

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Some Problems Christians Face: Temptation - How do I overcome it?

There was once a wealthy lady who had a great estate and many servants. Unfortunately the driver of her coach and horses died and she advertised for a replacement driver. Three men were interviewed for the job. During the interviews she presented the applicants with a problem. "On the approach to my estate the road is very narrow with a steep incline at each side", she informed the coach drivers. "How near could you drive to the edge of that part of the road?" The first applicant answered, "I could drive your coach to within one foot of the edge of the road and you would be safe." The second coach driver was even more confident. "I could safely drive to within six inches of the edge of the road", he replied. When the last coach driver was presented with the problem he looked steadfastly at the lady and said, "Madam, I would stay as far from the edge as possible." He got the job!

My question this morning is, when we are faced with temptation what kind of coach driver are we like? Do we go as near to the edge as we can or do we make sure we stay as far away from it as possible? I am of course speaking of temptation to sin. Temptation is sometimes used in the Bible to describe trials allowed by God which have a beneficial purpose and effect but this is not our subject this morning.

Let's begin at the beginning and remind ourselves of the very first temptation in Genesis 3. We read, "Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.' Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:1-9).

This story illustrates what temptation to sin is and what happens when we give into it. Temptation is used by Satan to entice Eve to sin against God's express command not to eat of the tree in the midst of the garden. Everything had been provided by God for the benefit of the man and the woman. He planted the Garden of Eden and established a unique relationship with the humans He had created. Then Satan questions the authority of God. "Has God said?" It is important to understand this fundamental issue of obedience to God's will or to our own will. When we succumb to temptation the results can be devastating both for ourselves and those near to us. When we overcome temptation, we glorify God, grow stronger in faith and are a blessing to others.

Eve's first mistake was to add to what God had said. She replied 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.' God said nothing about touching the tree, only of eating its fruit. How often do we erect greater barriers than God makes in a vain attempt to protect ourselves rather than simply relying upon what God has said and going no further. It is interesting that in the last chapter of the last book in the Bible, Revelation 22:18-19, there is a solemn warning not to add or take away from the book's prophecy. It is a principle which applies consistently to the word of God.

In Eden, Satan first questioned God's word and then contradicted it. 'You will not surely die.' Doubt is placed in the mind and heart of Eve and also the promise of a greater experience - 'you will be like God'. With this possibility presented to her, Eve begins to see the fruit in a different light. Not as something dangerous but desirable. 'So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.' She moves away from the importance of obeying what God had said, to seeing the forbidden fruit as a means to a greater existence. She was attracted to it - body (as food), soul (as pleasant) and spirit (to give wisdom). Then she took the tragic step and ate. Temptation ran its full course and sin entered the world. The step she took destroyed her spiritual state, then that of Adam. Sin never confines its pain to those who commit it.

When we come to the New Testament, the temptation of Christ is recorded. In this wonderful story it is not the serpent entering into a beautiful garden to destroy man's relationship with God, but the Son of God, led by the Spirit, entering into a hostile desert to begin the work of destroying Satan's power. Eve, in spite of enjoying the many blessings of God, was quickly diverted from obedience to the word of God. Jesus, hungry and isolated in a desolate wilderness, confounds the power of Satan by total obedience to God's word.

Matthew's account of the temptation of Christ is given in Matthew 4. In Eden, Satan's tactic was, "Has God said?" In the desert, it is pretty much the same "If you are the Son of God..." Satan always attempts to instil doubt into the mind of God's people. First, he presses Jesus to command stones to become bread to prove He is the Son of God. Jesus demonstrates that He is the Son of God by His obedience to "every word of God", not the fulfilment of His immediate physical needs.

Afterwards, Satan takes Jesus up to Jerusalem and sets Him on a pinnacle of the temple. Again, Satan continues to cast doubts upon Jesus being the Son of God and presents the opportunity to prove it by a dramatic act using Scripture to support his case. Jesus will not be goaded into drawing attention to Himself by spectacular means but proves who He is by His understanding of the true nature of God's word.

