-reliance. The second temptation (in Matthew's sequence) is seeking a sign, expecting God to do something special, telling him to do it my way.

The temptation of the short cut

The third temptation is the temptation of the short cut. Satan approached Jesus by taking aim at His chief concern, the establishment of the kingdom. He does the same with us. He takes aim at what should be our chief concern, our spiritual life, the establishment of the kingdom of God within. The third temptation is the spiritual life version of a get-rich-quick scheme.

In spiritual life as well as in work and family life we want to bypass the boredom of fidelity, the tedium and routine of repeated everyday cycles. There are get-holy-quick schemes too, the temptation of the short cut. We endow perfectly good practices with the promise and power of sudden advance in spiritual life.

Jesus said "My grace is sufficient for you. Power is made perfect in infirmity." (II Cor. 12:9) And, "Take up your cross daily and follow me." Which probably means, get holy slowly.

St James gives us a note of cheer about temptations. "Count it a pure joy when you are involved in every sort of trial. Realize that when your faith is tested it makes for endurance". (James 1:2). In brief, temptation is an invitation to sin, yes, but it also is an invitation to growth, to virtue.

Abridged from a presentation by Fr. Jeffrey Keefe, O.F.M.Conv. Ph.D., S.T.L. at the 2002 Courage Conference in San Diego, CA.

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