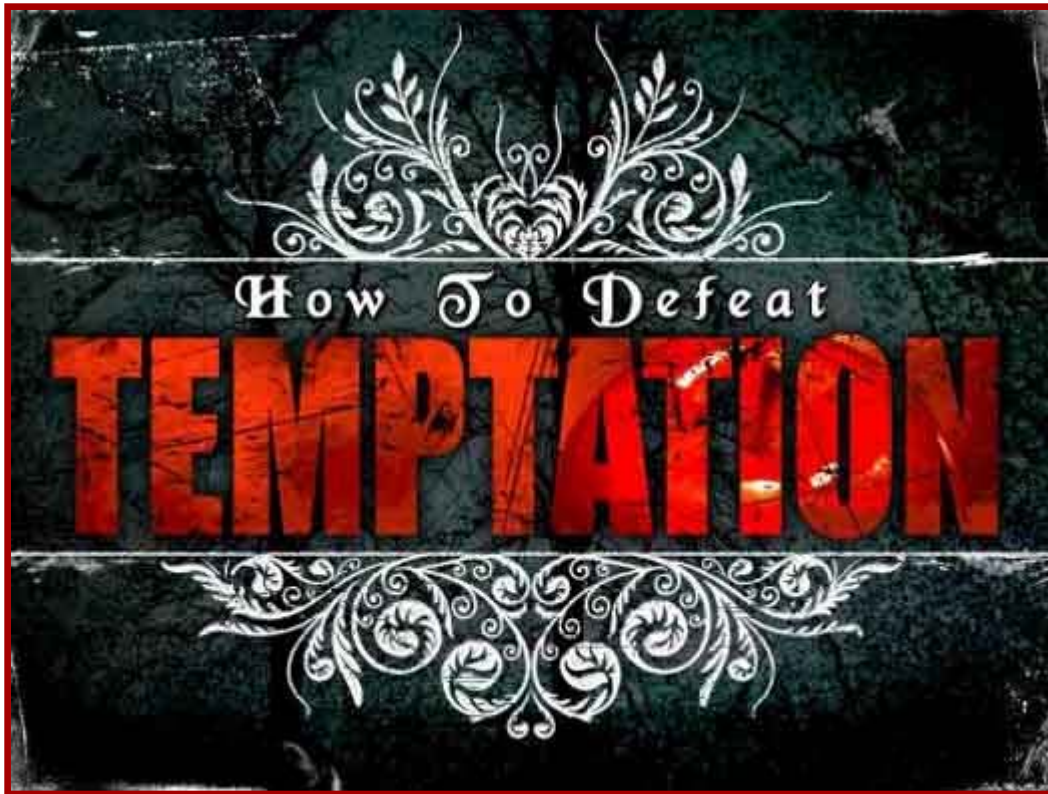


BEATING TEMPTATION! 2010



The Source of Temptation

God is unfailingly pure in His own nature and the source of all that is good in human experience. He is not the source of our temptations but their solution.

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (James 1:13-15).

In his brief comments on our vulnerability to temptation, James places the responsibility for it not on Satan but on us. Oh, he knows there is a formidable Enemy of Souls who seeks to destroy us for time and eternity (cf. I Peter 5:8-9). But there would be enticements to resist and disobey the divine will if no such seducer existed. There are some features of human

personality — not one of which is evil per se and none of which is fundamentally undesirable to our makeup — that make us susceptible to temptation.

The word translated "evil desire" (Gk, *epithymia*) at James 1:14 simply means desire, craving, or taste. Whether to translate it with a negative connotation as here (cf. II Peter 2:10) or with a positive one (cf. Luke 22:15) is determined by the word's context. In this text, it points negatively to those times and places where human beings allow our desires to "drag away" and "entice" us. Interestingly, these two words are fishing terms! They refer to baiting hooks and yanking in a day's catch.

Can you imagine a big bass swimming through calm waters with his school? He is minding his own business, flexing his gills for oxygen, and headed to a familiar feeding ground. Then he catches sight of a luscious worm! It's well below the water line and moving ever so slightly and slowly. It's a free lunch waiting to be taken! But the fish has to be careful not to tip its presence and alert another in the school to his easy meal. So he nonchalantly swims in its direction, sees it is even fatter than he thought, and makes a quick dart to gobble it up — intending to fall right back into ranks. The instant he darts and gobbles, though, he feels a jerk and is unceremoniously pulled from the water! Before he can figure out what has happened, he is flopping about on the bottom of a boat and gasping for oxygen — about to be lunch rather than get lunch.

