

HOW TO OVERCOME TEMPTATION

Matthew 4:1-11

Temptation is always a subject of interest because each of us knows something about being tempted. The word "tempt" means to entice or to seduce. By temptation we mean solicitation to sin. The first temptation took place in the Garden of Eden. It is significant and interesting that Satan approached the woman and not the man, the weaker rather than the stronger vessel, in order to get her to disobey God's explicit command. Satan approached Eve when she was alone. He sought to decoy her by getting her to doubt the goodness of God. His first insinuation to her was that God was unfair to her and to Adam by withholding something from them.

Satan influenced Eve to make the foolish mistake of taking from the Word of God, adding to the Word of God, and changing the Word of God. When Satan got Eve to question the love of God, he proceeded to deny the Word of God by saying to her: "Ye shall not surely die."

Satan appealed to Eve's fleshly appetite, to her aesthetic satisfaction, and to the elevation of her position. Satan appealed to her pride by promising her two things provided she would eat of the forbidden fruit, namely, that her eyes would be opened, and that she would be as a god, in that she would know good and evil. In this temptation of Satan there was an appeal to the physical, the aesthetic, and the intellectual. There was the lust of the flesh -- "good for food" -- the appeal to the physical nature; there was the lust of the eye -- "pleasant to the eyes" -- the appeal to the aesthetic nature; and there was the pride of life -- "tree to be desired to make one wise" -- the appeal to the intellectual nature. Beyond these three things Satan does not have anything to offer anybody. Just as soon as Eve yielded to temptation and ate the forbidden fruit, she influenced Adam to do likewise. Adam was far more inexcusable than Eve because he acted intelligently and voluntarily.

If we examine the temptations of Christ, we shall find three avenues through which Satan tried to divert the Master from the will of God. The first was that of physical appetite. At the time of His greatest physical weakness, due to His fast of forty days and forty nights, Satan tempted Christ to distrust God's care and to use His divine power to satisfy His personal hunger, by turning the stones into bread, rather than trust in God for relief. Christ won the victory over that temptation by one keen statement: "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."

Having failed in these two attempts, Satan's next appeal was to ambition. He offered Christ the kingdoms of this world on the single condition that He would bow down and pay homage to him. Our Lord found sweet recourse in the simple statement from God's Word: "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." Christ won the victory over the temptations of Satan by absolute dependence on God, accompanied by absolute faith in God, and reinforced by absolute obedience to God.

That temptation comes to everybody none of us can deny. Though appearing in different forms, and affecting different people in different ways, we can perceive a pattern in each allurement or inducement to sin. Satan always attacks through the mind, the most vulnerable part of man. Eve saw, coveted, and took. That was the downward path in which Achan walked also. Basically it is the pathway all of us tread when we yield to temptation. The mind is approached first with a suggestion, rather than a direct attack. No one is ever advised to sin in the beginning of the temptation. The side of sin is completely covered. The trap is baited, but only the bait is seen.

"You'll enjoy it," says the Tempter. "You'll like it. There's no harm in it. Others do it. Why don't you?" Then the temptation takes on a more desirable nature and a less reprehensible appearance. It looks attractive. It sounds good. It appears to be

adventurous. The voices that make these suggestions are quite pleasing, seductive, and persuasive.

In our consideration of temptation, we must take into account the fact that temptation is an inevitable certainty. We can no more live without encountering temptation than we can breathe without lungs. Instead of being unusual, temptation is something that is common to man. Children are tempted, young people are tempted, mature people are tempted, and even elderly people are tempted. At some time or other in life temptations come to all of us. Temptation is a traveling companion of every person who walks down the corridors of life. It does not have any respect of persons. Temptation cuddles up to the rich and the poor. It stands beside the intellectual giant as well as the illiterate. It travels with those who ride in royal vehicles and walks with the peasants. It does not slight any individual or skip any generation.

In itself temptation is not sin, although it easily and frequently leads to sin. For example, when Adam was first tempted, he did not sin until he allowed himself to desire the forbidden fruit. Had he dismissed the appeal at once, or had he declined the invitation to sin, Adam would not have fallen, but when he allowed himself to gaze at the forbidden fruit, and to think of how pleasant it appeared, and to contemplate how delicious it would be to the taste, and to ponder the advantages he would derive from it, he soon arrived at the point where he wanted it, and there is where he sinned, even before he reached out and took the fruit. Eve and Adam did not eat the fruit simply because it was forbidden, or in order to do wrong, or for the purpose of being defiant, but because they believed what Satan had told them, namely, that it would make them wise. There was not anything wrong about the desire to be wise, but the method of gratifying that desire was wrong because it was in direct conflict with and disobedience to the expressed will of God.

