

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As humans, we are always swimming in a pool of temptation. Temptation is nothing new, and began as early as Adam and Eve. We all know the story. God told them that they could enjoy anything in the garden of Eden. Anything! No limits, except for the fruit of that one tree. God would provide for their every need. But then there was that one tree. Can you just feel it? You can have anything you want, except that one thing. What is so special about that which I can't have? Moreso today than ever before, we suffer from FOMO (fear of missing out). Even Adam and Eve suffered from FOMO.

Temptation gets a bad rap in that by definition it is "a strong desire or drive to do something." When I think of temptation, I think of the evil or selfish things I am drawn towards. Yet, I could be tempted to help that person who dropped their groceries in the parking lot, or soothe that child that just fell off their bicycle.

But, in Lent, the focus is on temptations that lure us away from God. Distracting temptation can draw us away from what is best for us, are self-centered, and encourage us to choose short-term rewards over long-term harm. Everyone experiences temptation. It is normal, and not sinful in and of itself.

The common belief is that through our free will, we can choose what our response to temptation will be, and that free will is a function of the mind and soul.

When presented with a moral decision, we simply rely upon our knowledge of right and wrong to determine our actions. As Christians, we are taught that we have a spark of the divine within us that serves as our guide. We call it conscience. We believe that our moral compass resides there. Easy, right?

I suggest – not so! Being imperfect and fragile human beings influences how we respond to temptation. From a biological perspective, our actions are ultimately decided by our human brains. The spiritual and physical meet here. While our conscience steer us one way, our biology may draw us another way.

Science lesson: The fuel for our brains is glucose. In a study by Matt Galliot in 2008, he revealed that while the brain is only 2% of our body mass, it uses 75% of our glucose to function, and influences our reasoning, decision making, and impulse control. Low blood glucose or problems processing it, can result in aggression, criminality, impulsivity, trouble coping with stress, and difficulty in overcoming addiction. So, should we pound down a couple of Mountain Dews when we are faced with moral decisions? Well, no. Frequent surges of glucose can result in a ‘crash’ afterwards, and could result in long-term effects such as diabetes or insulin resistance. It is a balancing act.

Studies conducted in 2007 also revealed that exercises of self-control use more brain-fuel. Self-control is considered a limited resource.

When fatigued by our exercises of self-control, we enter a state called “ego-deprivation.” In other words, our fuel tank of self-control runs on empty. During these times, our moral decision-making is not at its best, resulting in agitation, anger, carelessness, and selfishness. After a mentally exhausting day, we may become more impulsive and ignore our spiritual/moral drivers.

The brain is a physical muscle in our bodies. Healthy nourishment and exercise can strengthen it, promoting more efficient use of our mental energy. Moral decisions use less fuel. Self-control becomes less taxing, second-nature, like driving a car.

One suggested exercise to improve self-control is to create a plan that sounds like, “If I this ..., then I will” Once the If/Then plan is determined, the next step is to verbally express it. You can express it to yourself, but also to others. Repeat it to yourself aloud. By often hearing yourself repeat your plan, you create a sense of self-accountability. Saying it in the presence of others, holds you accountable to the community.

Today, some call it self-talk. Those who are diligent in speaking lovingly and respectfully to themselves about themselves, come to believe that they are worthy of love, dignity and respect. Those who constantly criticize and demean themselves begin to believe that they are not worthy, cast-offs, unloved.

All very interesting, right? But, so what? The wisdom of our readings from 2000 years ago, reflects what modern-day scientists are saying.

Imagine the level of ego-deprivation that Jesus experienced in the desert. It was in this time of reflection and prayer that he wrestled with whether he was willing to be obedient to God in his ministry, or to avoid the inevitable pain and suffering, and cater to himself. He was hungry, tired, and alone – key ingredients to poor decision-making. Recall that Jesus was fully human, and likely felt human fear and anxiety. His divine nature may have compounded his anxiety giving him a clue as to where his ministry would likely lead him. Jesus could have thrown up his arms and said to himself, “I can’t, I won’t, do this!” I have to imagine the intense internal struggle he endured to resist using his divine power for personal comfort. But with each temptation, Jesus spoke aloud the virtuous counterpoint to the temptations. His self-talk, and public message, reinforced what he knew to be Truth, and his unconditional Trust in God’s providence, giving him the strength to push the temptations away.

Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, says, “because if you confess **with your lips that Jesus is Lord and** believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses **with the mouth** and so is saved. Everyone who **calls on the name of the**

Lord shall be saved.” Paul encourages the Romans to call on the Lord and to express their faith aloud. The self-talk, and public-talk of faith held them accountable and reinforced the strength of the words, and built up moral and spiritual muscle.

Every week we gather in community to express our faith aloud to ourselves and to each other. We profess our faith, call on the Name of the Lord, and share the spiritual food in the Eucharist to strengthen our spirit. Self-care, If/then strategies, and self-talk strengthens our biological moral muscles. Will you strain muscles? Yes! Will you succumb to ego-deprivation? Yes! Will you sometimes throw up your arms and say, “I can’t do this? I won’t do this?” Yes! Will God cancel our membership to the Spiritual Health Club? Absolutely not! When we call on God, he will spot us on our spiritual bench press, he will coach us on our muscle-building routines, and will cheer us on when we need encouragement.

May you call on God often! May you frequently remind yourself of your worthiness for love and dignity. May you strengthen your spirit through Eucharist, prayer, and self-talk. May you rely upon, and be held up by, your communities of faith, family, colleagues, and friends. May you find strength and endurance to resist temptations that draw you away from the love of God and each other. May you join Christ in His ministry, and be the voice of strength and truth. Amen.