

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues

Topic 13 – Temptation

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Introduction

Temptation is unavoidable. It is all around us and ultimately inside of us. This scenario may sound familiar: You've had a busy day at work or at home and you feel "under-appreciated." Then a situation arises (free time, conflict, difficult decision...etc.) and you have two basic options: obey God and continue to go on doing hard work and being unappreciated, or sin a feel better about yourself momentarily since you "deserve" it. The Bible has much to say about these little moments of temptation. In reality there is much more going on than we realize while we are in the midst of them.

A 2011 study tracked the top temptations Americans face. The people surveyed said they struggled with the following temptations either "often" or "sometimes":¹

1. Worrying or being anxious—60 percent
2. Procrastinating or putting things off—60 percent
3. Eating too much—55 percent
4. Spending too much time on media—44 percent
5. Being lazy—41 percent
6. Spending more money than they could afford—35 percent
7. Gossiping about others—26 percent
8. Being jealous or envious of others—24 percent
9. Viewing pornography or sexually explicit material—18 percent
10. Abusing alcohol or drugs—11 percent

Whatever it is that entices you to sin more than others, the same truths from God's word apply. That is what is so admirable and honorable about the Scriptures. When asked if they tried to do anything specific to avoid giving in to a temptation, 41 percent said yes and 59 percent said no. When people were asked why they give in to temptations, the top four reasons were:

1. I am not really sure—50 percent
2. To escape or get away from "real life"—20 percent
3. To feel less pain or loneliness—8 percent
4. To satisfy other people's expectations of me—7 percent

To the praise and glory of our Creator, we have much better reasons for choosing righteousness rather than giving into temptation.

Definition & Meaning of Temptation

1. מַצְחָה – *Maccah* – Hebrew: "temptation" – Exodus 17:7 – "He named the place **Massah** and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying,

¹ Todd Hunter, *Our Favorite Sins* (Thomas Nelson, 2012), 237-245.

‘Is the LORD among us, or not?’” – Interestingly, the Old Testament lacks any passage saying that a person was tempted using this word, though there are many passages explaining temptations Old Testament persons experienced (e.g., Adam and Eve, Job, Joseph, David...etc.).

2. *πειράζω* – *peirazō* – Greek: “to try, make trial of, test: for the purpose of ascertaining his quality, or what he thinks, or how he will behave himself; to try or test one's faith, virtue, character, by enticement to sin” – So temptation comes from the same idea that we understand as a trial. The result of both words is the same in that the character or value of the tempted or tried subject is put to the test.
3. Temptation is not sin, but rather it is the giving in to temptation which becomes sin.
4. Temptation is destructive. When we give in to temptation we trust the tempter more than God and his commands. “Sin begins with mistrust of God, includes a craving for what harms one’s self, neglects revelation of truth and ultimately concludes in destruction.”²
5. Temptation can be good. “In general, testing and temptation are facts within God's world and constitute some of the tools through which he is bringing to fulfillment his redemptive purpose. Both trials (as revealing and stimulating character and progress) and temptations (understood as allurements to evil) may minister to the divine purpose, provided the outcome is positive (Jas. 1:12).”³

The Three Sources of Temptation

Temptation can come from three different sources: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

1. The World:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **For all that is in the world**, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, **is not from the Father, but is from the world.** (1 Jn. 2:15-16)

2. The Flesh:

For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the **members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.** Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Rom. 7:22-24)

3. The Devil:

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, **the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion,** seeking someone to devour. (1 Pet. 5:8)

Once again, temptation is unavoidable. Yet there is hope in God’s Word and his Spirit living in us.

² Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 64-65.

³ Walter A. Elwell, "Entry for 'Temptation, Test'". "Evangelical Dictionary of Theology". 1997.

The Three Forms of Temptation

Temptation appears very clearly in many passages of the Bible, but in Genesis chapter three, Luke chapter four, and First John chapter two, we see some recurring themes. From these three passages of Scripture, we can see that temptation typically takes on one or more of three different forms: the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the boastful pride of life. I John 2:16 clearly identifies these three forms of temptation as “all that is in the world.”

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the **lust of the flesh** and the **lust of the eyes** and the **boastful pride of life**, is not from the Father, but is from the world. (1 Jn. 2:15-16)

Two of Satan’s most important endeavors to tempt mankind occurred in the Garden of Eden and the Wilderness of Judea. He employed his best tactics to bring about the curse of sin and death on mankind and then to get the Messiah to forsake his mission.

