

How Can I Resist?

A sermon based Hebrews 4:14-16

Have you ever tried to go on a diet to lose a few pounds? Most of us aren't people who can eat whatever we want and not gain a pound. If you've tried to diet, then you know it can be tough! It can be an exercise in will power. You know how it goes. You're exercising, watching what you eat, and off to a great start. But then a co-worker brings in donuts... and they're Krispy Kreme. Or your mom bakes your favorite brownies. Or a hurting friend wants to talk and brings over two pints of ice cream--one for each of you. How can you resist?

It's hard to resist temptation, isn't it? And I don't mean just in your diet. Today, as we discuss the 6th petition of the Lord's Prayer we talk about temptations that have consequences far more serious than keeping those love handles. We're talking about our temptations to sin--to rebel against God and against his will. We know it's wrong. We don't want to do it. But... how can we resist?

The 1st century Jewish Christians were going through tough times. A fierce and bloody persecution broke out against them tempting them to desert--to deny Christ. Just go back to the old way with its rituals and rites, with its priests and sacrifices, and they'd be left alone. No more running. No more prison. No more torture. No more death.

How could they resist that temptation? The author of the book of Hebrews tells them in Hebrews 4:14-16. He told them they could resist temptation with the help of their great high priest. He tells us how we, too, can resist temptation.

It's been said that the only time losing is more fun than winning is when you're fighting temptation. And it's been said that those who flee temptation generally leave a forwarding address. A man who was a more than a few pounds overweight decided it was time to take his diet seriously. He even changed his driving route to avoid his favorite bakery. But one morning he showed up to work with half a box of donuts and crumbs all over his shirt. "It's okay," he told his co-workers, "God wants me to have them. You see, I prayed to him and said, "God, if you want me to have some delicious donuts, give me a sign: let there be an empty parking spot right up front. And, sure enough, there it was... and only the 8th time I circled the block!"

Isn't that how we all are though? We pray, "God help me resist temptation," but keep circling the block? We ask God, "Help me be more faithful in my worship attendance," but stay up late Saturday night. We pray, "God help me with this sin I'm struggling with," but we keep toe-ing the line to see how close we can get without falling over..

We're like the little boy whose father clearly told him, "Come right home after school today. Do not go swimming in the creek. Come straight home." But sure enough when he finally go home dripping wet, his father asked him, "Didn't I tell you not to go swimming? Why did you?" "Well, sir. I had my swim suit along and just couldn't resist the temptation." "Why did you take your swim suit to school?" And the little boy replied, "I wanted to be prepared, just in case I was tempted."

Is that you? No? Then maybe you're not being honest with yourself. C.S. Lewis once said, "No man knows how bad he is until he's tried very hard to be good... Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is." Or think of it this way, only those who try to swim against the current know how strong the current really is. If you don't struggle with temptation, maybe it's because you're just going with the flow.

And if you think temptation's not that big of a deal, think again. Children who grow up with teddy bears sometimes think that real bears are cute and cuddly too. But in 1990 two boys scaled the fence at the Bronx Zoo in New York City into the polar bear compound. The next day they were found dead. Your pet sins that seem so cute and cuddly and harmless are deadly to your faith.

So, how can we resist those temptations? Try harder? Dig in and get more will power? How can we resist?

Does it really matter? We've already given in to them! And it only takes one sin to make us less than perfect, unacceptable to God and deserving of death--not by a polar bear, but eternal death in hell.

So, what can we do about it? Nothing. But there is one who can. Our great high priest.

Do you know the duties of a high priest? They had several. They were to pray to God on the people's behalf. They were to instruct the people on God's behalf. In this way they would serve as mediators. But their role of go-between between the people and God involved more than just communication. It involved a lot of sacrifice. The priests would slaughter countless animals each day to show that sin must be paid for with a life. But the 1st century Jewish Christians didn't need that old priesthood they were tempted to turn back to anymore. That priesthood was only meant to point ahead to Jesus--the great high priest.

How did Jesus serve? He too prayed to God and he taught the people. But that wasn't his primary role. Jesus came to make a sacrifice. And it had to be a perfect sacrifice. If Jesus had sinned--even once!--then his sacrifice on the cross could not have paid for our sin. But he didn't sin--not even once!

"We have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."

