



The Tempter's Path

Leaving my sister's house in Portland early one morning last month, I opened the car door to signs of an uninvited visitor: glove compartment wide open, motorcycle jacket across the front seat, canvas zipper bag underneath the steering wheel with a couple syringes and injectable vials inside.

I had left the car unlocked, and I paid the price for my negligence. The dim streetlight was enough to expose the upright button to the sidewalk gaze of my nocturnal intruder. He saw a one-time, risk-free opportunity. It was a temptation he couldn't resist. He opened the door and crawled in.

He thought he was merely crossing a line he could step back over just as easily as he had stepped in. In a matter of minutes he would walk away unscathed and unchanged with no repercussions to fear. It didn't occur to him that instead of just taking a step he might be setting out on a path—a path of ever more serious temptation and ever easier yielding. The next night on the next block he might spy a purse on a front seat and break the window to take it. The night after that on a block further down he might glimpse a set of keys in the ignition and be on his way.

That's how it must have been for the thief I met in the Lane County Jail when he first set out to steal. Again and again the Tempter's suggestions lured him on: easy in, easy out; no pain, good gain. Before long, the scarcely perceptible *path* of temptation turned into a well-trodden *way* of life

settled in sin, paved tight with stones of self-justification. He made a "career" of robbing banks. At age 62, after a shoot-out with police, he was arrested and put in jail, where I visited him for several months. His faith was strikingly selective; he acknowledged God but did not fear Him. He did not repent because he had long before justified his way of life to his satisfaction. But self-justification won him no mercy in court. The easy way out was closed to him at last. He spent the rest of his years behind bars.

The Tempter behind our temptations brings us down by the simple method of getting us to blur distinctions. Confused by the Serpent's cunning, Eve disastrously failed to distinguish the two trees God had placed in the Garden. On a darkened Portland street, Satan's prompting to plunder my car broke down a passing pedestrian's willingness to distinguish my space from his. Over a lifetime of temptation the Great Deceiver convinced a bank robber to dismiss the distinction between what belonged to others and what belonged to him.

Lenten fasting gives us *strength to distinguish*. When we deny ourselves food and drink, we strike a blow against the first desire to demand satisfaction—our newborn cry to be fed. It is a demand that must be met if we are to live; we *need* to eat and drink. But we are tempted every day to overeat because we *want* to eat and drink to the full, even to our physical detriment. After a few weeks in the school of fasting we learn by bites not taken to reign in our desire for what we *want*, and we grow grateful to be given what we *need*. This saving distinction is one the Tempter will do everything to keep us from making, for he knows we can employ it in mastering other overreaching desires as well. And that could bring all his efforts to ruin.