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New Millennium

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-- Commentaries from past newsletters -- Spring 2001

It is hard to believe that the new millennium is here. Since we are a future oriented people, we are certain to wonder what it will bring. What will our lives be like? Will we be able to evangelize the whole world? We now have the tools and the shortage of harvesters is decreasing, so is it likely to happen? Will Jesus come back then as he promised? All we can do is wonder and work.

One thing we can expect is that our life is not going to change much. We still have to live our lives out in a crooked and depraved world. Of course, it is possible that it will get more crooked and more depraved. In the light of that possibility, I want to repeat the statement that I have made before. Because there is so much sin around we will continue to live in a morally polluted environment. In a polluted environment we are always in danger of being infected by the sin that abounds. Only if we possess spiritual immunity and other defense mechanisms will we be able to resist it. We need, therefore, to know how to develop spiritual immunity, and have to possess adequate defense mechanisms that will keep us safe. In this letter I am going to try to tell you how to avoid infection. First, let us look at what a real infection can do.

The Ebola virus is one of the most deadly viruses known to mankind. The mortality rate in infected people is above 80%. It is spread by a person coming into skin-to-skin contact with the infected person. It is a hemorrhagic disease and they bleed from everywhere, so if infected blood gets on you, infection is likely to follow. In the first major outbreak of this disease in central Africa several Italian nuns, not realizing how lethal it was, died of the disease because they nursed those infected. Most of the persons who buried the dead also died. Therefore, you cannot touch them either before or after death without getting infected. There is no vaccine to provide immunity. The only way the infected can be cared for is to observe strict precautions. One has to wear gloves, masks, gowns and shoe

covers to avoid getting infected.

In my early career as a physician I was often in contact with people who had infectious diseases. I worked with persons who had tuberculosis, leprosy, venereal diseases, hepatitis, fungus infections, gastrointestinal infections and tropical viral diseases. I took great precautions to avoid getting infected. Even so, I developed tuberculosis when I was working with pediatric and adult TB patients in spite of the fact that I always wore my mask and gloves and gown. I learned one thing in those experiences. No matter how many precautions you take it is still possible to be infected.

Sin is in many ways like highly infectious bacterial and viral disease. We cannot avoid sinning at sometime in our lives, but we do have ways to keep the risks of contagion to a minimum. Unless you repent and are forgiven, the wages of sin are like the Ebola virus--death. In every way it is better not to be infected, so you need defense mechanisms. One of the defense mechanisms we possess is to know how to **meet and master temptation**.

To begin we have to recognize that the world does not believe there is such a thing as right or wrong. Humanism postulates that all of life is a matter of choices. Some are better than others, but for the most part we are going to do what we are going to do in spite of the choices we make. We do not have free will. Humanists believe as did Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Confederate cavalry general, "If you can't lick 'em, jine 'em." They believe you might as well go ahead and do the things your human nature urges you to do. You are going to do them no matter how strongly you resist, so be careful and don't get into trouble.

Christianity teaches that we are most likely to indulge in the things that constitute the greatest temptation. Without the Spirit we are likely to succumb. We can only live according to our human nature. Our human nature is the sin that lives in us (Rom. 7:5). It is to this nature that Satan appeals. Satan has, therefore, set snares in the world to trap us. For young people there are two major areas of temptation--substance abuse and sex.. Alcohol and street drugs are readily available. The appeal goes something like this. "Be cool man! You need to turn on. Try it! You'll like what it does to you." We know this proposition is true by watching the advertisements for Coors Lite on TV, or see cocktail parties in movies. In these scenes alcohol is always accompanied by fun or sex.

Another snare is to entice people to indulge in forbidden sex.. Now there is no doubt that sex is fun. Albert Ellis the atheistic and humanist psychologist said so, and those of us who have indulged know it from experience. Even so, you and I know that sex is more fun and more satisfying in the only right relationship—marriage. The *Redbook* study documented this fact. They observed that married women who were Christians had more frequent sex and gained greater satisfaction than non-Christians. A recent study by a famous research tank has shown that women who are promiscuous suffer because of their promiscuity. They are more likely to have illegitimate children, remain single, and live in poverty than women who practice abstinence. Still Satan tempts us to indulge by offering us sexual activity in the forms of recreational sex, prostitution, fornication, adultery, pornography and homosexuality. Satan especially uses sex education to tell our children that any sex is OK. Just use a condom. TV, magazines and books extol the pleasures of sex. Some men's and women's magazines tell you how to have dynamic and exciting sex. Entertainment and sports celebrities tell in lurid detail about their sex lives. Homosexuals have gotten the message into the schools that homosexual sex is OK too. It is no wonder that children as young as 11 years are having oral sex. I guess if the President can have it, they can have it too.