Just a few minutes earlier, a man sitting in a boat had carefully threaded that worm onto a sharp hook. He knew better than to throw a bare hook over the side of his boat. He would catch only what he might happen to snag off the bottom — an old boot or clump of grass, maybe, but no bass. So he knows to be crafty. He will have to use a bait that is attractive to the fish. His goal, though, is not to feed the fish but to lure, entice, and snare him. He wills to end the fish's freedom and to put him in his hot skillet. But he does it by enticing him with a bait that appeals to one of his most basic needs.

The same strategy works with those of us who are human — all too human, at times. We have certain fundamental needs that are in no way evil. Perhaps it is a need for intimacy or achievement or security. But how shall we satisfy the need? There are wholesome and holy satisfactions for it in this world

created by a God who is neither tempted to evil nor able to tempt us to evil. Now that satan is in the picture, it is not hard to imagine him baiting hooks that will snare and destroy us with appeals to these basic desires. He'll dangle the prospect of immediate intimacy and hook you with long-term emptiness. He knows how to lure you with a shortcut to achievement and success that will hook you with a criminal record or — and this is much worse! — teach you that cheating or saying whatever you must to get what you want can move you to an outcome that pleases you.

Again, though, essentially the same thing can happen without satan in the picture. You can want and get certain things without cheating or lying or hurting anyone. But do you know when to stop acquiring for yourself? To say that you have "enough"? Not only to share but to give some things away? To move on to higher and nobler goals that put spiritual issues above all other things?

Three Avenues of Seduction

The Bible teaches that there are three paths by which temptation comes. Are you aware of them? Do you know their most common ways of presenting to us? Here is what the Word of God says:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (I John 2:15-17).

For the purposes of immediately practical application, we will look at the "cravings of sinful man," the "lust of his eyes," and the "boasting of what he has and does" with our more familiar terms sex, money, and power.

Sex

What John most literally calls "desire of the flesh" points to the fact that the human physical body of flesh is the source of appetites that call for satisfaction. We have morally neutral and necessary-to-survival instincts for water, food, rest, sex, and

pleasure. "It is therefore possible to take the phrase here to be a reference to the desire for sensual pleasure, especially sexual desire." Any of our natural instincts may be perverted by our preoccupation with it (e.g., gluttony) or by seeking to satisfy it by means that lie outside the revealed will of God (e.g., stealing).

It doesn't take either a Solomon or a rocket scientist to discern our culture's preoccupation with sex. There is an ever-more-evident willingness to defend the satisfaction of this natural human desire outside the will of God. The will of God with regard to human sexual behavior is nowhere stated more succinctly than in this single verse from the New Testament: **"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral"** (Hebrews 13:4).

The non-Christian world says that any appetite as basic as sex is to be satisfied whenever one chooses. After all, goes the refrain, it's nobody else's body and nobody else's business! But Christians can't say that. We have been purchased to God by the blood of Jesus Christ. Our bodies belong to Him. **"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body"** (I Corinthians 6:19-20). Christian discipleship means that one honors God with his or her body by — among other things — abstinence from premarital and extramarital sex. You know this message had to go there, right!

Sex is not recreation or a right of passage. To the Christian community, it is the exclusive communication of love and commitment within marriage. Against all the prevailing winds of our culture, the church must continue to say that sex is sacred and resist the temptations that pander to our natural and strong sexual desires.

Money

John also warns that the lust of the eyes is an avenue for temptation. Though capable of broader and narrow interpretations, "more probably the basic thought is of greed and desire for things aroused by seeing them."

I am concerned that Christians don't take the Bible seriously

enough for what it says about money. Some who offer hearty "Amen!" to preaching what the Bible says about sexual purity grow quiet when texts like these are cited: **"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have" (Hebrews 13:5a). "Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs" (I Timothy 6:10b). "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:23).**

Michael Douglas' line in the movie Wall Street is a classic summary of the spirit of our time: "Greed is good!" In a careless parallel to Douglas' movie speech, Donald Trump writes: "And while I can't honestly say that I need an 80-foot-living room, I sure get a kick out of having one."

Would going to hell be acceptable to most Americans, so long as they could go in a chauffeur-driven limousine? I believe I know the choice too many people would make between these options: "Would you rather win a \$250 million Powerball jackpot or go to heaven?" The burden of bigger, better, and more is heavier than anyone can take to heaven. Don't get me wrong, money and the things it can buy are good when received as a gift from God, consecrated to His glory and held with a light grip.

Held tightly, that world becomes the "deceitfulness of wealth" and chokes out the power of the Word of God from a human heart.

What a temptation money is in our culture! We judge ourselves and the people around us by the price tags we can put on our toys. We would be far wiser to trust only what we cannot lose and to put less faith in things so easily taken away.

