

Tried and True

Luke 4:1-13

1st Sunday in Lent

21st February 2010

As I watched Tiger Woods make his statement of apology on Friday, I found myself reflecting on the large number of other celebrities who have gone down the same road in past years. Well-known people who have fallen prey to temptation in a big way. The list seems endless. Former President Bill Clinton. Sprinter, Ben Johnson. Football player, Michael Vick. Tennis player, Andre Agassi. Former presidential candidate, John Edwards. Basketball player, Kobe Bryant. South Carolina Governor, Mark Sanford. TTC chair, Adam Giambroni. And so many more. People who thought they were above discovery and beyond accountability. Oh, how are the mighty fallen!

A new book entitled *Star* by Peter Biskind,¹ tells how actor Warren Beatty, brought up a devout Baptist in Richmond, Virginia, came to be a high performer off-screen as well as on-screen. Where women were concerned, Biskind says, Beatty, never met a temptation to which he couldn't succumb. In fact, it is estimated that he had relationships with nigh on 12,775 women, including some of the most celebrated actresses of his time such as Julie Christie, Leslie Caron, Natalie Wood, Joan Collins and Diane Keaton. One writer suggests that comparing Tiger Woods to Beatty is like comparing an elementary school pupil to a Ph.D. graduate!

Why, I wonder, do so many famous people, gifted people, privileged people, do these kind of things? Is it because they live more high profile lives and so are more likely to be found out? Or are there other reasons. In his statement, Tiger Woods said, "I knew my actions were wrong. But I convinced myself that normal rules didn't apply ... I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me. Thanks to money and fame, I didn't have to go far to find them."²

"I didn't have to go far to find temptation." Isn't that the case with so many rich and famous people? They don't have far to go to find temptation. Their celebrity lifestyle readily takes them to high-risk places such as bars, clubs and casinos, where enticements abound in a myriad forms such as gambling, available sexual partners, alcohol, drugs to name a few.

But, where celebrities are concerned, it's not really that temptation is something they need to go out and find – even though they don't have to go too far to find it. Where celebrities are involved, because of their gifts, their position, their power and influence, temptation comes to find them. Temptation comes looking for them. Temptation comes knocking on the door because they are so much more vulnerable than others.

Now, Jesus of Nazareth was no celebrity in the modern sense of the word. But because of his high moral standards, because of his spiritual stature, because he was God's son, and because he was so vulnerable – having so much to lose and so far to fall – he similarly did not have to go and look for temptation. Temptation came looking for him. It came knocking on his door very early on his public ministry. And it did not waste time nibbling round the edges of his life, trying to sneak in undetected. On the contrary, it engaged him head-on in one of the greatest battles of his life. It was a battle of the spirit. A battle of principalities and powers. A battle of good against evil.³

This battle did not take place, of course, against the glamorous backdrop of places such as Malibu, or Hollywood, or Lake Windermere, or Pebble Beach or Las Vegas. No, this battle took place in a bleak and desolate wilderness area of Judea. New Testament writer, William Barclay, says the place was called Jeshimon meaning "The Devastation". "The hills were like dust heaps," he says, "the limestone looked blistered and peeling; the rocks were bare and jagged; the ground sounded hollow to horses' hooves; it glowed with heat like a vast furnace and it ran out to precipices 1,000 ft. high, which swooped down to the Dead Sea. It was there in that awesome devastation that Jesus was tempted."⁴

The interesting aspect of Jesus' battle against the tempting forces of evil is that, unlike so many celebrities and sports stars, Jesus was victorious in his battle. Which means that people have a lot to learn from him in terms of dealing with temptation and should ask such questions as: How did this man fight this 40 day war of spiritual attrition? What was his strategy when faced with the irresistibly enticing prospect of material wealth, unfettered power and

unlimited possibilities for self-advancement?

Well, certainly, he relied heavily on his inbred code of morality, acting like a compass to keep him on the right path and away from temptation's grasp. He depended greatly on the inner values imbibed at his mother's knee. But he also gained much strength from the religious foundations of his life branded deep into his psyche by long childhood years spent in the synagogue. The words of scripture, learned by heart, sprang automatically to his mind and to his defence. "No person lives by bread alone," he said to the first temptation. "Do not put the Lord to the test," to the second. And to the third, "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him."⁵ Such great words of faith as these steeled his soul to resist in the face of such a seemingly overwhelming onslaught.

Of course, temptation is not just something that just afflicted people like Jesus in a by-gone era or confronts celebrities in our own times. It is also very much a challenge we ordinary people are up against every moment in the battlefield of our lives day-by-day. And the temptations that we all face are both unexpected as well as familiar.

