

# Temptation: A battle between desires

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Last week we talked about worship not being just a song, but a lifestyle. At the center of that discussion was the role that desires play in our worship. As we live a life of worship Christ is to be our chief desire, our first Love, our highest allegiance, but on a daily basis this is challenged. Every decision that we make that has a moral dynamic to it will display our worship.

For example, what if we are sinned against? We can either choose the way of Christ and mercy, or choose the way of self and revenge. Or suppose that we are caught in a sin. We can either take the way of Christ and we can admit our fault, ask for forgiveness and work for reconciliation, or we can blame others, claim innocence, get angry and damage our Christian testimony. Or imagine that we encounter an opportunity for a secret sin. We can choose the way of Christ, integrity, holiness and purity, and flee from the sin, or we can choose the way of deception, lies and hypocrisy, and give in to the temptation.

Temptation is a battle between desires. It is a moment when warring desires come into conflict. Whatever is most important to us in that moment will win. It reveals what we are loyal to. It exposes what we worship. Whether it be internet pornography, gossip, laziness, cheating on a test, cheating on taxes or losing our temper, all temptation is a test or a trial that reveals our allegiances.

**But why is temptation so difficult to defeat?** The answer to that question goes all the way back to the beginning. In the beginning God created Adam and Eve, the first man and first woman. They lived in perfect communion with God, and all of their needs were met in Him. That is how it was designed to be.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve were tempted by Satan. They rebelled against God and disobeyed Him. Because of this, sin rushed into our world, and the hearts of man turned towards sin and away from God. As we read in Isaiah 59, sin separated mankind from God. Because of this, mankind's needs were no longer met by God because they had deserted Him.

We are spiritual descendants of Adam and Eve. We too were separated from God because of our sin. Because of this, for years our needs were not met in Him. We were like an orphan child who had to fend for himself. Up until the time that we came to Christ, we struggled to meet our own needs. We used

intelligence, money, reputation, beauty, greed, pride, deception, intimidation, gossip and many other strategies to try to get what we thought we needed, but all efforts were in vain. Any victory was short-lived and any provision proved to satisfy only for a moment.

That is the problem. We were trained to live for ourselves, but now we belong to Christ. Everything has changed. He has adopted us into His family and taken full responsibility for our well-being. Our only responsibility is to draw near to Him. He is our all-sufficient, heavenly Father. This is the truth of our identity in Christ, but we continue to be drawn back to our old ways of life, our old patterns of the flesh, being tempted to live like a spiritual orphan. When we drift from God . . . when we cling to sin . . . when we live for self . . . we distance ourselves from our adopted Father, who is ready and willing to meet all of our needs. It is in these moments that our perspectives are skewed and we are susceptible to temptation.

These truths are at the center of our struggle with temptation. Temptation at its core is a battle of identity and a question of trust.

In the moment that a Christian, a child of God, gives into sin and temptation, we are saying with our actions:

- “God, your wisdom is not good enough.”
- “God, your provisions are not enough.”
- “God, you don’t really know what is best for my life.”
- “God, I don’t believe you.”
- “God, I don’t have to submit to you, I can do what I want.”

When we forget the gospel, we start to turn to the world to meet needs that have already been met in Christ. We begin to question the wisdom and the goodness of our God. Like a teenager questioning their parents’ rules, we begin to question the lordship that Christ has over our lives. We begin to question the relevance of God’s Word to our situations. We are already children of our heavenly Father and have everything that we will ever need, but yet we still listen to the voice of temptation, as if God’s provision is not sufficient and the world’s ways are greater than God’s ways. Where is our contentment? Where is our gratitude? Where is our submission that should be fueled by the grace of God that has already done more than we could ever ask or imagine?

Some would like a series of steps to follow so that they could be victorious over sin, but the Bible does not offer that. The Bible gives only Christ. In Him we find everything that we need for life and godliness.

One of the key passages for temptation in the Bible is James 1:13-15:

***“<sup>13</sup>When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup>but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. <sup>15</sup>Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”***

In scripture the words that have been translated as “temptation” were at other times also translated as “test” or “trial.” The meanings were that closely related. A temptation is a test that shows what is most important to us. It shows what is ruling our heart in that moment. Temptation is a situation when we are baited, enticed or lured towards a sinful decision. An opportunity to either indulge in the forbidden or turn and walk away. Many times in scripture we see that a tempting situation served as a test to reveal a person’s heart and to refine his character.

In the book of Judges the Israelites had entered the Promised Land, but all the ungodly inhabitants were not driven out. Judges 2:22 says, *“I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did.”*

The temptations of Scripture were not merely situations where people could be drawn into moral failure. There was a redemptive aspect to the temptation. Temptation was a crossroads where one could rebel against God, and sin, or move towards God, and obey. In success, their faith would be strengthened. In failure, their idols would be revealed and surrendered anew to Christ.

Think for a moment about a school teacher who is a Christian. She teaches many students every day, trying to love them and teach them to the best of her abilities. But she has this one student. He causes such problems and she doesn’t know what to do about it. She prays to God to change the child’s behavior or get his family to move to another city, but nothing changes. But as she continues to pray for the child, God begins to change her, not him. Through this student, God reveals to the teacher her character flaws and the areas of her faith that are lacking. Yes, there is still the temptation to explode with anger and tell the child how she feels, but instead God grants grace and mercy, and the teacher learns to love the unlovable in ways she never thought possible. In the end, temptation was used to drive her closer to God and not farther away.