Finally, the devil takes Him up on an exceedingly high mountain to show Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. Here, Satan abandons Scripture and offers Jesus the kingdoms of world in return for His worship. Jesus remains totally faithful to God's word and dismisses Satan with the words, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.' Satan left the Saviour and angels came to minister to Jesus. This marvellous victory of Jesus over Satan at the beginning of His ministry simply looked on to His complete victory through His death, resurrection and reception into heaven. In the words of Ephesians 4, "But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men. (Now this, "He ascended" - what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

The victory of Christ involves all His people. He wants us to have victory over temptation and the power of sin. This is the subject John takes up in 1 John 2 where he warns Christians not to love the world. He then describes all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh (the body), the lust of the eyes (the soul), and the pride of life (the spirit). These three things are the three great areas of temptation which defeated Eve in the garden and which Christ overcame in the desert. It is the same three areas of temptation which the Lord expects His people to overcome in their Christian lives. John adds to this, in verse 17, "And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever." The emphasis is clear again. Adam and Eve failed in doing God's will but the last Adam - Jesus, completely fulfilled God's will and now His people have the power to do the same. That power depends upon their obedience to God's word. As John writes in verse 14, "...the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one."

The way to overcome temptation is to apply and obey God's word to every circumstance. But how does this work in practice? What do I do when I am tempted to steal, cheat or lie? How do I deal with the threat of being unfaithful or immoral in my life? How do I overcome the temptations of a materialistic age? How do I escape from the very incidents which more and more confront Christians in a world full of moral and spiritual dangers?

I think there are several ways in which God helps us in such circumstances. In overcoming temptation, three things are very important, avoiding temptation, running away from temptation and resisting temptation.

Avoiding temptation.

Someone once said, "If you don't want the devil to tempt you with forbidden fruit, you had better keep out of his orchard." I think this is helpful advice. If a Christian is tempted by alcohol then the pub is not the place to be. One of the first things done in a drug rehabilitation programme is to distance the drug user from the drug supply. This makes sense. It has been argued that the Lord Jesus visited all kinds of places and Christians should be able to do the same. It is vital to understand that the Lord Jesus visited places with the express purpose and ability to seek and save those who were lost. There are Christians who are gifted and called to go into the most difficult places to win souls for Christ. But this is entirely different from Christians placing themselves in social situations where they endanger their spiritual welfare. The dangers of alcohol and drug abuse are more widespread now than ever and it is essential that Christians avoid circumstance which they know would compromise and ultimately destroy their testimony for Christ. I know several gifted Christians of many years standing and leadership who have allowed

themselves to be led by associates into situations which have destroyed their faith and families. The first way to overcome temptation is not to be in places where you will find it.

This is particularly a problem when we become idle or apathetic. We have an outstanding example of this in the Old Testament. King David's adultery with Bathsheba was the result of his idleness. He had stopped going to war and was letting others fight the battles he had once so valiantly won. As he walked about his palace doing nothing, he saw Bathsheba bathing and one thing led to another. The consequences of the king's sin was the death of Bathsheba's brave husband, civil war in Israel and the death of David's son, Absalom. Had David been with his army he would not have fallen prey to temptation. He was in the wrong place - do not make the same mistake!

Running away from temptation.

There are times when temptation comes head on and unexpectedly. Joseph had this experience when he was repeatedly accosted by Potiphar's wife. She was persistent in her unwanted attentions. In the end Joseph takes the only course open to him - he runs away. The Bible is very positive about "running away". In 1 Timothy 6 Paul writes, "But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness." Paul emphasises the importance of running away from spiritual dangers and pursuing things of spiritual value. This is a mindset which Paul writes about in Philippians 4, "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy - meditate on these things. The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you." By occupying ourselves with good things there is little space for the bad things. Do not be afraid of running away from the temptation of books, magazines, TV programmes, videos and Internet sites designed to corrupt the mind and consequently the behaviour. Take Paul's advice in Romans 12:2 "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect, will of God."