In Genesis chapter three, Eve had been lied to and deceived by Satan who had taken on the form of a serpent in the Garden of Eden. Once she began to doubt the truth of God’s promises regarding eating of the tree, she was tempted in all of the three aforementioned ways.

When the woman saw that the tree was **good for food**, and that it was a **delight to the eyes**, and that the tree was **desirable to make one wise**, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate. (Gen. 3:6)

First, when she saw the tree as “good for food” this was the lust of the flesh. Second, when the tree was a “delight to [her] eyes” this was the lust of the eyes. Finally, when she believed that eating of the tree would make her “wise” this was the boastful pride of life. In these ways, Satan chose to tempt mankind to fall into sin and therefore come under the curse. Several millennia later, Satan attempted to use the same three tactics to get the Messiah to forsake his mission. Luke chapter four records the events of Jesus’ temptation in the Judean wilderness:

"If You are the Son of God, **tell this stone to become bread.**" (Lk. 4:3)

So, first we see Satan trying to appeal to Jesus’ flesh since Jesus had not eaten for forty days. Then Satan appealed to Jesus’ eyes as he showed Christ all the kingdoms of the world and then offered all of it to Jesus. All Christ had to do was worship Satan and Jesus would be given domain over all the kingdoms of the world.

"I will give You **all this domain and its glory** ... if You worship before me..." (Lk. 4:6)

After Satan’s first two attempts with the lust of the flesh and of the eyes, he tried the boastful pride of life. In order to approach this angle, Satan took Jesus to the high point of Herod the Great’s Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Surely there were large crowds in the temple courtyard and in the city surrounding the temple mount from their vantage point. What Satan offered is for Jesus to do an ancient world stunt-devil (pun intended) act by throwing himself off of the temple in order to be carried off by great and powerful angels. This would attract much attention and make Jesus almost instantly famous. It would have given him much about which to boast for the rest of his ministry.

And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, **throw Yourself down from here**; for it is written, 'HE WILL

COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU TO GUARD YOU,' and, 'ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" (Lk. 4:9-11)

In all three of these instances, Jesus quoted Scripture as he reminded himself and Satan of truth that made the luster of these offers fade. Christ's example is profound and inspiring. Satan's success in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve came largely from their inability to accurately remember what God had told them. Eve misquoted God in Genesis 3:3, and this opened the door for Satan to bring more doubt and confusion to her mind. Christ, on the other hand, quoted Scripture perfectly to fend off Satan's efforts to tempt him with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. There is a challenge here to the believer to know and cherish God's word in his or her heart as the Psalmist says:

You word I have treasured I my heart, that I might not sin against You. (Ps. 119:11)

While 1 John 2:16 does seem to sum up the nature and danger of temptation in the believer's life, the Bible has more to say to clarify and enlighten our understanding of temptation.

Verses Clarifying Temptation:

1. *Temptation comes from within, not from God.* Since God is in control of all things, it can be easy to blame him when we are tempted to sin. However, the Bible clearly states that temptations do not come from God.

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and **He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.** Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. (Jas. 1:13-15)

This is critical to understand in dealing with temptation and sin. If we believe that God is the source of our temptation, we will be led to question his divine character and deflect responsibility. This is a dangerous mindset to have. When we realize that temptation is coming from our own lusts, we begin to understand our responsibility to renew our minds and hearts, and to fight temptation in the power of the Holy Spirit. When a temptation is brought before a believer, they will only feel enticed by it if they desire what it offers in their heart. If their heart has no desire for it, then the temptation has little to no effect on them. This is why it is so important to have Christ as our ultimate desire.

2. *Temptation is never too difficult to withstand.* Another complaint Christians have is that they give in to temptation because the temptations with which they are faced are too strong. They feel as though they are overwhelmed by the temptation to the degree that they have no choice but to give in. However, God's Word corrects that thinking.

In Paul's first letter to the believers at Corinth, he begins explaining how not to give in to self-indulgence in the end of chapter nine. He compares the Christian to a runner and a boxer, both of whom are athletes who train vigorously to compete. Then, beginning in chapter ten, Paul uses the Israelites who died in the wilderness as a bad example of what it looks like to give in to the flesh. He says in verse six, "Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved." The ways in which they gave into their cravings and sinned against Yahweh were in idolatry, immorality, trying the Lord, and grumbling (vv. 7-11). Paul

then provides what might be the most encouraging, mind-blowing, and life-changing statements regarding temptation in the whole of Scripture:

No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will **not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able**, but **with the temptation will provide the way of escape** also, so that **you will be able to endure it**. (1 Cor. 10:13)

This statement serves as a promise to all Christians battling temptation. That promise being that temptation will never be too much to bear, and temptation does not just “overwhelm” us to the degree that we have no choice but to sin. Though we may “feel” that way in particular moments, we must remember that that feeling comes from our flesh when we are allowing it to rule our thoughts and actions.

