

Infield Fly Rule*Spring Training Series # 4*

Luke 4: 1-13

03-15-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction**PP3 ALEX RODRIGUEZ**

Alex Rodriguez is the star third baseman for the *New York Yankees*. To date, he has hit 553 career homeruns and is on the fast track to beat Barry Bonds' all-time record. In December 2007, the *Yankees* signed A-Rod to a 10 year, \$275 million contract—the richest in Major League Baseball history.

However, this winter Rodriguez joined a growing list of players that have admitted to the use of performance enhancing drugs. After months of denial, A-Rod finally confessed to using steroids from 2001-2003 while he was with the *Texas Rangers*. He hit 156 homeruns over the three seasons.

Alex Rodriguez joins a host of other notables such as **Barry Bonds** in baseball's steroid scandal. Bonds was indicted for perjury and obstruction of justice during the investigation. Baseball commissioner, Bud Selig, may consider overturning Bond's record high 756 career homeruns.

Although Major League Baseball has cracked down on steroid use, it is still difficult to test for substances like Human Growth Hormone. Many modern records now have an **asterisk** in many minds.

As a baseball fan, I do NOT condone the use of performance enhancing drugs. But I understand the temptation. In competition, even a small edge can make a difference. If others are getting ahead through cheating, then it is tempting to make a bad choice. However, a wrong decision ultimately hurts both the game and the players.

I. The Garden

Of course, **temptation** is nothing new. It began in the very beginning. One day Eve was wandering through Eden's garden when the serpent appeared. It asked in sibilant syllables: "*Did God REALLY say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'*"

Eve's first mistake was answering the serpent. It is never a good idea to enter into a conversation with the Tempter; but First Woman did not know any better. So she corrected the snake, "*Oh, no. We MAY eat from the trees in the garden, but God DID say, 'You must not eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden.'*" Then stretching the Creator's words, Eve added: "*And you must not touch it, or you will die.'*"

The snake hissed in exasperation and answered, "*You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and **you will be like God!**'"*

After seeing the forbidden fruit pleased the eye, Eve took the serpent's advice. She ate her fill and then shared the stolen fruit with Adam. And the snake's words proved to be true in a way they never foresaw. On the far side of innocence, the eyes of Adam and Eve were indeed opened as they discovered the difference between good and evil. Ashamed and afraid, Man and Woman hid from God in the shadows.

Many have speculated about the original site of Eden's garden, but we all know its location. We have wandered down twisted paths with trees heavy with forbidden fruit. We never intend to taste, just to look, smell, and touch; but a voice whispers from the undergrowth to stop and rest for a while. See how attractive the tree is to the eye. Weight the fruit in one hand. Breathe deeply its enticing aroma. Nibble at the peel. Take a small bite. Consume the entire piece and then lust for more.

Temptation is a common, shared experience for humans living in a fallen world. No one is immune to the world's enticements. Even when we recognize the trap, the bait is still so alluring. We willfully ignore the future consequences of our actions for momentary pleasures in the present.

The devotional writer, Thomas a Kempis, wrote: *"No one is so mature and holy that s/he does not sometimes have temptations, nor can we be completely free from them . . . there is no one completely free from temptation as long as h/she lives, because the source of temptation is in ourselves."* (The Imitation of Christ, p. 36)

Oh, we claim it's really not our fault. After all, there is a snake in the garden that tempts us like a stranger offering candy to a child. Mimicking the old routine of comedian, Flip Wilson, we like to claim, *"The devil made me do it!"* Certainly there is an evil, supernatural entity that opposes God's rule in our lives.

But the darkness is reflected in our own depraved hearts. We are not good people who occasionally sin. We are sinners who occasionally do good. We understand firsthand the hymn's words: *"Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."*

Where is your garden? What forbidden path do you travel time and again? What fruit do you find simply irresistible? We are ALL tempted . . . but in DIFFERENT ways. We are unique individuals of spirit and flesh, strength and weakness, holiness and sin. What tempts you is not a temptation for me. Where I am weak, you are strong. However, we are ALL vulnerable in our own ways.

In Greek mythology, **Achilles** was the son of a mortal man and a sea nymph. His mother, Thetis, dipped her baby into the Styx River in order to make him invulnerable. Unfortunately, she held him by the heel and did not totally immerse him in the magical waters. In a great battle, Achilles was struck in the heel by an arrow and later died.

We *all* have an **Achilles' heel**, a weak spot, a favorite garden, a place of our greatest temptation. You know what it is. The devil knows. God knows.

Examples: gossip, greed, lust, illicit affairs of the body or mind, materialism, substance abuse, prejudice, selfishness, temper, language, a nonexistent prayer life, a Bible gathering dust in some closet, anxiety, worry, etc.

In the past, we may have experienced a depressingly regular cycle in life. Temptation, resistance, weakness, sin, then guilt, shame, and remorse. We promise to change and become different. Then the same cycle of temptation begins all over again.

II. Divine Initiative

Hear the good news: the future need not be the same as the past. Today we are invited to bring our past sins, present temptation, and future struggles to **Jesus**. Let us kneel beside our Lord in the wilderness and learn from his example. We too can conquer temptation. We can leave here a different people than those who entered this place.

We come to Jesus with the assurance that he understands our struggles with temptation. Our Lord lived an earthly existence in every way. In Hebrews, Christ is called our **high priest** who lived, died, and rose again for us. *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are—yet was without sin.”* (Hebrews 4: 15)

Before beginning his public ministry, Jesus spent **forty days in the wilderness** where he was tempted by the devil. After failing to entrap Jesus, Luke writes that Satan left *“until a more opportune time.”* Time and again our Lord faced the temptations of this world. He was tempted in *every way* as we are.

