

It's Far Too Easy To Buy A Tiger..... Tim Challies

A comedian jokes, rightly I'm sure, that it's far too easy to buy a tiger. Buying a tiger "is not an all-day thing," he says, "it's like an hour—I'll be right back with our tiger." We do hear about people who welcome big cats into their homes and we all have a pretty good idea of how such stories are likely to end. While we would be surprised to hear of a man being killed by his pet hamster or pet budgie, we are not at all surprised to hear of a man being mauled by his pet tiger. Why are we not surprised? Precisely because it's a tiger!

There are a couple of problems with welcoming a tiger as a pet. The first is that people welcome them into their homes when they are just little cubs. They are tiny, helpless, dependent, adorable. Who hasn't at one time or another had their heart-strings tugged by the pitiful mewling and playful pouncing of a baby tiger? The second is that tigers are undomesticated. They have not, over the course of many successive generations, been bred away from ferocity and toward docility. Though they may share ancestry with the common tabby, the family tree diverged far in the distant past. The best of them is just a few generations removed from the rain forests, from their natural setting where to survive they must be, in the words of the poet, "red in tooth and claw."

Welcoming a tiger into the home serves as an apt metaphor for welcoming a sin into the life. The sins we permit to enter the doors of our lives are often very small. They are as far removed from sin in its full form as a day-old tiger is from its fully-grown father. Yet sins grow up just like tigers grow up. They gain size, they gain strength, they gain ferocity. Just as it does not take long for a 20-pound cub to grow into a 400-pound adult, it does not take long for a wandering eye to grow into adultery, for a grumbling heart to grow into theft, for an angry spirit to grow into murder. As a tiger cub is a ferocious predator in the making, what appears to be a mere peccadillo is, in seed form, a disqualifying, home-wrecking, life-altering act of depravity.

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And then there is the problem of domestication. The sins we permit into our lives appear to be harmless when we first usher them in and we are easily convinced that we can contain them. No one welcomes a tiger into their home thinking that it will someday devour them. No, they are certain they can subdue its strength, coddle it into forgoing its ferocity, love it into docility. And in much the same way, a sinful heart is convinced it can look at those not-quite-pornographic pictures without being drawn into the full thing, that it can be emotionally attached to another person without eventually committing adultery, that it can dabble in gambling without going all-in. The sinful heart, like the owner of the tiger, thinks it can contain the ferocity, that it can be the one who masters its strength, who subjugates its power, who persuades it to go only so far but no farther.

I wonder if the man who has welcomed a tiger into his home is truly surprised in that brief moment between seeing it pounce and feeling its teeth close around his neck. He brought it in, he raised it up, he saw it get big and strong and powerful. He saw its claws form and its teeth grow. He knew its craving for death, for blood, for meat. It should have been no surprise that one day it turned on him, for while he may have been its owner, he was certainly never its master. And just so, we are never the masters of any sin. We introduce them to our lives on their terms, not on ours. Once we have welcomed them in, it is just a matter of time before they grow big enough to turn on us, big enough to kill us, big enough to do what sins always do.