

If a certain pill could make you suddenly and permanently smarter, would you take it? You'll probably never have to decide that, because no such pill exists, and, as far as I know, none is in the works. But what's definitely under study is how to increase the IQ of our yet unborn children. Apparently, there is more potential fruit from cracking the code of the human genome, which scientists have done in recent years. We're not yet at the place where we can customize our offspring in terms of how high their IQs will be, but there is significant research underway toward that goal.

At a top biotech institute in China, which is home to some of the best DNA-sequencing machines in the world, Zhau Bowen -- a high-IQ prodigy himself -- is using those machines to crack the code for intelligence. He and his team expect that, within a decade, they'll be able to boost the IQs of children by as much as 20 points. "In theory," says John Bohannon, writing about this for *Wired* magazine, "that's the difference between a kid who struggles through high school and one who sails into college."

Okay, so maybe we'll be able to have smarter kids. But here's a question: If they're more intelligent than we are, will they be able to make wise choices instead of foolish ones? Will they still buy tickets to a Seth Rogen or Adam Sandler movie? Will they still watch shows like *The Bachelor*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians* or shows like *the Real Housewives of Miami*? Or -- and this is huge -- will they be able to resist temptation better than we do?

I'm fairly certain that most of us would suspect the answer to be no. After all, sometimes super-smart people use their intelligence only to come up with cleverer rationalizations for yielding to temptation. Or what about the apostle Paul, that genius of the early church who made such an impact on our faith through his letters, that theologians sometime identify it as *Pauline* Christianity? He famously

said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Or think of bestselling author Keith Miller, no dummy by anyone's measure, who writes, "Temptation is a strange experience for me. I want to be God's person. But I also have a deep human need for approval, affection, and the satisfaction of strong physical and emotional drives. When wrestling with a specific temptation, I seem to change into a different person inside." He goes on to say, "I have a kind of tunnel vision and only see the object of my resentment, greed, or lust. All else is blotted out. I am no longer the smiling, friendly Christian, but instead am an intense and sweating stranger -- yet not a stranger, for I know this one so well. Reason waits outside the door of temptation for me. I argue against my conscience and dazzle myself with agile rationalizations. But by that time the battle is usually lost."

Even more to the point, think about Jesus. If anybody was likely to have a typo-free DNA, it was the only begotten Son of God, but our Gospel story for this morning finds him in the wilderness, "tempted by the devil." Now admittedly, the *things* he was tempted to do wouldn't tempt us, since we don't have the ability to turn stone into bread, leap off a temple mount without injury, or command the kingdoms of the world. But there's no reason to think that the enticing power of his temptations was any less than ours are. As the writer of Hebrews put it, "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."

No, whatever our IQ, or intelligence is, temptation is part and parcel of the human condition. It's as common as rain in Seattle, mosquitos in Minnesota, and honeybees in a field of clover. You can get an umbrella, bug repellent, or a bee hood, but at some point you're going to get wet, or bit, or stung. That's why the

13th-century Franciscan monk Saint Anthony advised, "Expect temptation with your last breath."

But another question: Even if higher intelligence could immune-ize us against temptation, *would that be a good thing?* Certainly, the petition in the Lord's Prayer -- "and lead us not into temptation" -- would seem to suggest that it is, but the account of Jesus' temptations may make us wonder. In fact, could Jesus have accomplished what he did without his time of struggle in the wilderness? Could he have done the will of God without first confronting the tempter within?

As Matthew records the story, the whole point of the temptations Jesus experienced in the wilderness, was to drive a wedge between Jesus and God. That Jesus did not yield to temptation means that he stopped that wedge from being driven in. And the writer of Hebrews linked Jesus' temptation with his ministry: "Because [Jesus] himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested."

It's instructive that the Greek word translated as "tempted" in the account of Jesus in the wilderness is *peirazo*, which carries the idea of testing, and scrutinizing, and even of disciplining. But, of course, to be effective, a "test" must be something that can be failed as well as passed or endured. Notice, too, that our narrative declares that Jesus was "led up by the Spirit" to be tempted. This implies that temptation can have a positive role. It can lead us to an understanding of our core being and help us to assess our limits. It can show us the strength (or lack thereof) of our commitments and values.