Then there is the temptation to power. These days people seek it in any endeavor they undertake. One of my patients told me that her marriage ended because her husband was obsessed with gaining power. It was his motivation to power that caused him to be a workaholic and neglect her. When she developed an existential despair of meaning, she drank (never excessively) to deaden the pain. Her husband eventually had an affair and left her after 41 years of marriage. Power is heady stuff. Years ago one of my students urged me to take a job as chairman of a department of psychiatry. His comment was,

“You will have power you have never had before!” I asked why power was so important. His answer was that you can manipulate people and the system. Since I was unable to manipulate only a few people in the position I held at the time, and certainly could not influence the system, he thought I was throwing away an awesome opportunity if I turned it down. I did not accept the job, for I had no desire for power.

Materialism is probably the greatest snare in our society today. Now I know you are going to say, “More than sex and drugs?” That's what I said! Our Lord specifically warned

us against covetousness because we cannot worship God if we worship money (Matt:6:24). All of us covet! It is in our human nature. Why did God include in the "Big Ten" (commandments) the commandment to not covet? The answer is that He understood our human nature. He had created in us biological drives that would allow us to sustain life. These were the drives to get adequate supplies of food and protection from the elements. He knew these biological drives could get out of hand. So he gave us the command to not covet believing that the command, and the promise of punishment if we did not obey it, would give us the motive to inhibit it. It is interesting that He did not tell us not to want money. He told us not to covet the real things that have to do with sustenance (Ex. 20:17). Since money is one of the things that belongs to our neighbor it, too is forbidden. We are also to inhibit our greed. Jesus warned us against greed in his parable about the man who had a bounteous harvest and decided to indulge himself (Luke 12:16-21). Satan knows our weaknesses. He does, therefore, create all kinds of appeals to that weakness. We are offered get rich quick schemes like, "make \$10,000 a month at home, buy this mutual fund and you will increase your holdings by 25% per year". These are part of Satan's come on. He also successfully uses lotteries and gambling casinos to appeal to our greed. He has so many things to tempt us that I cannot name them all, so we need to know how to deal with those he lays before us.

In James 1:12-15 the apostle describes the trajectory of sin. He begins by saying that a person is tempted when he is drawn away by his evil desires. He knew that our desires arise out of our human nature. When an appropriate stimulus is received through our sensory system it stimulates an appetite and we endeavor to satisfy it. When it is forbidden by God it is an evil desire. Pride, lust, greed, gluttony, sloth and covetousness are our repertoire of evil desires. They are basic, and out of them come many of the actions we call sins. The stimuli that appeal to these desires are many, but let me give you a few examples. To appeal to our desire for food and drink, Satan uses real food, pictures of food and smells to stimulate our appetite. He uses attractive persons of the opposite sex, both soft and hard pornography, music with suggestive or explicit lyrics, perfume and any thing else that arouses our sexual desire. Our desire for alcohol, a drug that decreases our inhibitions, is easily appealed to with advertisements on TV or in magazines. We all want freedom. Around colleges and universities the party life of campus groups such as

fraternities and dorms stimulates the desire to join in. Getting drunk is a rite of passage for many of these. In these situations persuasion by others is often an important factor. Finally he appeals to our covetousness (greed) in the same ways, with exception of smells, he appeals to our other desires. Gambling is the most glaring example of how he appeals to our covetousness. Acting on these desires is not evil if we indulge within the limits set by God. It is only when we respond to them in ways that are contrary to God's laws and ordinances that we sin.

