

Meeting Christ at the Crossroads of Temptation

Gluttony & Moderation

I Samuel 2:12-17; I Timothy 6:2b-10, 17-19

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Thomas H. Cook

A popular band called the Barenaked Ladies sings a trademark song at all their concerts titled, "If I Had a Million Dollars." In it the protagonist sings: "If I had a million dollars I'd buy you a house, furniture for the house like a chesterfield and an ottoman, a K car or a Reliant, a tree fort with a tiny fridge containing pre-wrapped sausages, a fake fur coat because a real one would be too cruel, an exotic pet like an emu or a llama, a limousine to drive to the store, Kraft dinners and fancy ketchup, a fake green dress, some art (a Picasso or Garfunkel), a monkey, and your love. It's a catchy, folksy tune you can easily catch yourself singing when you are not paying attention or even thinking about anything special.

One of the reasons it's so catchy is because it taps into a fantasy many of us harbor. What would you do with a million dollars? If I had a million dollars would I buy a plane, a boat, a beach condo, a Porsche 911 Cabriolet? But when I add it all up even a million dollars isn't enough which tells me there is no end to my wants... my fantasies... and there is no quenching my thirst when it comes to cool stuff. We all get caught in that dream.

You all know by now that during this season of Lent Karin and I are paying attention to particular life circumstances that catch us at the crossroads of life where important decisions pertaining to faithfulness are made. We find ourselves caught at crossroads, feeling lost or frozen in place. We have choices to make, choices that have to do with our faithfulness that's when we need to turn to Christ at the crossroads.

In reality we have a road map when we get stuck at these crossroads. It's called the gospel. We have somewhere to turn to get direction if we are only willing to pay attention and make the effort to follow through. Much of what we will speak about over these remaining few weeks is rooted in the challenges that come to us from what we call the seven deadly sins. You all know them, right? Pride, covetousness (greed), lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. We are paying

attention to five of them. Last week Karin did a great job talking about getting caught at the crossroads of anger and kindness. She demonstrated how the gospel calls us down the road of kindness. Today I'd like to talk about the times we get caught at the crossroads where gluttony and moderation meet, especially when it comes to the accumulation of stuff.

To imagine the experience of gluttony I often think of the experience of trying to quench your thirst with salt water. The more salt water you drink the thirstier you get to the point when you go toxic and it kills you. And yet we live in an age of gluttony; many folks are wanting to stick their forks into what belongs to God, like Eli's sons in the temple. We try to own what we don't earn. We sometimes want lots of things for nothing and are willing to sell ourselves and stretch ourselves beyond our means to achieve it. There are folks who live by the rule, whether consciously or not, that the one who dies with the most toys wins. It has a terrible effect on us as a people who live in a nation with the most incredible abundance and affluence the world has ever known and yet we continue to impoverish ourselves with debt. We live with an unquenchable thirst because we keep pouring salt water down our throats.

Throw into the mix easy access to consumer credit, exorbitant interest rates and fees that most of us receive weekly, if not daily, offers for pre-approved credit cards. Even my kids who are in college and who have no significant income whatsoever receive weekly offers from credit card companies.

U.S. News and World Report, last year, sited that household debt rose from 96 % of personal disposable income in 2000 to 113% in 2004. In 2000 the average credit card balances stood at \$7842 according to Cardweb.com. That figure rose to \$9312 in 2004. Take out the 40% who pay off their credit cards with each statement and the average balance sores to over \$13,000. A chief executive of Cambridge Credit Counseling Services says, "Americans are in big trouble right now." He notes that 1 in 4 households is either behind on card payments or over the credit limit on at least one account. (U.S. News & World Report, August 16, 05)

This is what's so insane about the lifestyle of so many Americans buried under credit card debt fueled by gluttony. We have voluntarily impoverished ourselves. While surrounding ourselves with an abundance of stuff we are at the same time financially broke and we are broken, desperate and anxious and we need grace and lessons in moderation.

This is such a huge issue and right now, even for me, and it's an incomprehensible contrast to what I experienced this past week. Most of you know I recently returned from Haiti where I traveled with my son Phil, Larry Braak, Tammy Davison, Doug Doering, Larry Schutt, Peter Wampler and Beth Windemuller, plus Nancy Braak's niece and her husband from Florida where we visited an important missionary of this church, Tom Braak who founded Faith In Action International. It was a mind blowing experience. I can't yet really adequately describe it but I can witness to you that Tom Braak is doing some phenomenal things to effect the rural villages around the town of Verrette, Haiti as he teaches good agricultural techniques and how to grow trees that produce fruit that can be sold to pay for the tuition of children in families where illiteracy is a pandemic. He is making incredible strides to provide clean, drinkable water to communities where too many children die from amoebic dysentery. Children literally without clothing, suffer from such malnutrition made obvious by their distended bellies. Adults can't add or subtract numbers or even sign their names because of the level of illiteracy.

Folks, I have been to impoverished places in this world. I've traveled the West Bank of Palestine, I've worked with native churches in South Africa, I've served an inner city church in Chicago and been on Indian Reservations but never in my life have I witnessed such a broken and impoverished nation as Haiti. Such poverty is incomprehensible to us, and I can witness to you that, even when you experience it and see it with you own eyes, it's still impossible to describe. Such poverty also convicts us as a nation for we are forever teetering on the edge of gluttony while nations like Haiti grow poorer and more hungry and desperate.

So often we find ourselves caught at a crossroads where we must choose between acquiring more just for acquisition's sake... or living a life of moderation and doing something good with what God has blessed us with. That's when we must listen to what the Gospel says to us.

Our bulletin cover quotes a wonderful passage from Jeremiah: *“Stand at the crossroads and look... ask where the good way is, and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls.”* While the gospel does not in any way shape or form condemn affluence it does call us to move down the road of moderation. Paul wrote to his student Timothy: *“Of course there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”*

Combining contentment and godliness can go far in helping us choose the right path when caught at the crossroads of gluttony and moderation.

Learning to be content is a hard lesson to learn when we live in the affluence and abundance of North America. That’s why taking mission trips to places of genuine need, like Haiti, is so eye opening. It’s too easy to become myopic, nearsighted to the point where we start to consider ourselves poor when compared images created popular media, when in reality we have made ourselves poor by pursuing images created by the smoke and mirrors of consumerism.

The gospel calls us to take the road of moderation. Sure we can enjoy the delight of the abundance we have been blessed with but realize at the same time the suffering of this world. Use that God’s delight to bless the truly poor. Returning to Paul’s letter to Timothy, that’s why he says: *“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future.”* Moderation gives us the power to invest in God’s mission in this world and helps us to, as Paul concludes *“take hold of life that really is life.”*

You’ve heard the news reports that confirm what many of us know. We spend more than we have. Many of us are living from pay check to pay check and are burdened by consumer debt. There is a common sense way out. In fact our church is beginning to address the issue with a program for personal and household finances, developed by the Willow Creek Church, called “Good Sense.” You can see it announced in this morning’s bulletin and it will be taught in three sessions

beginning on April 19th. Because we get caught at the cross roads of gluttony and moderation, Martha and I are already signed up and I hope you will consider joining us as we learn to listen to Christ calling us down the road of moderation.

By the way, if someone handed me a million dollars right now, I wouldn't buy a Porsche, a Plane, or a boat. I'd do something with it that would help me *take hold of life that is really life*.