Of course, we most certainly need to distinguish between being tempted and yielding to temptation. "Lead us not into temptation" is a fair request, but, given that temptations continue to come at us, the petition is really shorthand for, "When we are tempted, help us not to fail the test." What's more, if we could actually

eliminate all temptations from our lives, we would also close one of the roads that can lead us to personal and spiritual development.

If temptation is a road, it's one with forks in it. The nature of temptation is that these forks force us to make decisions: Will we follow the leading of the Spirit, or the opportunity of the devil? Sometimes the pull of temptation is so demanding that the choice of turning at a major intersection is all we can see. At other times, it's in small choices, slight detours that, when followed one after another, lead us to ungodly destinations. The 15th century German devotional writer Thomas à Kempis wrote about these detours when he said, "For first there cometh to the mind a bare thought of evil, then a strong imagination thereof, afterwards delight, an evil motion, and then consent. And so little by little our wicked enemy gains complete entrance because he is not resisted in the beginning."

The Bible notes that same sequence by using four verbs when it tells of David's sin with Bathsheba, in 2 Samuel. First, David, from the vantage point of his palace roof, "saw" Bathsheba. Then he "inquired" about her. Next, he sent messengers to "get" her, and finally, he "lay" with her. There was no sin in the seeing of Bathsheba, but that was a fork in the road and, by inquiring about her, David was making the first of a string of decisions that would lead him to a moral collapse.

The problem with temptation, of course, is that we don't get to make just one big correct choice and the battle is won. Read in isolation, this account of Jesus in the wilderness can seem that way: Jesus refused to yield and that settled it. But if we read on in Matthew, we find that, when Peter tried to get Jesus to stop saying he was headed for suffering and death, Jesus replied, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me," revealing that the temptation, to turn off the road God wanted him to walk, was still going on.

So, we, like Jesus, have to keep deciding afresh, albeit in different circumstances, whether we will be who God calls us to be or something less. It can be hard to see it when we're standing at a fork, but we're actually more fulfilled when we make the choices that demand our best.

We may not be tempted by the things that tempted Jesus, but, in essence, our temptations have a commonality with his: to mistrust God's readiness to strengthen us to face our trials. Paul heard God say to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness," and the forks we encounter in the road, are good places to remember that for ourselves. But the thing is, we need to ask God for grace and power not only at fork intersections, not only at the onset of a temptation -- though it is certainly important at such moments -- but also beforehand in our regular life of prayer (which is no doubt why "lead us not into temptation" is one of the few specific petitions Christ included in the model prayer he gave us).

There's a story about a passenger on a boat on Lake Michigan during a violent storm far from shore. He was well known as a preacher. The storm was so severe that people began praying for survival -- saying the Lord's Prayer, reciting the rosary or murmuring silent prayers under their breath.

Some people noticed that the preacher wasn't anywhere to be found, so one man went looking for him. He found the reverend sitting on deck, on the bow, facing the wind and riding the swells as the boat rocked back and forth. The man shouted, "Why aren't you down below praying with us?" The preacher man said, "No need. I'm all prayed up."

Maybe that's the edge smarter people have when it comes to temptation: They know they need God's help every day and they stay prayed up. But it's a lesson we -- who aren't necessarily geniuses -- can learn as well. And now is a good time to do that, especially as we continue to observe the Lenten season. Perhaps some of

us have given up something during these forty days and we are hoping that we can continue to refrain from indulging in sweets, or caffeine, or from watching tv. Maybe we need encouragement to stay committed to something we have added to our spiritual practices during this special time of year such as: attending weekly Lent services on Wednesdays, praying every day, spending more time in scripture.

Thankfully we have some help when it comes to temptation....We have God's spirit that we can tap into through our worship and prayer. We have God's Word in Scripture to help guide us. We have one another so we can support, encourage, and lean on each other when we are enticed to give up or give in. And finally, we have the promise of Christ that he is always with us. As we witness in our story today, Jesus was able to avoid temptation and can most likely help us too! And thanks be to God for that. Amen