James next tells us (vs. 14) that we will be dragged away and enticed. When we are enticed we are artfully attracted. Satan is artful. We are enticed when we continue to focus on the forbidden action. For example, if I, as a man, lust after a woman and imagine myself having sex with her over and over again (men do this), in time I will take steps to have sex. I will do all I can to create an opportunity to seduce her. When I have achieved my purpose, my evil desires will have given birth to sin. Now that I have sinned I will reap the rewards of my transgressions – death (vs. 15).

Knowing the trajectory of sin, we are now able to plot a strategy to deal with the temptations that are presented to us. To start we have to be able to identify the snares and understand their mechanisms. To do this we need to remain in the Word of God. God told us to learn his law. We need to learn it early in life for it to have the most benefit. God commanded us to teach our children the law from early in life (Deut. 4:9, 31:9). Jesus did not do away with the law (Matt. 5:17,18), he gave it real meaning by enhancing our ability to obey it! One of my patients told me that the only Christian thing she encountered in her childhood was a list of the Ten Commandments that hung above her bed. She had never learned them, so she did not obey them. She came under my care because of her disobedience. Even though some of God's laws are written on our hearts, we are helped by a thorough knowledge of his laws. Although I did not become a Christian until late, I did know God's laws. My parents took me to church to learn them. They were the only things I got out of my early church training. When I went to the university I found that people were disobeying them and "having fun." I did not have the power to resist, so I joined in too. It was true, though, that I did so with fear and trembling. I was what I called a "chicken sinner." I could not sin without a guilty conscience, and always tried to stop. But like all sinners I had moral paralysis so I kept on. Even then my knowledge of the law kept me

inhibited.

We have to know God's commands, decrees and ordinances, and be determined to obey them (Deut. 30:10). I cannot stress this enough. One cannot deal with temptation unless one knows what God has forbidden. Why were the Israeli's told to teach their children the law?

God knew they would have a set of standards to live by. They had explicit directions as to what they were to do. " Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth" (Deut 11:19-21).

Next we must identify the areas where we are most vulnerable to disobey them. It is well to make a list of these so that we will not be able to deny them. Of course, it may be that we do not want those closest to us to know how we are sinning, especially if our sin does not harm them. In this case, it is well not to keep a written record.

When we have done that, we should in our own minds determine who is being hurt by our sin. Remember that Jesus suffered for our sins. He took our punishment. David summed it up so well in Psalm 51 when he said, "Against you and only against you have I sinned." What about Bathsheba and Uriah? Bathsheba was pregnant by someone other than her husband, she had been seduced into adultery, and Uriah was dead. Still David said that he had sinned only against God. God suffered when Jesus suffered on the Cross. David knew he made God suffer. We do too, so we have to understand the extent of His suffering.

I was once given a tape that described the crucifixion and what happened to Jesus. Think about what was done to Him. He was falsely accused and convicted in a kangaroo court. He was reviled, mocked, and spat upon. He was beaten with a flagellum. It is a kind of whip made up of leather thongs on the ends of which are little lead dumbbells. When these strike the flesh they bruise it and hemorrhage occurs in the muscles. A crown of thorns was jammed down on His head. These thorns were about two or three inches long, probably from an acacia tree. It was not a coronet but a cap. The thorns penetrated the scalp all the way down to the skull. He then had to carry the cross bar to Golgotha even

though He was physically damaged and exhausted from the torture that He had been subjected to the night before. It is no wonder that He fell. Then at Calvary He had spikes driven through his wrists and ankles, and lifted up onto the cross. Then came the worst part! Jesus, who had been one with the Father, suddenly had the spirit of the Father withdrawn so He could suffer for our sins. He suffered the pain of our punishment so that we could be forgiven and escape it. Only an infinite God could suffer for all of mankind. We must realize that He suffered for each one of us! We brought upon Him not only the pain, but the shame of our wrongdoing. You know what it is like to feel ashamed and guilty for your wrongdoing. Amplify that by 5 or 6 billion or even more times, and you will realize what He suffered. He suffered for the sins of all those who had gone before and those who were to come after.

Sin always hurts others too. The person sinned against, our collaborators, the significant others in our lives, and even innocent bystanders. Sin is almost never individual.

