

Lent always begins with gospel readings that tell us about Jesus' temptation by the devil. The rationale, in part, is to point out to us that Jesus underwent temptation just the way you and I do. There's more to it than the notion of fellowship though, important as that is, so let's take a closer look at temptation together.

Mark's gospel differs from the other gospels in that he doesn't describe the temptations themselves in any detail. It's easy to get the impression that Jesus just blew off his temptations, whatever they were, without breaking a sweat. It isn't that way for you and me though. Dealing with temptation's hard work. Let's examine temptation and see how it works.

A temptation is an attraction to do something we know is wrong. By itself, the experience of temptation is morally neutral. It's only a proposition, almost always contains a lie, and we don't have to accept it. To endure temptation is part of life. To accept the proposition is to sin, and that's part of life, too. Avoiding temptation is certainly a good practice, but it can take you only so far. Happily, we Catholics have the sacrament of reconciliation here to set things straight again.

Why is it, do you think, that God permits us to be tempted? God doesn't send us temptation, as St. James explains (Jas 1:13), nor, as St. Paul tells us (1 Cor 10:13), are we ever tempted beyond our strength. But sometimes we accept the propositions of temptation and sometimes we don't. What do you think is going on? Does temptation perhaps have a deeper, perhaps unexpected purpose?

Augustinian Father George Riley<sup>1</sup> explains it this way: temptations are not meant to make us fall; they are not meant for our ruin, but for our good. Each presents a choice to do what is good or to do what is evil; to do what's in my own selfish interests, or to do the just and loving thing. As the implications of each of these choices unfold, we get to see our world bathed more and more in the brilliance of God's love or steeped deeper into the darkness of sin.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.augustinianfriends.org/homilies/hom\\_lent1b.pdf](http://www.augustinianfriends.org/homilies/hom_lent1b.pdf), February 10, 2015

Perhaps the nastiest temptations, particularly for good, religious folks like you and me are those that come at us through our own image of who we think we are and how we think we're expected to act. Br. Don Bisson is a psychologist who has also been a spiritual director for several decades. He knows all about this kind of temptation and just how deep its roots can reach. Someone who thought I needed it gave me a copy of one of his talks entitled *The Conversion of the So-Called Good Person*.

Bad folks, it seems, have an easier time of it. To convert, murderers just need to stop killing people, thieves need to stop taking stuff that isn't theirs and so on. But how does a good person convert? There's nothing for them to stop doing. Should they do *more* good stuff?

Talk about a depressing prospect. It's an open question whether you'll run out of time, money or sanity first, but the temptation's there, isn't it? What's the lie within that temptation? It might come as a shock to hear that Br. Bisson tells us that the conversion of a good person involves nothing less than converting from idolatry to authentic worship; simply obeying to the letter the first of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have no false gods before me."

Here's what he means: It's all too common for *good people* like you and me to offer our burnt sacrifices (and it's usually ourselves that's the burnt-out offering) at the altar of the unholy trinity of pleasing, performance and perfection rather than to offer the living sacrifice of our complete, authentic selves, warts and all, at the altar of the current moment lived intimately and with absolute trust in God, fully aware of being loved and accepted unconditionally.

Let's take a close look at that unholy trinity. Who indeed are we trying to *please* with what we *good people* do? When the doing is authentically God's action through us in the unselfconscious service of love, all is well. If, however, we do what we do to impress others, to convince ourselves, other people or even God of our worthiness, maybe even our superior goodness, then exactly who or what is it that we are really serving? Maybe we're returning God's unconditional

love with a conditional love of our own: “I’ll do all this good stuff for you, God, but then you have to do this over here for me....” Br. Bisson tells us that God makes no such deals. Those who consciously or unconsciously think they are God make them all the time.

Do we *perform* out of a sense of obligation or out of love? Are we *good people* “human beings” or “human doings?” Perhaps we’ve been dazzled by the Pelagian heresy, still alive and well these days, that incorrectly claims that we earn our way to salvation all by ourselves; who needs God anyway?

Does *perfection* for us *good people* mean evolving over a lifetime into the expressions of God’s love and mercy that we were created to be, or do we have some notion that we need to be, or at least convince ourselves of the illusion, that we’re flawless; unapproachable by temptation and the lessons it has to teach? If so, then who is there for God to redeem and love? What possible meaning could the Eucharist possess?

Conversion for good people, when we feel safe enough and strong enough to do so, involves the hard work of accepting, perhaps through gritted teeth, both the good and the not-so-good of ourselves exactly as-is, dropping the “*good person*” label as Jesus did when he told us only the Father is “good,” and replacing it with the term “unconditionally loved person.” God cannot love a person who doesn’t exist, or save one who doesn’t think he or she is in need of it.

So-called *good people* run the risk of yielding to the temptation to control the terms of our own goodness by manufacturing images of ourselves and do things that reflect what we think is expected of us that are neither necessary nor true; all in service not of God, but of someone else altogether. I invite you to guess who. Take a look at what tempts you this Lent. There are many possibilities, but if you’re one of Br. Bisson’s so-called *good people*, like me before I embraced Christianity as it is rather than as I thought it ought to be, let me gently suggest to you that you may find, as I did, that the unwitting source of the most difficult temptations you’ll ever have to face is staring right back at you in your bathroom mirror.