

Luke 4:1-13 Temptation February 21, 2010

Temptations of the Rich and Famous (not politicians)

Bernie Madoff – Ripped off countless individuals and charities in order to line his own pockets with billions of dollars. He obviously liked money and was willing to do almost anything to get it. Consequences were for the little people.

Wall Street/Housing Mkt – Again, greed at work. Laws, regulations and common sense were bent and broken in the name of a larger profit margin, and enormous bonuses for the bank executives – at the cost of people’s pensions and homes. Absolutely no concern for the lives they were ruining.

Mark McGwire – Representing the Steroid era in baseball. In 1998, he and Sammy Sosa revived baseball (after the strike) with a homerun race that led to McGwire smashing Roger Maris’ single season record of 61 homers, with an asterisk, with 70 homers, no asterisk, until he was caught up in the steroid scandal that rocked baseball. In 2005, he and 11 other baseball players were called before Congress. While other players were willing to talk, McGwire insisted he wasn’t there to talk about the past, but the future. He appeared as guilty as he could have possibly appeared.

He dropped out of sight for a few years. Then, early this year, he was offered a job as batting coach for his old team, the St. Louis Cardinals. But, in order to get back into baseball, he needed to confess his steroid use. So, last month, he did just that, on national TV. However, he also said that the steroids did not actually enhance his performance.

Evidently he thinks we'll all believe he hit more than 50 homeruns 5 yrs in a row, a feat never duplicated, on his own, even though he was juiced. He is also hoping that this confession will clear the way for him to get into the Hall of Fame. We'll see.

Tiger Woods – Where to begin? He risked the complete destruction of his marriage and his family by having many, many relationships with women across the country. Like so many others who succumb to their temptations, he confessed after he was caught. Not only that, he confessed 3 months after he was caught. For some observers, this sort of time lag throws the sincerity of his confession into some doubt.

I saw his confession on the TV in Betty's hospital room not long before she was released. Tiger said all the right things. He made no attempt to shift or even share the blame. He took full responsibility for his actions. And he used a word that is at the very heart of the issue of temptation: He said he felt "entitled."

He felt he deserved everything he got, everyone he took. And that is how temptation gets us. We must feel as if we are entitled to whatever it is we know deep down we shouldn't have. Bernie Madoff felt entitled to other people's money, as he told them he would be investing it in something safe. The men on Wall Street, the bankers, the housing lenders all felt entitled to the extra money that came from bilking people who trusted them. Every baseball player guilty of using performance enhancing drugs felt entitled to the extra advantage those drugs gave them, even though they were banned. And Tiger Woods, even though he was the first athlete to earn a billion dollars, felt entitled to even more, even though he risked everything that was important in his life.

This is what tempts the rich and powerful. They feel their wealth and power entitle them to take whatever they want, to do whatever they want. This is a temptation for every politician, every entertainer, every athlete, every rich person.

But, the sense of entitlement is not limited to the rich and powerful. I would suspect that most of us feel entitled to a little more than we know we can afford, a little something extra in our otherwise hum-drum lives. And temptation arrives, trying to convince us that it would be a good idea to take what we feel entitled to.

Temptation doesn't work unless it seems like a good idea at the time; a good idea that would be worth the consequences. And those of us who are world-class rationalizers, like myself, can take a temptation and make it into something good. I won't explain the process, just in case you aren't already doing it yourselves. I don't want to give you any ideas. I don't want to tempt you.

Now, back to Jesus, who was tempted in the desert after his baptism and 40 days of fasting.

Stones to Bread – Not only could he have fed himself, he could have fed the world with the power to turn stones into bread. This could easily have appeared as a good idea.

Kingdoms – Again, this could have been a good thing. If Jesus were the political ruler of the world, imagine the laws he would pass. He could stop all the wars and bring people together, to work together for the betterment of everyone.

Jump – This could have been a big attention-grabber. It could have jump-started his ministry, so to speak. He could have had hundreds, maybe thousands of disciples that day. They would all have been very impressed by his safe leap, and would have followed him anywhere, or not. No telling what a crowd impressed by that would do. They probably would have expected entertaining miracles all the time. Their loyalty might have been just a superficial attraction to power. How long would that last?

Opportune Time – Temptations are never completely conquered. As we learn to resist the old temptations, new upgraded temptations come along. They may attack us at our weakest points, or they may go for our strongest points, turning them against us. Going back to the baseball illustration, both Mark McGwire and Barry Bonds (who broke his homerun record) were very good ballplayers before they started using steroids (Bonds still hasn't admitted this, yet). But, very good wasn't enough. The discipline and competitiveness that brought them that far, drove them to use drugs to make them even better. Virtues became vices.

So, we can look at the rich and powerful for negative role models. And we can look at Jesus as a positive role model. We can simply give in to temptation and take whatever we feel entitled to, or we can struggle against temptation, seeking to serve God in all that we do. This is a choice we have to make every single day of our lives. Fortunately, Christ is there to help us make the right decisions.

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