

Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life

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Don't Talk to Strangers

What situations in your life are often accompanied by crafty questions from others or your inner voice?

How do your responses open you to manipulation into destructive choices?

What spiritual practices could train you to respond in an invincible way?

Genesis 3:1-5 – ¹Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” ²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; ³but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” ⁴But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; ⁵for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

I) Warning Signs...

We instruct our children not to talk to strangers. We know there are dangerous people out in the wild. We are not so much concerned with those who are scary and mean, but those who present a kind, friendly image. And we know innocent children cannot tell the difference. We think we can, though. Unfortunately, many of us are just as likely to miss the warning signs of the truly dangerous. Let's receive God's wisdom offered in the Bible how to identify and defend ourselves against these enemies.

◆ **Know the type:** The kind of person who terrifies us is one who relates well to children. The kind who distracts kids by tapping into their emotions. Someone crafty enough to have learned what attracts kids, what they like, what they want. “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made (Gen 3:1).”

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Just as we instruct our children to be aware of their surroundings and beware of crafty men, we need to pay close attention and be wary of the crafty around us. The crafty are skilled at manipulating our emotions and expectations to cause us to think, say, and do things we otherwise would not.

◆ **Listen for cues:** Many of us have learned by experience when we are about to be ambushed by someone. Often, this comes in the form of a seemingly simple question with an obvious answer that is certain to put us in a vulnerable position. Wisdom would have us respond cautiously. When we do not, we find ourselves trapped into a choice between a confrontation or poor decision. The serpent asks, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden (v1)?’” This is a warning cue. The answer has nothing to do with the serpent—it’s an intrusion into a private relationship. The question is framed to be nearly the opposite of what God said, designed to probe any misunderstanding or emotional unease with what God did say. Sadly, the woman ignores these warnings and lurches into danger.

II) Danger Ahead...

Once past the early warning signs of a crafty enemy, we move rapidly into danger. Those pretending to care for us are often well prepared for the responses we might give. Calm, logical, appeasing, our enemy will attempt to smoothly draw us into their web. A young child enters dangerous territory as they share what attracts them, opening their heart with positive emotion. We also enter the danger zone when we let others provoke emotional responses that override our will.

◆ **Think before you speak:** Some of us teach our kids a polite way to respond to strangers. This solves the problem of how to teach both social kindness and protect them from danger. Jesus teaches the same lesson—how to respond invincibly—when he says, “Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No;’ anything more than this comes from the evil one (Mt 5:37).” A simple, memorized answer allows us to be socially polite without risk of emotional manipulation. Instead, an attack vector is opened for Satan as “The woman said to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden (Gen 3:2).’” Had she simply said, “No,” the conversation may have ended or gone in a different direction.

◆ **Guard your heart:** A child who speaks from the heart is vulnerable. They reveal what motivates and restrains them, what pleases and upsets them. A ruthless predator learns what to say or do to lure the child past the point of no return. The serpent also learns the desire of

the woman’s heart and what restrains her as she continues, “but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die (v3).’” Her response focuses on what is denied to her. It exaggerates the limits of that denial. It is conditioned on the negative consequence, not the positive love for God. Her heart revealed to her enemy, the woman is easy prey for a crafty enemy.

III) Point of No Return...

We train our children rigorously how to avoid speaking from the heart with strangers because we know once they reveal their inner being they do not control what comes next. Most people are kind and use this to build a relationship with kids. But ruthless predators urge kids past the point of no return with intent to harm. Adults, we delude ourselves into believing we control ourselves no matter what another says or does. Experience proves this false. The ruthless will ruin us, too.

◆ **Define your terms:** Someone decides to attract a child by offering a treat or toy. The child opens their heart, admitting they would like to, but they aren’t allowed to talk with strangers. A crafty predator might reply, “Let me introduce myself...now we aren’t strangers!” Once our heart is known, it is easy to justify what seemed wrong or dismiss what appeared to be a negative consequence. “But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die (v4).’” Both the woman and the child are likely to detect a total lie. The crafty do not uncloak themselves with overt lies—they distort the truth to relax our restraints so we act on emotional impulse in destructive ways. The same way one cigarette does not kill, neither will the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We give our enemy full control by permitting them to define the terms of our relationship with truth.

◆ **Fan the flames:** The final step into doom is reframing our relationship with our legitimate authority. One way this happens is by deciding we can assume what they think. Another is casting doubt on the legitimacy of authority. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God (v5).” God is not sovereign if I can be like Him. Our emotions provoked by thoughts of denial, doubt over whether God has the right to deny us inflames us into self-destruction. Our crafty predator has captured us, and we are his slave until rescued. A life of purpose cannot be achieved by hiding from strangers. Instead, we must master our tongue by letting God master our hearts if we are going to live godly lives of purpose.