

GOD HELPS THOSE WHO STOP HURTING THEMSELVES

I'd like to play you a song by Carrie Newcomer. It's a FUN song, and a FUN way to introduce a NOT so fun TOPIC. SO, just sit back and enjoy the song, *Don't Push Send*. The words are on an insert.

SONG: *Don't Push Send* by Carrie Newcomer

We ALL make MISTAKES, don't we? It's part of LIFE. We all DO and SAY the wrong things sometimes that unintentionally HURT people. We ALL push SEND sometimes when we don't MEAN to, and wish we DIDN'T. Yes, we ALL make mistakes, and sometimes our mistakes need to be FORGIVEN. And most of us are pretty good about OFFERING and receiving forgiveness at such times. HOWEVER, in addition to making MISTAKES, very often we also CHOOSE to HURT others or ourselves. And we CHOOSE to do so because we've ALL been given the gift of FREE-WILL. And to truly be FREE, we HAVE to be free to make BAD and hurtful CHOICES. And SO, we are continually TEMPTED to MAKE to make those choices.

Let me tell you a STORY. Unlike most graduating doctors, who go on to establish themselves in a lucrative medical practice, ALEC decided to DONATE 2 out of every 4 years of HIS medical practice to a small, rural clinic on a MISSION compound in BURUNDI. He took NO PAY at ALL for his work, and usually brought with him CARTONS of medicine and medical supplies to give away to the poor and sick. Well, BECAUSE he received no INCOME for 2 out of every 4 years, and BECAUSE he was MARRIED and had 6 children, his PERSONAL finances were constantly at RISK. In fact, Alec began to grow increasingly WORRIED about the financial security of his family, especially with the upcoming educational expenses of his children. Therefore, on the advice of a FRIEND, he placed ALL of his savings into a REAL estate deal, which promised to return MORE than money enough to provide for his wife and children. SOON, however, it became apparent that his REAL estate was a WORTHLESS.

Well, SOON Alec began falling deeper and deeper into the QUICKSAND of self-condemnation. He became distraught over his STUPIDITY. He refused to SEE that his intentions were NOBLE and honorable, both in caring for the sick in Burundi, AND in trying to gain financial stability to his family. He COULDN'T let go of his feelings of FAILURE, but THOUGHT about them continually, until one fateful NIGHT, he drove up the hill behind his house and ENDED his life with a GUNSHOT.

Friends, THIS is a TRUE story, reported by Alec's friend, Lewis Smedes, in his book, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We DON'T Deserve*. Of course, this incident is EXTREME! Most of us DON'T commit suicide over our SHORTCOMINGS, at least not in the same way that ALEC did. However, it's AMAZING how MANY of us, who are somehow HURT by life, go on and COMPOUND the DAMAGE; go on and CONTINUE hurting ourselves, again and again, by BROODING over it, by CURSING ourselves and by REHASHING our PAST. Indeed, MOST of us even go so far as to commit a SLOW form of SUICIDE by using various ADDICTIONS.

But don't you see? And believe me: I'm preaching to MYSELF as MUCH as I am to YOU. By turning on OURSELVES, we diminish our own ABILITY to HEAR and FEEL and EXPERIENCE God's unconditional LOVE and grace, and God's free-flowing forgiveness, acceptance and healing. By turning on OURSELVES, we make it SO much harder for GOD to be able to HELP us and HEAL us! And that's why I've TITLED this sermon, *God HELPS Those Who STOP Hurting THEMSELVES*. Now, I'm not saying that God DOESN'T help us UNLESS we stop hurting ourselves. God is CONSTANTLY trying to help us, whether we're hurting ourselves or NOT! What I mean is that God is better ABLE to help those who STOP hurting themselves, because they are the ones who can HEAR and FEEL and EXPERIENCE the love and grace, the strength and comfort, that God PROVIDES.

