Strength Part 2 – God Promises a Way Out of Temptation **September 21, 2025**

Last week I preached the first part of a sermon on God promising us strength. In it I said, *"to embrace Christ is to let go of all else that we hold onto, or that holds onto us."* Yet, what of those who wish to embrace Christ but have never known him? Or, since I am preaching to all of you who know something of Christ, what of those times when we discover that we have an area of our lives where we have loosened our grip on Christ…that we might grasp **other** things that promised much and looked so tempting? Even those who have been raised as Christians can discover that they have allowed something to tie strings to their hearts that pulls them away from Christ's path.

Once we realize this, it can be hard to make our way back, because something else dwells in our hearts and minds, trying to push out the Holy Spirit. Internal voices that sound so reasonable encourage you *not to think too deeply* about the growing distance, because when you *do* you feel uncomfortable. **Shame** may rise within. And if it ever does, then you know some part of you recognizes the wrongness of your actions, which may have begun innocently enough but now have taken ahold of you. Addiction is an example of something taking hold of a person, so that even when they want to step away, it seems impossible to break free.

And there are all kinds of addictions. I know that you are probably thinking of things like gambling, alcohol or drug addiction, or even addiction to pornography. We associate "addiction" with awful things, things we know can be bad for us. But we can also become addicted to things that we normally think of as positive or just benign. Caffeine can be a *help* to us when we are tired and must work into the night; but a cup of coffee or a bottle of pop now and then can easily become a daily occurrence…eventually coming to the point that you need that morning coffee just to get started…or maybe you have to have caffeine in the afternoon because you get a headache if you don't. We tend to ignore such signs of addiction, brushing them off as minor.

We also think of being accepted in our work and peer groups as being desirable, but when we develop a need for such acceptance – so that it affects our behaviors, so we begin doing things we wouldn't normally do as people of faith, just to please others – that is a sign of addiction. I've known both teenagers and adults who cannot be single for more than a few days because they are addicted to love, or at least the *illusion* of love, who believe they cannot survive without a significant other…and usually we would say love is a positive thing. And it is far worse when both love and acceptance – needing a sense of *belonging to* – control a person. This need can cause people to stay in the *most abusive* of relationships. Whether they are physically or emotionally abusive, the abuse is irrelevant before their need.

This is a tough addiction to break free from. I know, from personal experience. But I have another addiction I battle now. There is a subtle but important difference between being hard-working and being a work-a-holic. Being here in Raymond alone most of the time, this has become my greatest challenge, as throwing myself into my work is so easy. I must be very careful to recognize when I am working to an unhealthy degree and purposefully make time for myself and my own spiritual practices. I do not freely admit my struggles today to make you worry, but so that you might realize that *any one of us* can be in the throes of addiction at any moment. What is important is to recognize it, admit it to oneself, and then do something to break the cycle of addiction.

But, how do we recognize that an addiction has us in its grips? How do we know when we have moved beyond what is okay or even healthy? One indicator is that it becomes a top priority, maybe even controls your schedule. When it interferes with the things you know you should be doing, encouraging avoidance of other needful behaviors… If it causes you to ignore warning

signs that it is hurting you or others in some way… These things tell you that you have lost control over part of your life, that you are instead **being** controlled.

When something produces positive emotions within us, we can become addicted to it before we realize it. If it is considered a *positive* or *normal* behavior or activity, it can be difficult to recognize that we suffer from addiction. I am going to share with you about a friend of mine back in Monmouth who is a pastor. Actually, I have learned the most about addictive behaviors by watching her, rather than from reading books, which has helped me to look for them in my own life. She is one of the most impulsive, spontaneous people I have ever met, but also has several addictions. She knows that her weight is too high and wants it to come down, yet she is addicted to eating comfort foods, and to eating mindlessly, needing something to do with her hands while she works on computer (as pastors do a lot of these days) or while she watches TV or reads a book to unwind. She has always been an athletic and active person, so to balance this eating, she began running more, setting goals of running 2020 miles in 2020, 2021 miles in 2021, and so on each year. When her doctor told her it needed to stop because she was wearing down the cartilage in her knees too fast and was going to need knee transplants in no time, she ignored the pain as long as she could and kept running. When her husband begged her to stop, she let go of running, but refused to stop walking to meet these goals she set for herself.

She likes to get people to walk with her, and our families were Covid families together, so the summer of Covid she bullied me into hiking trails with her, even knowing I was in desperate need of an operation. My doctor was furious, I ended up in pain with complications, but she continued pushing me to walk with her both before and immediately after my operation. I went, because when I was with her she was forced to slow down a bit. I asked her to take easier trails, bringing peace of mind to her husband. My point in telling you this story is that she allowed her addictions to drive her to disregard her doctor's advice, ignore her family's pleading, let go of good sense and empathy for her friend…for me…all because she didn't recognize or at least wouldn't admit her addictions and seek help. A *pastor* who does not listen and has no empathy – this is a Christian who has displaced Christ from their hearts, who has put other things in God's place, without even realizing it. If it can happen to pastors, it can happen to you.