In their 2010 annual report on temptation, the Toronto-based Harlequin company says that, surprisingly, 75% of Canadians admitted that books were the one alluring item they could not resist. They would sacrifice shopping sprees, vacations, movies and dining out to buy their favourite books. 78% of Ontario women said that their biggest temptation was to snoop through their significant other's personal belongings, well above the national average of 66%. While Ontario men are most tempted by sex, women are more tempted by food. In the snooping category, 53% of men compared to 47% of women revealed that they had peeked at their co-workers' paycheques, while, when it comes to the temptation to vindictiveness, 36% of women compared with 24% of men said they would reveal a boss's mistake to their superior.⁶

Well, whether this is really a scientific report or not, it remains that we ordinary people, though not open to the greater temptations of the rich and famous, still we have to face temptations to such things as drink and drugs, to lust and infidelity, to selfish and avaricious behaviour, to self-seeking and acquisitiveness – and we need help. Like Jesus, we need, of course, to be able to rely on a strong moral fibre and a solid foundation of spiritual values. They are great weapons against a powerful foe. But we

need other means also to win the fight.

We need, for instance, the power of recognition if we are going to overcome temptation's awesome power. We need to recognise the insidious nature of temptation because, of course, it hardly ever comes to us with a big sign around its neck saying, "I am a nasty bit of work – shun me like the plague." On the contrary, temptation almost always comes in disguise, lulling us into a false sense of security by its seeming innocence. It always tries to insinuate itself into our minds and hearts by means of its sweet reasonableness.

As Richard Watson Gilder says in his poem "Temptation"⁷

*Not alone in pain and gloom,
Does the abhorred tempter come;
Not in light alone and pleasure
Proffers he the poisoned measure,
When the soul doth rise
Nearest to its native skies,
There the exalted spirit finds
Borne upon the heavenly winds
Satan in an angel's guise,
With voice divine and innocent eyes.*

Not only do we need to recognise the insidiousness of temptation, we need also to realise the power of avoidance in the fight against temptation. Jesus, with all the spiritual power available to him, was able to stand up against these insidious forces and take them on in a full frontal type of assault. But for us, today, often the best policy is to avoid those things that have a terrible hold over us. The alcoholic, for instance, recognises that she or he has a drinking problem and so avoids having liquor in the house or avoids situations where they might feel pressured to imbibe. In this way, they are able to win the battle against that temptation by just not giving it a toehold.

In one of the Andy Capp cartoons, Andy slips out of the house in the dark and heads down to the neighbourhood pub where he sees a beautiful woman. Remembering his wife at home, he says, "Oh ... Flo," and then makes to walk away. In the next frame, he looks back to the gorgeous woman and says, "You mustn't tempt me, Miss, I'm a married man." Then he turns to the bartender to back him up, "Right Jack? I'm a married man?" he asks. "Right, Andy," the bartender agrees. As Andy starts to walk out of the pub, he turns back to the bartender and whispers, "Tell that beautiful woman I'll be in the Rose and Crown tomorrow night, Jack." In the concluding frame, the bartender muses, "That fellow

might be able to walk away from temptation, but when he does he always likes to leave a forwarding address.”⁸

No, unlike Andy Capp, we mustn't leave a forwarding address and use avoidance as one of the best methods of combating temptation. Avoidance? Even children recognise its importance.

Once there was a small boy who wanted a pair of skates. His parents, hoping to teach him the value of money, informed him that he would have to save the required amount from his allowance. His mother overheard him in his room one afternoon shaking his bank and counting his money. Then she heard the bell on the ice cream wagon ringing loudly in the street outside. Mom waited to see what would happen. The boy wanted the skates, but he also liked ice cream. There was no sound from the room until the vehicle had gone, and the bell could no longer be heard. Then a childish voice was heard in prayer. “Dear Jesus, please don't let the ice cream wagon come down my street anymore.”⁹

In our contemporary fight against the temptations that bedevil us, let us then do two things: Recognise temptation for what it is and refuse to allow it a toehold in our lives.

But, much more than these. As we struggle daily against the myriad of modern temptations that evil visits upon us, let us call to our aid the very power of Christ himself. The power of him who has already won the battle over temptation because of his desert war and sacrifice on the cross. Through the power of the Victor – made available to all who believe in him and call upon his name – we can be victors too.

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St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Peter Biskind, *Star*, Simon & Schuster, January 2010

² Tiger Woods, Full Statement, CNN.com 19 February 2010

³ Luke 4:1-13

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1953, p. 38 ff.

⁵ Luke 4: 4;8;12

⁶ “It's human nature to give in to temptation”, The Daily Observer, Ottawa, 13 February 2010

⁷ Richard Watson Gilder, “Temptation”, The Poems of Richard Watson Gilder, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1908, p. 174

⁸ Reginald Smythe, *The Andy Capp Collection: No. 1 and The Andy Capp Collection: 2005*, © The Daily Mirror and Creators Syndicate

⁹ “Temptation”, Collected Sermons, David E. Leininger, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2005 www.leSermons.com