

IT'S MY WAY, OR ELSE!

Genesis 3:6

The woman was convinced. The fruit looked so fresh and delicious, and it would make her so wise! So she ate some of the fruit. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her. Then he ate it, too.

Matthew 4:8-11

⁸ *Next the Devil took him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him the nations of the world and all their glory. ⁹ “I will give it all to you,” he said, “if you will only kneel down and worship me.”*

¹⁰ *“Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say,*

‘You must worship the Lord your God; serve only him.’”

¹¹ *Then the Devil went away, and angels came and cared for Jesus.*

[NLT]

Both Eve and Jesus were tempted to be control-freaks: To be in total control of their lives; and to be in control of other people's lives if that's what it would take to be in total control of one's own lives.

These days we would call that bullying.

But, then, isn't this a temptation we all face: each one of us wants to be in control? People tend to panic if they feel their lives are out of control, or controlled by something or someone else. And so we play politics, or we sulk, or we bully to try to get our own ways.

But does it really work?

Or does it simply make things worse?

The temptation to be in control usually ends up in a big mess. Only God has the knowledge and ability to be in total control. But we still try to be.

An obvious example is the chaos countries end up in when someone in power is determined to hold onto that power, no matter how much the people oppose him or her – an example: Gadaffi in Libya.

I like the story about a sales executive who got his chance to make the Really Big Sale. He was going into the final interview on the biggest contract he had ever written. As he was ushered into the office of the executive buyer, an assistant brought her coffee and left. The atmosphere was cordial, and he knew he was giving his best presentation ever.

Then the assistant tapped on the door, re-entered the office and spoke briefly with the executive. She stood and said, "I apologize, but I have to tend to a matter. I'll just be a minute or two." And she followed her assistant out of the room.

The sales representative looked around the beautifully appointed office. He saw her family pictures on her desk. Then he noticed a contract on her desk. She had evidently been studying a bid from a competitor. Leaning forward, he could see the column of figures, but it was obscured by a diet softdrink can.

He was tempted to move the can and see the bottom line of his competitor's bid. What harm possibly could there be in reading her private information? After all, she had left it out in plain sight, almost. After wrestling with himself a while, he finally decided to take a peek.

As he lifted the can, he discovered that the can wasn't filled with softdrink at all. Instead it was a bottomless can filled with 1,000s of air rifle pellets which gushed out, and ran all over the desk and cascaded onto the carpet. His attempt to short cut the competition was exposed.

Not every temptation is so obvious. Not every failure is so embarrassing. But every temptation is a challenge. Not even Jesus was spared the choosing.

But how should we respond to the temptation to have power and control?

Henri Nouwen wrote:

What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" We ask, "Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your Kingdom?" (Matthew 20:21). Ever since the snake said, "The day you eat of this tree your eyes will be open and you will be like God,

knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:5), we have been tempted to replace love with power. Jesus lived that temptation in the most agonizing way from the desert to the cross. The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints. ...

One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.

(In the Name of Jesus (Crossroad: New York, 1989) p. 59-60.

That point about control and intimacy reminds me of something about parenting. Some parents mistakenly think that controlling one's children is good parenting. Good parenting is not about control. Rather it is about protection and direction – protection from danger “No!”, and direction to what is good for life.

God the Father models such parenting. Not surprisingly, then, when Jesus is in danger, he goes to what his Father has said. Jesus' answer to the temptation of power is from the Old Testament:

‘You must worship the Lord your God; serve only him.’

Now, this is not about going to Sunday worship. What it is about is reflecting in our lives God's heart for people: to care, to forgive, to seek peace, to live in harmony, to serve.

Jesus himself modelled for us the answer to the temptation for power: he came to serve, and not be served.

And he calls on us to love one another as he has loved us.

Now, I admit I hear these words of Jesus, and I think, “Yes, Amen!” And then I think, but what about all the church politicking that goes on, let alone anything in our communities? What about how we tend to use church positions to try to control things and other members? And pastors do it, and members do it. Because there is a fairly large amount of bullying and control and power struggles in the church!

And then I think, “How utterly hopeless we are. We can't even get Jesus teaching right among ourselves – in the church –

let alone encourage it anywhere else!” A couple of plain examples: The member who gets on a committee only to push their own wants; or the disgruntled member who tries to 'blackmail' the congregation by threatening to go somewhere else if “modern songs are brought in”, or if “modern songs aren't brought in”. I'm sure we've all heard such things lots of times over the years. And I reckon we'd all be guilty in some way or to some degree of playing the control/power game. Where is the servant heart?

What can we do?

Well, I think Jesus' response is the best of all:

Out flashed the sword of the Spirit: our Lord will fight with no other weapon. He could have spoken new revelations, but he chose to say, “It is written.” There is a power in the Word of God which even the devil cannot deny [C.H. Spurgeon's Commentary on Matthew, Matthew 4:4].

And so may we, when tempted, have God's word with us to remind us and strengthen us and redirect us!

It's like having our Father in heaven calling us back to himself.

Which reminds me of the story of Rev Harry Fosdick, a well know preacher in the USA. As a young seminary student he reached the breaking point after working one summer in a New York Bowery mission. The Bowery is a slum area of New York. He went home and was overcome by deep depression. One day he stood in the bathroom with a straight razor to his throat. He thought about taking his own life. And then -- and then he heard his father in the other room calling his name, "Harry! Harry!" It called him back. He never forgot it. It was like the voice of God calling him.

So remember, in those times when you feel you are in the wilderness, trying to find your way through, and when temptation comes and offers you the wrong answer, the wrong choice – the wrong use of power, the way to popularity, the wrong kind of partnership – then remember that God has called your name: "This is my beloved son/daughter, in whom I am well pleased." And remember that because God has called your name He will see you through it all, just as he did with Jesus in the wilderness.

Amen.