The good news is that once you accept that you have a problem, whatever might be controlling your behavior, whatever temptations beckon to you, you are also ready to accept that **you are not alone**. As I told you last week, strength can be yours if only you will come before God with your problems. As Paul famously declared in his letter to believers at Philippi (Philippians 4:13), *"I can do all things through him who gives me strength…"*

God will give you the strength – of mind, body, and spirit – to resist whatever temptation you face. His love for you is so great that nothing you are doing, nothing that you bring before him, will make him love you any less. His desire is to be in relationship with you. But it is up to you to come to him, to bring *whatever troubles you* to our heavenly parent, and ask for guidance and strength. He will guide you back to the path of Christ, slicing through the bonds of addiction according to his timing. For some, the change is immediate – like a smoker quitting by going cold-turkey – one day, they just stop. For others, it becomes a gradual process of letting go, of recognizing the hold something has on them and slowly backing off until one day the desire is gone. God knows you and what you can handle, what you are ready for. What works for someone else may not work for you, so we must trust in God's actions and his timing when we

ask him for help to break addictions. However, we need not wait for temptations to lead us down the path to addiction before we ask God for strength.

We are admonished in Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; **in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.**" Our paths can become crooked indeed when temptation is before us, if we do not surrender our will to God and depend on his strength instead of our own. Therefore, Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 10:12-13 *"**12** So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. **13** No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but **with the testing he will also provide the way out** so that you may be able to endure it."*

Now, you may be asking yourself, *How does Paul know that God will not allow me to be tested, or tempted, beyond my strength? Paul is not God. He does not know me nor my problems!* And that is true – Paul lived long ago. But Paul does not need to know us to know our strength. He only needs to know God, for our strength in trials and temptations comes from God, not from ourselves. Our strength comes from God's Spirit who dwells within us. Paul knows the power of the Holy Spirit and the directing or redirecting that is *the work of God's Spirit* within believers across the ages. After all, God **chose him** to teach non-Jewish people – to teach US – what God has done for us in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit.

God chose Paul, one who had zealously persecuted all who followed Jesus Christ, who claimed he is God's messiah. God chose Paul so that he might teach out of his personal learned humility. He could teach from his own experience that **even those who profess and desire to follow God can be led astray from following God's will**.

Paul knew the truth of his own words when he said, "*God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it*." When God redirected him, Paul had *become blind* at the revelation that he had been opposing the will of God, when he had believed that he sought to uphold it by persecuting Christians. He could have retreated into shame, merely leaving off from such persecution. But God gave him the strength to do an about-face, to not only stop persecuting followers of the Way but to turn boldly to teaching in the name of Jesus Christ. He didn't become proud in his zeal with this about-face, but chose to humble himself before God and before those he taught, claiming no power for himself, ascribing all glory to God. **He knew that God had provided him a way to escape the self-persecution that he could have fallen into.** He did so by *giving Paul new purpose* – commissioning him to go to the Gentiles to proclaim the Gospel, to bring those who did not worship God to the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ.

God will also not tempt us beyond our strength, because when we follow God then **Christ becomes our strength**. In him, all we are called to do is made possible, for, as Ephesians 6:10 commands, we go forward *by the power of God's might*. And **God has promised that all will be well when we walk according to our faith**. In Romans 8:28, we are told *"We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose."* It does not matter what our eyes tell us nor what the world believes about our circumstances, for *we walk by faith, not by sight* (2 Cor 5:7). When we *humbly* accept the leading of the Lord, counting on his providence of what is needful and on *his strength* to face whatever lies before us, through our faith we accept also the broader picture that keeps us from being dismayed at

any present circumstances. Our Father works things out for the good of his children, for us and for all God's people.

Thus, no matter what trials you face, no matter what temptations surround you, your hope in a bright future *remains* when you humble yourself and allow your desires to be *re-aligned to God's will*. Allowing this, we reject pride and things that are stumbling blocks to admitting our needs, even our addictions, to our Father. Believe me, since God's Spirit resides in you, he *knows* your difficulties already. Remember what we are told in James chapter 4 (4b-10):

> **5** Do you suppose that the scripture speaks to no purpose? Does the spirit that God caused to dwell in us desire envy? **6** But God gives all the more grace; therefore it says, *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* **7** **Submit yourselves therefore to God**. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **8** Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you… **10** **Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.**

There's a picture for you to hold onto – **The devil flees from you.** Evil flees before the Lord God, unable to keep hold of God's children when we submit ourselves to God, drawing once more near to him in humility. Evil cannot stand in the humble, but wreaks havoc with the proud. The apostle Peter affirms this, saying in 1 Peter 5:4-6

> **4** When the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.
>
> **5** … you who are younger must be subject to the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* **6** Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. **7** Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.

When we are proud within ourselves, in our own abilities, we make room for the devil, and invite evil to take hold of us once more. God's grace comes to those who kneel before him. Jesus himself taught this when, in Luke 18:11-14, he told the following parable:

> **10** "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.
>
> **11** The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, *'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.* **12** *I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'* **13** But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, *'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'* **14** I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

So, as you leave here today, remember to be humble, to remain strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. In him, all things are made possible that fall under God's will. You will have the strength you need in the moment to resist temptation, even to triumph over addiction, when you relinquish your will to God, for God's grace is given to the humble. So put your trust in him to make your paths straight once again if ever you face addiction or any form of temptation. Our God is loving and faithful; he will always reveal a path back to him. All *we* need do is follow it.

To God we ascribe, humbly, all power and might and strength.
To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.