Fully human in every way, tempted just as we are in every way, but he never gave in! He was a red-blooded male with natural male desires, but he never lusted. He grew tired, but was never lazy! He was frustrated, but never used words to hurt! He was very busy, but always made worship a top priority. He knows what it's like to be tempted. But he never gave in.

And yet, he died. He went to hell on the cross. Why for us? The author to the Hebrews said that Jesus can sympathize with us. Literally sympathize means to suffer with someone. But Jesus does more than suffer with us when we're tempted. He suffered for us to pay for the times we've caved and given in to temptation. And by the sacrifice of our great high priest, he took our sin away and gave his perfect score of resisting every temptation to us. Our sins are forgiven! And the proof is in the resurrection. He didn't stay dead, but "[he] has gone through the heavens!" What a great high priest we have!

And now, we long not to indulge the sinful nature and give in to every temptation, but to fight it all the harder. We long to do what our Jesus wants no matter how hard it might be. Because we have to thank him for what he's done! But how can we resist? Our hearts are in the right place--longing to thank him for our sacrifice--but still... "The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." Well, the author to the Hebrews gives us some advice on how to resist...by the help of my great High Priest.

First, he says, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess." To resist temptation and keep from falling into sin, hold firmly to the faith.

About a half dozen years ago, there was a football player from the University of South Florida football team, who was working at his summer job at the Busch Gardens amusement park. After three girls climbed into one of the rides he was in charge of, he noticed that the door wasn't latched properly. So he reached for it, but a little too late. The ride took off with him clinging to the side of the car, hanging 35 feet in the air. The girls tried to pull him in and he tried to hang on, but he let go and he fell, breaking one of his vertebrae and possibly ending his football career--only 50 feet from the platform and from safety. He would be fine if he had only held firmly to the car.

In the same way, we will fall into temptation and sin when we don't hang on to God's Word. "Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess." Know the truth of God's Word. Read it. Study it. Learn it. Come to worship. Come to Bible Class. Celebrate the sacraments. Remember your baptism. Take the Lord's Supper as often as you can. Grow in your faith. Strengthen your grip on the truths of God's grace. That's how you hold firmly to the faith. Cling to it and never let go. For the result of letting go might be far worse than falling 35 feet. You'll fall into sin and may fall from the faith.

Now, on our own, none of us has the spiritual strength to cling to the cross and keep from letting go. But thankfully, we're not on our own. We can call for help at any time from our great high priest. "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Do you know how difficult it would be to gain access to the President, to have a conversation with him, to buy him a cup of coffee? Pretty difficult, wouldn't it be, because of personnel and the level of security always surrounding him.

Not everyone has access to the President of the United States. But you don't need it. You can call in greater forces when temptation comes knocking at your door. With your sins removed by the sacrifice of your great high priest, you have direct access to God. You can approach his throne--a throne, not of wrath, but of grace, as he longs to bless you. There you will find grace to help in time of need.

Someone once said that when temptation comes knocking on the door, call Jesus. "Would you please get that for me?" And when Temptation sees who answers, he'll say, "Oh! I'm sorry. I must have the wrong address." And he'll turn around and run. Really that's what we do every time we pray the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation." We approach the throne of grace and cry out, "Jesus, would you please get that for me?"

Resist temptation in thanks to your great high priest for the sacrifice he's made for you. Resist temptation with help from your great high priest as you cling to the faith.

A wealthy woman was interviewing potential chauffeurs to drive her Rolls Royce and narrowed it down to three candidates. She took the first to her driveway and asked, "How close could you get my Rolls to that brick wall without scratching it?" "I can get it within one foot. No problem!" he said. She asked the second applicant the same question. "I can get within 6 inches! No scratches guaranteed," he proudly said. But when she asked the third applicant, he replied, "Ma'am, I don't know how close I could get, but if I were driving your Rolls Royce, I'd leave a few feet of clearance to be sure not to damage your car."

Likewise, as we live in thanks to our Savior for rescuing us from the sin that's resulted in us giving to temptation time and time again, we keep our distance from those things that might "scratch" us again. Don't keep driving around the block looking for the empty space. And don't take your swimming suit along, just in case you're tempted. Live for him. Serve him in thanks. And with his help, crying out to the throne of grace, clinging to the faith you profess, you can--you will--resist.