Resisting temptation.

In 1 Peter 5:6-9 the apostle writes, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world." Resisting temptation is not easy but it is rewarding. Luther wrote, "My temptations have been my masters in divinity".

One of the secrets of resisting temptation and the Devil is **faith** - the belief that "He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." So often we give in to temptation meekly because we think we are not strong enough to resist. We are not, but the Spirit of God is, and the struggle is one of having faith in Spirit's power to overcome our sinful nature's response to temptation.

The Lord Jesus also stresses the importance of **watching and praying** in Matthew 26:41: "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Watching has the idea of anticipation. If you see temptation coming, you can take action to avoid it. Prayer is essential to all Christian activity and especially in relation to temptation. The Lord's Prayer highlights this: "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen" (Matthew 6:13).

Temptation is something which has to be **endured** in the sense of fighting against it and not being overcome by it. Nor should we attribute temptation to God who can neither be tempted nor does He tempt anyone. Satan tempts the people of God in order to destroy their faith. God tests our faith to make it stronger. God never appeals to our fallen nature to tempt us into sin - that is the work of Satan. But God may allow difficulties and problems into our lives which test our faith and increase it. James writes, "Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning." (James 1:12-17).

There are of course **specific temptations**. The issue of temptation in relation to sexual matters is addressed in 1 Corinthians 7:2-5. "Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time

that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”

Paul teaches that sexual intercourse, for the Christian, is confined to men and women within the marriage relationship. He also teaches that in our marriages we should be sensitive to each other in regard to our sexual needs and not create situations which may tempt our husbands or wives to look for sexual satisfaction outside of marriage. Our demonstration of our love to each works to protect us from temptation.

Another specific and equally up to date temptation is **materialism**. Paul writes about this in 1 Timothy 6: “Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” Notice it is the desire to be rich which is highlighted. The pursuit of riches tends to draw the believer away from the things of God and to become absorbed by career, possessions and the esteem wealth appears to promise. The Lord was very direct. “You cannot serve God and Mammon.” The whole concept of contentment is alien to our society which has become obsessed with the “me” factor. But for the Christian “godliness and contentment” should be of greater value. This is assured by investing in our relationships with the Lord, our families and the people of God. We keep our perspective on material things by applying God’s principles of living within our means, not envying others and being cheerful givers. Epicurus said, “Wealth consists not in having great possessions but in having few wants”.

Overcoming temptation also has beneficial effects in our spiritual lives. The knowledge that God does not allow us face temptation which we cannot overcome should keep keeps us humble. Succumbing to temptation is our responsibility, overcoming it makes us stronger Christians. “Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.” 1 Corinthians 10:12-14.

Knowing what it is like to be tempted should give us a **gentler character** and enable us to help those in spiritual difficulty. “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.” Galatians 6:1. Paul had a genuine concern about those he felt were in danger of being tempted away from the truth he had revealed to them. He writes to the Thessalonians about this concern in 1 Thessalonians 3:5: “For this reason, when I could no longer endure it, I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter had tempted you, and our labour might be in vain.”

Temptation also enables us to experience the priestly character of the Lord Jesus. Christ, our High Priest, is presented as One who understands and aids us when we are tempted. “Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.” Hebrews 2:17-18. “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 4:15-16.

This does not mean that there was anything in Jesus, as there is in our fallen nature, which could be drawn away to sin. For He is God and cannot be tempted in that sense. His Manhood was entirely consistent with His Divine nature. But that the temptations He passed through were a cause of suffering in themselves. And as One who so suffered He is able to sympathise with His people in their struggles against sin and is able to restore them if they do sin.

As we begin this new week let’s make sure that, like the coach driver, we stay as far from temptation’s edge as possible and also make sure that, like John Bunyan, “Temptation provokes me to look upward to God”.

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