James 1:14 says, *“but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”*

Verse 14 explains where temptation comes from. All temptation that one faces begins from the evil desires that are within him. Yes, Satan tempts us where we are most vulnerable, but each person will always be responsible for his own desires and choices. It is as if we are walking through a crowded market with many vendors vying for our business. While none can touch us or force their will upon us, they all do their best to entice us. Those who are selling products that we do not care about are no challenge to ignore, but those offering products that promise to fulfill our longings are more difficult to refuse. This is even more difficult when Satan is the salesman. He is the tempter who knows our weaknesses. He knows our past failures. He also knows the lies that we believe (about ourselves and about God). In some ways, he knows us better than we know ourselves.

A phrase you might have heard some use in the past is, “The devil made me do it!” That will never be true. All temptations that we face will have begun from the evil desires within us. We will always be responsible for our own choices, but there are times Satan is definitely involved.

Satan tempts us where we are most vulnerable. 1 Peter 5:8 describes Satan with these words, *“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”* In John 10:10, Jesus tells how Satan has come *“to kill, steal and destroy”*. Satan also uses other people to entice us (Prov. 1:10) and twists scripture to hide the truths of God (Gen. 3). But even in his treachery, all Satan can do is tempt in the areas of our desires, hoping that we will give in to them.

We see this described at the end of James 1:14 in the idea of being drawn out or lured into sin. It would be similar to that of an animal that is lured into a trap that has been set with meat that it desires. Another example would be an unsuspecting fish that is drawn to a hook that is hidden by a type of bait that the fish seeks.<sup>1</sup> We see this similar idea when reading about the young man drawn out by a prostitute in Proverbs 7:6-23. Without the initial desire, the young man would not be drawn to his destruction. The desire determines the type of temptation.

We all have evil desires of one kind or another that originate in our hearts. Even with sincere efforts we do not have the power to change our own hearts. Only God can bring conviction of sin, distaste for the things of the world, and a new nature in us. Heart change can only be done by God. It is in Christ that one finds his Defender against temptation.

In the words of Madame Guyon’s (1648-1717), *“The surest and safest method for conquest is simply to turn away from the evil and draw yet nearer and closer to our God.”*<sup>2</sup> She likened it to a child who clings to her mother in total confidence of safety, after seeing a monster. *“The Lord will defend us from temptation; therefore our greatest responsibility is to run to him. Our energies are not to be spent fighting the temptation. Within ourselves we do not have the resources to win. Our energies are to be spent running to the Father. He will win the battle for us.”*

It is in turning with our whole heart towards Jesus Christ that we find safety and refuge. As this becomes our custom and our way of life, every encounter with temptation will propel us closer and closer to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

A great desire for God is the only thing that can dethrone one’s idolatrous evil desires. John Piper expresses this biblical principle in these words, *“I know of no other way to triumph over sin long-term, than to gain a distaste for it, because of a superior satisfaction in God.”*<sup>3</sup>

If drawing near to our heavenly Father is the key to victory over temptation, then how do I draw near to God?

One can think of drawing near to God in two parts. The first is, *“What in your life is keeping you from being near to God?”* It could be selfishness, unforgiveness, unconfessed sin, pride, disobedience or various other forms of sin. To draw near to God, these must be surrendered to God. One must repent from his sin and submit to Jesus Christ as Lord of every part of his life. By God’s grace anything that distances us from God must be removed.

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<sup>1</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), G1828, Logos 2.1.

<sup>2</sup> Madame Guyon, *“Short and Easy Method of Prayer,”* Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed April 25, 2013, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/guyon/prayer.xxi.html?highlight=temptation#highlight>.

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God*, (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1996), 11.

Secondly, things that draw us near to God must be added. God has given us many ways to nurture our spirit. These include Bible study, prayer, accountability with other believers, service, fasting, giving and other spiritual disciplines. As we add these to our lives, our spirit grows more prepared for the work of God in our lives. As we draw near to God, it puts us firmly in his arms and He then fends off any temptation that seeks to woo our heart and challenge our allegiance to Christ.

One must remember that these actions of drawing near to God are not strategies to changing our own hearts. Only Christ can change the hearts of man. These actions are merely preparing the soil for a fruitful harvest of righteousness in our lives as the Spirit works. By the grace of God may we draw near to Christ . . . and in this find the deliverance we have been longing for.

*“No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And 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 Corinthians 10:13)

*“Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”* (Psalms 73:25-26)

## Additional verses

- *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.* (Hebrews 12:1-2)
- *“Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace.”* (2 Timothy 2:22)
- *“Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.”* (Colossians 3:2)
- *“Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; for the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* (Matthew 26:41)
- *“Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not proceed in the way of evil men. Avoid it, do not pass by; turn away from it and pass on.”* (Proverbs 4:14-15)
- *“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.* (1 Corinthians 10:13)
- As Paul told the Galatians, *“live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”* (Galatians 5:16)
- The psalmist tells us, *“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”* (Psalm 119:11)

• When Christ was tempted by Satan in the desert, the first thing He did was to quote Scripture (Matthew 4:4–10), which eventually caused the devil to leave Him.

• *“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”* (Romans 13:14)

• *“Flee from sexual immorality.”* (1 Corinthians 6:19)

### Discussion questions:

1. What did you find most interesting or thought-provoking from this sermon?
2. In your opinion, what temptations seem to be the most difficult for people to break free from?
3. How would you explain this phrase in your own words?: “Temptation reveals what we are loyal to.”
4. In the moment that a Christian gives into sin and temptation, what types of things are we saying about God with our actions? (refer to page 1 if needed). Do you agree?
5. James 1:14 says, *“Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”* Who are we tempted by? How are our desires connected to the types of temptations that we face?
6. What type of things keep Christians from being as near to Christ as they can be?
7. What do you think God wants you to remember from this sermon?
8. What do you think God wants you to do about it?
9. Is there any way that we can help you with this?
10. How can we pray for you?