EVERYTHING HAS ITS PRICE
Ted Schroder, March 1, 2009

The Season of Lent always begins with a call to self-examination and repentance; prayer, fasting and self-denial; and the account of the temptations of Jesus during his forty days in the wilderness. It is a reality check, a douche of cold water, to wake us up to the hard facts of life—everything has its price. If you want to go along with the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil, you have to accept the consequences—a life on the dark side, opposed to the light and love of God with all the sickness that entails. If you want to live in the light, and fulfill your God-given potential and become all that you are created and redeemed to be, then you have to stand, fight and kill the temptation to be otherwise. There can be no compromise or neutrality. Life in all its fullness and wholeness, what the Bible calls holiness, has its price.

St. Paul makes it very clear. “Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.” (Romans 8:12,13)

The follower of Christ has been given the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit to enable him to overcome temptation. We are empowered by the Spirit when we set our minds on the things of the Spirit. The Spirit enables us to exercise our will to resist temptation. Our natural bodies, with their sinful tendencies, are still going to want to be indulged. This doesn’t mean that followers of Christ are to be killjoys, who cannot have fun. But it does mean that there are moral boundaries, and virtues to be respected if we are to be authentic and faithful.

A belief that is popular today is that we should not deny the desires of our bodies. If you want a sexual relationship with a person, whether they be married or single, of your gender or not, then indulge yourself. If you feel that your personal identity is constrained by your biology, then change your gender. If you feel that you deserve the same rights and privileges as those who have committed themselves to marriage and family, then, sue for it in a court of law. If others disagree with you on the basis of their faith and morals then accuse them of hatred and make it a civil rights issue. If you feel that your sense of self-worth demands multi-million dollar compensation packages, then negotiate for it. If you need to be pampered and waited on, and agreed with, in order to feel good about yourself, then surround yourself with those who will indulge you. If you are obsessed with your own health problems to the exclusion of being interested in the problems of others, then dominate the conversation by indulging your preoccupations and anxieties. If your need to feel important requires you to be right on every issue then impose your opinions on others and never listen respectfully to a contrary opinion. Indulge yourself. Make yourself the center of attention. But the Bible teaches that just because we want something to feel good, or don’t feel like doing something we should, does not mean that we should indulge ourselves.

Paul uses the analogy of the athlete. (1 Corinthians 9:24-27) If you want to be successful it has its price—you have to go into training. You have to deny yourself indulgences, and enter into a strict regimen if you want to be your best. “I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.” Now this sounds like radical language. It is the language of discipline and self-denial. Paul calls it “putting to death the misdeeds of the body”. Give no quarter to the temptation to natural indulgence of our bodily desires for comfort and pleasure.

Jesus goes even further in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:27-30). He teaches us to metaphorically amputate that part of our body that causes us to sin. It is better to lose one part of
our body than to allow it to make you go to hell. In other words, if proximity to the source of temptation leads you into sin, then don’t go there. For example, if watching certain kinds of movies, or television shows, results in your imagination being filled with unworthy and depraved thoughts, then don’t watch them, don’t look. This is a real problem today because of the availability of so much pornography and violence on the internet and television. People have become addicted to voyeurism. Instead of avoidance of these sources of temptation they are indulging them. Paul said that we must kill, mortify, not indulge these temptations.

That this teaching of self-denial of the sinful desires of the body – mortification - is relevant to our culture today is seen in the moral relativism that is rampant in our society. Because we are all sinners, and all human, it even surfaces in the church. Pastors who preach one thing and are found to do differently bring embarrassment upon their congregations.

Ted Haggard, pastor of New Life Church in Colorado Springs for twenty years, and president of the National Association of Evangelicals, in November 2006 was caught in a sex-and-drugs scandal involving a male prostitute in Denver. Patton Dodd, who was on the staff of New Life Church for eight years has written, ‘One of his most legendary sermons was titled, ‘There’s No Such Thing as a Secret.’ Truth will out, preached Haggard, so you might as well confess your darkest impulses and actions. Haggard’s double life was a searing revelation to his family, his church, and his closest friends. Another legendary Haggard sermon was called, ‘How Much Is Your Sin Going To Cost Me?’ It was the pastor’s sly, wry way of reminding us that there are social consequences for our actions. When we lie, cheat, and steal, we incur debts of time, emotion, and material treasure that our family and friends have to pay. Have integrity, he said, so that no one has to clean up after your mistakes.”

HBO premiered The Trials of Ted Haggard, a documentary by Alexander Pelosi that followed the ex-minister through the dreary months following his fall. Dodd wrote, “The other night, I watched Pelosi’s documentary with several friends who had experienced Haggard’s downfall together. Afterward, we reflected on one of the benevolent outcomes of the tragedy: It forced us to deal in reality. Haggard had crafted the illusion of a perfect life. He rarely showed personal weakness, and he preached that faith in God and a can-do attitude guaranteed a life of happiness. Something always does – and always did – smell off about the ‘Jesus makes life perfect’ version of Christian witness. It’s not consistent with the Bible’s record of pain and suffering, much less than what we know of ourselves. But hey, it sure seemed to be working for Haggard. His smile was constant, his energy endless. His life was an argument for the power of positive thinking.”

“Haggard’s downfall was a clarion call to personal honesty. It challenged us to do the gritty work of growing in self-knowledge. John Calvin, echoing Augustine, wrote that there is ‘no deep knowing of God without a deep knowing of self.’ Self-knowledge is, or should be, a natural outcome of a proper Christian life, because confession is a core discipline. The Christian is invited to admit the full truth of his or her life – as our Scripture has it, to ‘walk in the light.’ Christianity should be a path of self-disclosure. There is no such thing as a secret.”

This problem is not just confined to sexual sin, or to preachers. It is common to all men and women who think they have got it all together, and are self-satisfied and self-righteous. Unfortunately, the failure to face the reality of our temptations to indulge ourselves, results in continued self-deception. We justify our self-indulgence. We make excuses for ourselves. We capitulate to our desires. As unpalatable as he may seem, St. Paul is the realist about human nature. Our only real hope is, not to give in, but to fight and defeat our temptations in the power of the Spirit. It is easier to give in to temptation, but it has its price. Real hope comes from putting to death, depriving our self-indulgent desires of their power to control us. That is the way to victory, life and peace.