The author of Hebrews encourages his readers on the same level as he proved that Christ was superior to the angels even though he was made a man during his earthly advent. As the author finishes up this section of his letter, he says that Jesus needed “to be made like his brethren in all things,” and this included him being tempted.

For since **He Himself was tempted** in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Heb. 2:18)

Later in the letter to the Hebrew believers living in Rome, the author warns about the sin of unbelief and tries to encourage his readers to avoid it by reiterating the reality and implications of Christ’s temptations.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but **One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin**. (Heb. 4:15)

Our High Priest is one who knows exactly what we are enduring. Some might object and say that Christ cannot know and understand what we endure since he was fully God and therefore could not sin anyway. While it is true that he was fully God, Christ was also fully man, and as such he endured much more than we ever will since he never did give in to temptation. Just as a runner who finishes the race at their full speed and at the limits of what their body can handle, Christ knows and has endured much more and much stronger temptation than we will ever know.

It would be pure pride to think that we need to endure temptation alone. We need to tap into the resources that are at our disposal in Christ, and that takes humility as we recognize we cannot endure temptation on our own. Additionally, when people come to us about their battles with temptation, we need to point them to Christ and his word.

Resisting Temptation

Many Christians take very surface-level approaches to resisting temptation, and while those tactics can help, they are not the most important element of resisting temptation. Just like many other facets of the Christian life, resisting temptation occurs most effectively when we walk in the Spirit and obey God’s word on a heart level. It begins with turning one’s mind to the right things before and

during temptation, then fixing one's gaze on Jesus, then coming under the guidance and influence of God's word, and finally involves being intentional to make no provision for the flesh.

1. *Turn your mind.* (Eph. 4:17-24; cf. Rom. 12:1-2)

Temptation has the power to cause us to walk in the manner of our former self if we choose to give in. However, according to Ephesians 4:17-24 and Romans 12:1-2, we have a new self that we should put on in replacement of that old self. That process of putting off the old self and putting on the new self is generated by the renewing of our mind. Therefore, if we are to resist temptation effectively we must turn our minds to the right things, to Jesus and the Bible.

2. *Turn to Jesus.* (Heb. 12:1-2)

As we turn our minds away from the temptations in the world that appeal to our old self in various ways, we need to turn towards Jesus.

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also **lay aside** every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, **fixing our eyes on Jesus**, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1-2)

The chorus of Helen Lemmel's hymn, "Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus," poetically reiterates this exhortation. It is true that when we do this, the temptations facing us will lose their appeal, and will grow strangely dim.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.⁴

Once we find our complete satisfaction in Jesus Christ, the appeal of temptation wanes significantly. This is why it is an insufficient approach to try to remove temptation through external tactics. Temptation will not go away. Therefore we need to draw near to God to the degree that we can concur in our hearts with David when he found his satisfaction and desire to be rooted in God as he fled from Saul in the wilderness:

A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah. O God, You are my God; I shall seek You earnestly; **My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You**, In a dry and weary land where there is no water. Because **Your lovingkindness is better than life**, My lips will praise You. So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. **My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness**, And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips. (Ps. 63:1, 3-5)

3. *Turn to the Word.*

We must also turn our minds to God's word as the means of resisting temptation. Since temptation comes at unpredictable times, it is vital to have God's word hidden in our hearts. For

⁴ Words & Music by Helen H. Lemmel, 1922.

example, if you are tempted to be angry it would be helpful to have James 1:20 memorized, which says, “the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.”

Paul urged Timothy to remember that God’s word is able to equip him for every good work after he had implored him to obey the things he had learned. “You...continue in the things you have learned... All Scripture is God-breathed...so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:14, 16-17)

4. *Make no provision for the flesh.* (Rom. 13:13-14)

It is also vitally important and wise to make no provision for the flesh as we seek to resist temptation. Paul urged the Roman believers to behave properly in the world and to not participate in the debauched activities offered in it. Accordingly, this was the exhortation he gave them.

Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.** (Rom. 13:13-14)

Just as people make plans to give in to their sin and walk in their flesh, we need to make plans to avoid temptation and walk in the Spirit. An arrogant line of thinking on this would be, “I don’t need to *avoid* temptation since temptation is all around me anyway!” Paul is saying the opposite to the Romans. He is telling them that they need to remove those provisions that would feed our flesh and its lusts. This exhortation needs to be applied specifically and differently in each believer’s life, but it does at least need to be applied.

Biblical Examples

We’ve seen how Adam and Eve mishandled Satan’s temptation in the Garden of Eden and we’ve also seen how Christ masterfully handled Satan’s temptation in the Judean Wilderness at the outset of his ministry. There are additional biblical examples from the Old Testament that can shed light on some practical ways to avoid temptation we might face.

1. *Abraham* (Genesis 14:17-24) – In this account, Abram (Abraham) had fought to retrieve his nephew Lot after Lot had been captured in a war. Upon his success Abram was offered goods by the king of Sodom (where Lot had been living prior to being captured). Abram rejected this offer because he had made an oath with Yahweh. He remembered his promise, and he remained true to it in obedience.
2. *Joseph* (Genesis 39) – Joseph was living in the captain of the bodyguard’s (Potiphar) house because the Lord had blessed him while he was living in Egypt. When Potiphar’s wife attempted to seduce Joseph he responded by clearly explaining that Potiphar had put him in charge of everything in the house except her since she was his master’s wife. Then he asked, “How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?” Joseph knew his place and knew if he were to give into this temptation that he would be ultimately sinning against God. As Potiphar’s wife persisted over a period of days, he eventually fled. Joseph sought to make no provision for the flesh.

3. *Job* (Job 2:9-10) – Job literally had everything in life taken from him. The only thing left was his wife, and she was not much help as she told him to “Curse God and die!” Job’s response shows his absolute and unwavering trust in God’s sovereign plan for his life and the adverse circumstances that can and do occur.
4. *Daniel* (Daniel 1:8) – As an exile in a foreign land, Daniel was forced to accept many Babylonian customs, but he made up his mind to serve God by not doing those things that would cause him to be defiled. Notice that he made up his mind in order to resist temptation.

Real Life Scenarios

1. *Yourself*: You have been involved in ministry at your local church for ten years doing something many consider to be “behind the scenes” and not many people even know you serve at all. You feel frustrated and unfulfilled often and it is difficult to watch other people who serve in more visible ways get so much attention. You frequently compare yourself to them to make yourself look and sound better in your own perception.
 - A. What temptation(s) is/are at the root of your issue?
 - B. How would you fight this temptation?
 - C. How would you know there has been success in fighting this temptation?
2. *Someone Else*: Bob is a salesman and has a lot of flexibility with his working time. He and his wife Jennifer have been married for seven years and they have three children. She runs her own small internet business which takes up all her spare time. Sometimes Bob goes alone to a movie during the day. Lately he has been going to “adult clubs” at lunchtime. He feels guilty and afraid. He wants to change but feels the temptation is too much to resist. At other times, he justifies his behavior by saying his wife is too busy for him so he deserves to indulge himself occasionally.
 - A. What additional information would be helpful to understand Bob’s issues?
 - B. What temptation is at the heart of Bob’s issue? How can God’s Word address it?
 - C. What changes should occur for Bob to manifest repentance?

Conclusion

Temptation comes at us from every angle and in every form. Graciously, God has provided a means of resisting temptation and choosing obedience to his holy word. Whatever your sin struggles are, God’s word has the power to keep you from turning back to that/those sin(s). As we bow in worship and humility to our Creator and bring ourselves before his word and walk in the Spirit, the things of our flesh, this world, and Satan will become strangely unenticing.

Biblical Solutions for Life Issues
Topic 13 – Temptation – Additional Study

1. After listening to or reading over this study, what insights into temptation were most enlightening?

2. What misperceptions (if any) about temptation did you have previously?

3. What sin are you most tempted to commit? How should you view that temptation and what does God’s word say about temptation in general or that sin specifically that would help you fight that temptation?

4. In what scenarios are you most tempted to sin? How can you “make no provision for the flesh” and avoid putting yourself in this situation?

5. What is the opposite of this sin? (e.g., anger – kindness, anxiety – trusting God, lust – self-control & purity...etc.)

6. How have you dealt with temptation unbiblically in the past?

7. David gave into temptation and committed adultery with Bathsheba. Later he wrote Psalm 51. Read it and write out what he learned about God, himself, temptation...etc.

8. What does Psalm 51:13 say David was going to do after having gone through this sin experience and repentance? How can you also do this in your life? What would keep you from doing this in your life?