You know, that TEMPTATION to hurt ourselves, to DO what we know we ought NOT to do, is INCREDIBLY powerful! But take heart: WE are not the FIRST, nor the LAST, to struggle with it. It was even a “THORN in the flesh” for St. PAUL. It was in GREAT frustration that St. Paul wrote THESE famous words: *The GOOD that I WOULD do, I do NOT do; and THAT which I would NOT do, that I DO!* Can you HEAR Paul’s FRUSTRATION? And isn’t that OUR frustration as well? We CONTINUALLY do what we KNOW we ought NOT to do, and do NOT do what we know we OUGHT to do! We are being CONSTANTLY tempted OFF course. And I don’t know about YOU, but I keep thinking that there MUST be some way to get BEYOND being TEMPTED all the time. But THEN, of course, I think about JESUS, and realize that not even HE could reach THAT stage. I mean: HERE we are, in our Scripture Lesson, at the BEGINNING of His ministry, and sure enough, He’s dealing with TEMPTATION. LATER, His tempter will speak to Him AGAIN, in and through Peter, who TRIES to convince Jesus to AVOID the cross. And Jesus says to Peter: *Get BEHIND me, Satan! YOU think as MORTALS think, NOT as GOD thinks!* And then, at the END of His ministry, on the NIGHT before His DEATH, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is tempted AGAIN, this time to find an easy ESCAPE from having to endure the HORROR, the PAIN, and the INDIGNITY of being CRUCIFIED.

Did you know that in the New Testament, the word “temptation” literally means “to TEST.” And it’s NOT so much about trying to CAUSE us to commit evil as it is about trying to TEST our STRENGTH. And temptation is always an INTERNAL struggle. No EXTERNAL power, not even God, can RESCUE us from being tempted, because temptation comes NATURALLY to us with God’s GIFT of free-will. Even when we pray the Lord’s Prayer and say, *Lead us NOT into temptation*, the KEY word is “INTO.” We’re NOT asking God to help us avoid being TEMPTED. We’re ASKING God to help us avoid falling INTO temptation, falling PREY to temptation. And while OTHER people can either be supportive or seductive, the STRUGGLE and the CHOICE are ultimately OURS.

In the New Testament, we ALSO see temptation PERSONIFIED. Jesus, in our Scripture Lesson, is tempted by “the DEVIL.” Well, WHO is the DEVIL? I LOVE the words of my teacher and mentor, William Sloan Coffin, who said: *Allow me once again to explain that the DEVIL is pictured as a PERSON because EVIL is experienced as an intensely PERSONAL power. The devil is also given a separate existence, NOT because evil exists OUTSIDE of us, but because evil is experienced as something GREATER than us. And never to be forgotten is the fact that the devil is an ANGEL, albeit a FALLEN one. THAT means that EVIL does NOT arise in our LOWER NATURE.... EVIL arises in our HIGHER nature, in the realm of the SPIRIT, where the Devil seeks constantly to corrupt our FREEDOM by SEDUCING us into making WRONG choices.*

Well, if THAT’S who the TEMPTER is, then HOW do we DEFY the tempter? HOW do we KEEP from falling PREY to temptation, and STOP hurting ourselves? That’s our ETERNAL human question, isn’t it? THAT’S the question that every ONE of us has to STRUGGLE with -- from Presidents right on down to the HOMELESS man who stopped in the other day for a hand-out. HOW do we BEAT our tempter? HOW do we FIGHT something SO strong, and be a WINNER? HOW do we STOP hurting ourselves?

Well, to be quite frank, I’VE never been very GOOD at it, at least in SOME arenas of my life. However, I recently learned something NEW, something that’s been extremely helpful to me in my OWN battle with temptation. I learned that, in the biblical tradition, in the HEBREW scripture, the word “temptation” meant NOT “to TEST” as in the NEW Testament, but “a CROSSROADS.” And AT that crossroads, ONE road ALWAYS led back to EGYPT. And do you remember what EGYPT meant to the Hebrews in Old Testament times, what Egypt SYMBOLIZED? It symbolized “SLAVERY” or “CAPTIVITY!” And THAT’S because, before Moses led his people out of Egypt, they were SLAVES to the Egyptians, and TREATED as horribly as slave are ALWAYS treated. Moreover, they were

STUCK in slavery, and felt as POWERLESS to do anything ABOUT it. SO, whenever someone said the word “EGYPT” to a Hebrew, SLAVERY came to mind. So, **IF** the word “temptation” means “a CROSSROADS,” and **if** ONE road leads back to Egypt, WHO would want to TAKE that road?