Hebrews goes on to make an astounding statement: *“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence (boldness!), so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”* (Hebrews 4: 16)

Our natural tendency in temptation and sin is to do the opposite. Like Adam and Eve, we hide in the bushes so that God will not find us. But this is the very moment when we need God the most. We can come into the Almighty’s presence with **CONFIDENCE**, knowing we will not find condemnation and judgment, but mercy and forgiveness.

III. Human Response

While we are in this world, we will continue to be tempted. With God’s grace, love, and strength, however, we can begin the lifelong process of overcoming temptation in our lives. Claiming God’s victory over temptation requires both **divine power and human will power**.

1) The first step is to recognize that temptation itself is not sinful. After all, Jesus himself was tempted, but he was without sin. Temptation is simply a **choice** with negative and positive potential. If we choose to give in to temptation, then we enter into sin. If we choose to oppose temptation, then we can grow stronger in faith. It gives us the opportunity to exercise our spiritual muscles and become more spiritually fit.

A study led by Jonathan Hore at the University of Western Ontario found that a baseball pitcher has *“a window of only .01 second in which to extend his fingers and release the ball. Extend them too early and the ball is high; too late and the ball is low.”* (“How to be a Control Freak,” *Newsweek*, April 1, 1996)

In the split second—or the long moments—between temptation and decision, we choose how to respond. Our response can lead to sinful action or holy growth.

2) Secondly, we must **want** to overcome temptation in our life. We can become contented and comfortable with our sin. It’s not *that* bad, we reason, especially in comparison with others. (Have you ever noticed that other people’s sins are much worse

than your own?) Besides, we like it. It feels good to share gossip, nurse a grudge, lose our temper, spend time with the wrong person, give in to our prejudices, ignore our neighbor's need, and satisfy our carnal desires.

As one author put it, we oftentimes pray: *"Lead us not into temptation . . . we can find it quite well on our own, thank you very much."* And we enjoy doing so.

The beginning moment of overcoming sin is to call it what it is. It is not a bad habit, a small weakness, a passing fling, or a harmless avocation. **It is sin.** God hates sin because it hurts others and us.

As God's children, we are challenged to **JUST SAY NO!** No to sinfulness and yes to holiness. No to evil and yes to good. No to temptation and yes to righteousness. **JUST SAY NO** so we **CAN JUST SAY YES.**

3) An important way we reject temptation is to oppose it from the start. This may be one of THE most important principles when it comes to dealing with temptation. I have shared this story before because I think it is so insightful. When I served as a hospital chaplain during seminary, a clinical supervisor shared an important piece of advice with us. He said, ***"All seduction begins with flirtation."***

"We must watch, especially in the beginnings of temptation, for then is the foe more easily overcome when he is in no manner allowed to enter the portal of the mind, but is met outside the threshold as soon as he has knocked, and there withstood . . . And the longer a man is inactive in resisting, the weaker each day he grows in himself, and the enemy stronger against him." (The Imitation of Christ, Thomas a Kempis, p. 37)

4) In order to overcome temptation, we can also learn from Jesus' example. When our Lord was tempted, he employed three spiritual disciplines.

A. Scripture.

Luke 4: each temptation is met with a quote from Scripture. When we immerse ourselves in God's Word, we find ways to creatively respond to temptation.

B. Prayer

Constant pattern of prayer is revealed in Jesus' life. This is most exemplified in the Garden of Gethsemane. Just as Jesus prayed, he told his disciples, *"Pray that you will not fall into temptation."* (Luke 22: 40) Jesus' prayer: *"Your will be done."*

C. Fellowship with others

Jesus surrounded himself with good friends. Twelve: three: one. Peter, James, and John accompany him into the garden. Even though they fell asleep and failed their Lord, at least they were still there. Friends and fellow believers hold us accountable. They support us in prayer. They encourage us. They inspire us.

IV. God's Power

One of the more obscure and confusing regulations in baseball is the **Infield Fly Rule**. If runners are on first and second with less than two outs, then any playable fly ball in the infield is an automatic out."

Although it is difficult to understand, the rule actually makes a lot of sense. Suppose a team has bases loaded with no outs. A batter pops up to the infield. If the runners advance and the ball is caught, then they can be thrown out for not tagging up. If they don't advance, the infielder could deliberately drop the ball and turn a double or even triple play. The infield fly rule solves the difficult situation by making the fly ball an automatic out.

Like the Infield Fly Rule, temptation can be a challenging and dangerous situation. However, God saves us from temptation. When we align ourselves with God's will for our lives and resist temptation, human will power is multiplied by divine power.

PP9 1 JOHN 4:4

- ❖ *"The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."* (1 John 4: 4)
- ❖ *"No temptation has seized you that is not common to man. God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."* (1 Cor. 10: 13)
- ❖ *"We are more than conquerors through him who loved us."* (Romans 8: 37)

Conclusion

While we are in this world, we will continue to be tempted. The garden contains forbidden fruit. The serpent hisses words of temptation. And something within us wants to respond. We are recovering sinners ever prone to temptation.

But we need not fall! God has granted us the strength and power to overcome temptation and live as his children. We can grow into the image of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

What's the temptation you struggle with today? Do you like your sin too much to give it up? Or are you overcome with a sense of helplessness from past attempts and failures? Or could today be the day you allow God to truly transform your life?

"He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world." We can be more than conquerors through him who loves us. Let us claim this day the power that is our birthright as God's children to overcome temptation in our lives.