Power

The third avenue for temptation is what John calls "the boasting of what [a person] has and does." And while this can be understood as merely an extension of the arrogance that goes with wealth used to impress others, I suspect it refers to the spirit of one who likes to have power over others. Thus he or she uses even sex and money with a larger goal of being able to impress or manipulate others.

One writer has characterized such a spirit with these words:

"Pride of life" will be reflected in whatever status symbol is important to me or seems to define my identity. When I define myself to others in terms of my honorary degrees, the reputation of the church I serve, my annual income, the size of my library, my expensive car or house and if in doing this I misrepresent the truth and in my boasting show myself to be only a pompous fool who has deceived no one, then I have succumbed to what John calls the pride of life.

Why do people get caught up in their pretentiousness? Why do they need to "build bigger barns" and impress more people? Why ply people with sex or money? It is ultimately a power play that seeks to have a vantage point high enough to look down on others — thus propping up a terrifically weak ego — or to gain enough actual advantage over another to use and hurt that person.

There are employers who sexually harass people who work for them and sexual predators who seduce their victims with fluff and flash. There are teachers who mistreat students and church leaders who bully members. Who are these people? They are people with badges or access who like to frighten people. They are petty people who like to tell racist jokes. They are mean people who like to taunt anyone they think is weaker or who has no way of defending himself.

Overcoming Temptation

Temptation always needs a partner in order to do its destructive work. Someone has to welcome it and open the door when it comes knocking. Otherwise, it is defeated.

Jesus Himself was tempted via the same three avenues that approach us. When satan tempted Him to turn stones into bread, he was appealing to the elemental desire to meet the needs of His physical body — in this case, not for sex but for food. When he offered Him the kingdoms of this world in exchange for worship, satan was trying to stir greed and the lust of His eyes. When the Deceiver tried to get Him to jump from the high corner of the Temple compound before the people and be rescued by angels, he was attempting to break through at the juncture of His ego by offering Him a way to gain power over the masses.

Jesus' experience lets us know that temptation and sin are not

the same things. That you can be tempted does not mean that you have sinned or that you must. It means simply that you must have a strategy for dealing with temptation in the power of the Spirit of God. Here are some suggestions that might help you.

First, never be surprised by temptation. No one is exempt from it, and no one is invincible to it. Something that you have prayed about and struggled with and thought you had overcome may still have an appeal to you at some weak moment. Don't be shocked by your humanity and weakness! In fact, a failure to take your vulnerability to temptation seriously could be satan's most effective way of destroying you. We must always be on guard. **"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" (I Corinthians 10:13).**

Second, stay in the Word of God and prayer for the sake of keeping your conscience tender to the Lord. It was not coincidental that Jesus responded to satan's temptations in the wilderness encounter with quotations from Scripture. His deep personal grounding in the Word of God made its guidance available to Him in His crisis moments. If you are not living with that same Word in your life, it will not come to you miraculously in your times of temptation. And Jesus taught us to pray for deliverance from satan and his seductions to evil (Matthew 6:13).

Third, be serious enough about your spiritual life to avoid people and situations you know to be unhealthy for you. All of us have the ability to play games with our own hearts to rationalize our presence in situations where we have no business. That person provokes you, but you continue being with her. He does not respect your personal boundaries and tries to seduce you into having sex with him, yet you still occasionally accept a date with him when he calls. The team you signed up to play softball with has turned out to be a group with whom you will never fit except by drinking with them after games. Nobody needs to tell you the right thing to do in situations like these. You simply need to decide how serious you are about following Christ.

Fourth, if there is an area of particular vulnerability in your life

(e.g., sex, money, power), dedicate a time of prayer and fasting to that issue this week — at least twelve hours and perhaps a full day. Fasting does not force God's hand. It signals your repentance, consciously opens your heart to the Spirit's purifying power, and puts you on heightened alert against satan. You have this promise from Jesus: **"But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you"** (Matthew 6:17-18).

Fifth, see the positive side to temptation. And what could that be? If you take it seriously, it will drive you near to your Father. Resisting satan has the effect of showing you the one safe place in all the cosmos. **"Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded"** (James 4:7-8).

Christian character results from the struggle waged against satan in the power of God's indwelling Spirit.

Conclusion

The Christian life is ultimately a positive experience of love, joy, peace, and the other fruit of the Spirit. But the same text that exalts those positive traits of virtue makes it clear that they cannot co-exist in a life that contains "acts of the sinful nature" such as sexual immorality, selfish ambition and discord. These things destroy good character and wholesome relationships.

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires," says Paul of the spiritual person's attitude toward temptation (Galatians 5:24). Where do you stand in this process of resisting satan and drawing near to God?