Knowing these things you are now ready to deal with temptation. When temptation comes and you are aware of it, you have to systematically attack it. Whenever your evil desires rise up, you must go on the offensive. Your human nature will drive you to continue, and if Satan is involved he will encourage you too. The greatest weapon to combat your human nature and Satan is prayer. To start, rebuke Satan and then begin to confess your potential sin to God. You can say to Him something like this. "Lord, I know I am wrong to have this desire. I know if I harbor it, it will lead to sin. I do not want to cause you any more suffering, nor do I want to hurt others (if it will). I also do not want to bring shame and disgrace to your name. Lord, I am sorry for this evil desire and ask that You give me the strength to overcome it. Do not let me fall into sin."

One must pray a prayer like this many times in order to eventually be delivered. In your prayers, you are restructuring your mind so the drive to sin will be directed away from the evil you want to do. The Holy Spirit will facilitate this restructuring.

There is, however, much more to mastering temptation. There is something that should come before we deal with the actual temptations. We must develop and enhance our spiritual immunity. Spiritual immunity is something I learned about from Costa Deir. I heard him at a conference in Pittsburgh, and I never forgot his series of lectures. I was speaking there too, but not at the same time he was. I was intrigued by his topic so I

decided to learn something. What he taught me was infinitely useful. He said that Satan can have nothing on us if we maintain our spiritual immunity. This is how we do it.

First we must be born again. It is helpful if we have been filled with the Holy Spirit at the time or at later times. Our measure of the Holy Spirit is often reduced when we quench or grieve Him. We do the former when we neglect the means of Grace, the latter when we sin. If we do not pray regularly, read God's Word regularly, worship in spirit and truth regularly and do not celebrate the Eucharist regularly we quench the Spirit. Over and again I have noticed in my own life that there are periods where I neglect these disciplines and I fall into the spiritual doldrums. I am then more susceptible to temptation. Certainly we are not going to do these things if we are not in an alive church. One of my theological students told me the other day that she was trapped in a dead church, and that she came to the seminary to get some stimulation. She felt she was decaying there. Family ties kept her there, but she was spiritually dying. She wanted to know if I knew of any way she could handle this. I gave her some advice because I had the same problem years ago and successfully resolved it. I'll tell you how in a later newsletter.

It is important that we have community in some Christian group. The church is an ideal place to have it, but in most churches there is little community. In my experience, the greatest community I have ever had was in a house church. Second to it was in the group of medical students, residents and faculty that we had when I was at Duke. The third is in the church where we currently worship. This group provides support for us in our times of trial. Why? Because they will pray for us and, like Aaron and Hur did literally for Moses (Exodus 17:12), will figuratively hold our arms up as we contend with the enemy.

We must also be in spiritual warfare. Satan is not going to leave us alone. Peter summed it up best when he said, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." We have to believe that he is out there and that he will be after us if we do not have spiritual immunity. That is why we need the full armor of God to deal with him. Two of our greatest weapons are praise and worship. This is why we need to be in an alive church. Churches that are alive usually have great praise and worship music. Ira D. Sankey, Dwight Moody's great song leader, believed that music was as important as preaching. He is right! Good praise and worship music is cached in an idiom of the people of the day not in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. The

best praise music we have is contemporary Christian music. This is true for worship music as well. This is not to say that some of the music of the past does not fill the bill, but we like what we are used to and it should be in the idiom of our generation or the preceding one. It is not just me who believes this, but the best evangelical musicologists believe as I do.

Finally, let me say that we should keep our emotional state healthy. There is no question that our desires are affected by our emotions. Anger, anxiety and depression will make us much more vulnerable to temptation. Many times these arise out of stress, so we should know how to deal with stress. I can write an entire letter on this subject, but let me give you some quickie pointers.

- (1) Get exercise regularly. At least 30 minutes of vigorous activity three times a week
- (2) Have a quiet time every day
- (3) Eat a balanced diet regularly and wisely
- (4) Do not use too much caffeine or other stimulants, no more than 2 cups of “high test” coffee a day
- (5) Get at least seven hours of sleep each night
- (6) Have someone you can regularly confide in
- (7) Attend to your family in a loving way
- (8) Maintain your spiritual vigor as I have told you above
- (9) Get away from the stresses of life by retreating to a place free from stimulation that excites as often as you can