And ISN'T it the same for you and me? **IF** temptation is a CROSSROADS, and **IF** ONE road leads to some kind of CAPTIVITY, then WHO would want to TAKE it? And aren't ALL addictions a kind of SLAVERY? In fact, isn't EVERY sin, EVERY separation we cause, every WALL we build, a type of SLAVERY? And **WHO** wants to be a SLAVE? Do we REALLY want to give away our FREEDOM and feel POWERLESS? Do we really want to keep HURTING ourselves that way?

I'll tell you, for ME, this NEW/OLD understanding of temptation is VERY helpful. NOW, every time I'm TEMPTED, I TRY to think of it as a CROSSROADS: *I'm standing at a CROSSROADS!* And AT that crossroads, I'm trying to plant a **STOP** sign, so that I'll stop and THINK about WHICH road to take. And I HOPE and PRAY that **IF** I can actually stop and THINK about it, BEFORE I just jump “INTO” temptation, BEFORE I fall PREY to temptation, that MAYBE – just maybe -- I can TELL myself: *NO! I'm NOT going BACK to Egypt! I WON'T be a SLAVE any longer! I'm going to STOP hurting myself, and take the OTHER toad, the road LESS traveled by -- at least in MY life -- and take it WHEREVER it may LEAD, because I KNOW I don't want to go back to EGYPT.* Yes, THAT'S what I want to tell myself WHENEVER I stand at that CROSSROADS and face “TEMPTATION.”

It's very SCAREY though, isn't it? Sometimes we are just SO afraid of the UNKNOWN that it almost seems EASIER just to go BACK to Egypt. EVEN if we HATE Egypt, and know it's HURTING us, at LEAST we know the WAY there, and at LEAST we know what to EXPECT when we GET there.

And THAT'S why we have to use JESUS as our MODEL. In our Scripture Lesson, it would have been EASY for Jesus just to fall INTO temptation. It would have made Him SUCCESSFUL by the WORLD'S standards, which judge us by WHAT we HAVE, WHAT we DO, and WHAT others SAY about us. But Jesus KNEW that He was at a CROSSROADS, and that the SUCCESS or the FAILURE of His entire MINISTRY, of ALL that He was CAPABLE of becoming, RESTED upon WHICH road He would CHOOSE to travel. IF He chose SUCCESS by the WORLD'S standards, He would be forever ENSLAVED to the VALUES of THIS world, ALWAYS needing more STUFF, more PRAISE or more TROPHIES. And SO, Jesus REFUSED to take that road that would lead to EGYPT and CAPTIVITY. Instead, He DARED to take the road less TRAVELED by, the road that seemed FOOLISH in the eyes of THIS world. But Jesus had HEARD God's CALL at His BAPTISM, and He KNEW which road GOD wanted Him to take. He JUST had to put His trust in GOD and keep His focus on GOD and God's WORD in scripture. For IF He could walk by FAITH, not knowing WHERE this road less traveled by would LEAD Him, He KNEW that He would feel the presence of God's Spirit WITH Him, GUIDING and empowering Him EVERY step of the way. But IF He chose to HURT Himself by NOT fulfilling His God-given potential, HE knew that He was choosing EGYPT and building a WALL between Himself and God, a wall that would PREVENT Him from feeling God's presence and strength. You see: God helps THOSE who STOP hurting themselves. And it's simply because THEY are the ones whom God is ABLE to help. THEY are the ones who are OPEN to God!

SO, the NEXT time temptation CONFRONTS you, TRY thinking of it as a CROSSROADS. And then, STOP and THINK! And REMEMBER that ONE road ALWAYS leads back to EGYPT and SLAVERY, while the OTHER leads to FULFILLING your potential, and to ALL that God has made you CAPABLE of becoming. And even though THAT road is the road LESS traveled by, THAT road is the road to CHOOSE, because THAT'S where FULLNESS of life is to be FOUND. So, TELL your TEMPTER, in the words of Thomas Merton: *“I will no LONGER collaborate with my OWN diminishment.” I will STOP hurting myself, and FOLLOW wherever it IS that God LEADS me, for God desires ONLY good for ALL God's children, even ME!* Amen.