Temptation is only an invitation or solicitation to sin. Inherently temptation is neither good nor evil. It does not bring either honor or shame. As William Shakespeare once said: "It is one thing to be tempted, and another to fall." Temptation is a battleground upon which man's selfishness challenges God's will. Temptation brings to the front the conflict between that which one wants to do and that which he knows that he ought to do.

To tempt is to attempt to lead into sin. It will help those of us who are Christians to know the source from whence our temptations come. We can then be on the watch for them and on our guard against them. At the outset, let it be said emphatically that God does not tempt any person to sin. The Bible says: "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man" (James 1:13). God will never induce or entice any person to sin. It is wholly inconceivable that God would seek to lead anybody astray, or in any way design a trap that would place any soul in jeopardy, or cause anybody to surrender his noble aspirations to beastly desires, or influence any man to switch his allegiance from that which is eternal to a mere passing pleasure.

The first source of temptation is within. James 1:14 says: "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed." Temptation is the pull of something within or without a person to get him to cease to be what he ought to be, or to fail to do what he knows is right. Every human being has a natural and inner inclination to sin. If he so desires, man can court temptation, play with it, cultivate its friendship, and eventually become entrapped in its degrading web.

Bad associates constitute another source of temptation. John said: "These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you" (I John 2:26). When somebody tempts you to do wrong, there will not be any stain of sin upon you until you yield to the

temptation. It is a certainty that the adversary cannot get you to sin unless you surrender to him. It is encouraging to know that temptations from without can never harm your soul unless there is an overpowering desire within.

All temptations come directly or indirectly from Satan. Repeatedly he will tempt you with the acclaim of the crowd. For example, you may be in attendance at social gatherings where cocktails are being served Satan will say to you something like this, "Well, surely, you will not make an exception now! What does it matter, or what will it hurt, if you just take a little drink? Somebody will be upset if you don't. Join in, for the sake of being sociable." It is in situations like this that so many fail to abide by the will of God. They grade themselves down to what people may or may not think. But in winning the approval of their associates they lose the divine approval, which is far more important.

It is a sin to yield to temptations, which will exist and beckon us as long as we are here on earth. Although it is gloriously true that when we place our trust in Christ as our Saviour we were born from above and received a new nature, we did not lose the old nature at that time, nor since. The old nature is subject to all the blandishments of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The difference between Christians and the unsaved is that, while both are subject to temptations to sin, Christians do not want to sin, and they are heartbroken and penitent when they do sin. The very fact that people are distressed when they sin and long to know how to be victorious over temptation is proof that they have been saved.

The beginnings of temptation are the easiest to handle, and they involve us in the largest responsibilities. Every sin is first a thought and can be killed while it is in that stage. We cannot help thinking of things that are wrong, but we can keep from going on thinking of them. We can always find something else about which to think. It is only when we keep on thinking about sinful things that we fall into sin. As human beings we cannot help experiencing desires which are out of harmony with the will of God, but sin is actually committed when we yield to those desires.

In the presence of temptation, we should ask ourselves questions like these: "If I engage in this activity, will it degrade my personality? Where will it lead me?" Every deed is a step leading somewhere. It may be toward the land of godly living and genuine happiness, or it could be in the direction of degradation and misery. In the presence of temptation one should also ask the question, "Will my engaging in this activity cause another to stumble?" We do not live unto ourselves. God holds us responsible for our influence upon other people. That is one reason why we should shun temptation in order to avoid adverse effects upon others. Then, we ought to examine our personal temptations in the light of this question, "Would I be willing to permit those whom I love most to enter into this activity?" We may be sure that anything that would not be good for those we love would not be good for us. Finally, let us give this acid test to the temptations that we face: "If I yield to this temptation, will it meet the standard of God's will for my life?" How encouraging it is to remember that in all of His relationships Christ lived by the rule, "Not my will, but thine be done."

Satan takes great delight in attacking Christians suddenly, unexpectedly, and severely. Even at that, he cannot make much progress without human cooperation. You hold the key to the fortress, and he cannot enter unless you open the door.

If you want to live a victorious and joyous Christian life, you must learn how to overcome temptation and be governed accordingly. How can you, as a child of God, overcome the temptations that assail you?

1. You must realize that temptation is a normal experience.

God's Word says: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man" (I Corinthians 10:13). One of Satan's strategies is to use your natural inclinations as a means of leading you into sin. If you have the wrong desires, and you yield to them, it is a certainty that they will lead you to the wrong actions.

2. You must understand that it is possible to overcome temptation.

Knowing the ability of each and every individual, God does not permit one of His children to be tempted beyond what he is able to withstand. Paul assured the Corinthians that God would never allow them to be tempted beyond their ability to remain true and faithful. He said: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able" (I Corinthians 10:13).

3. You must avoid unnecessary temptations.

Some people expose themselves unnecessarily to temptations. They are subjected to various temptations because they have gotten out of the line of Christian duty. For example, one afternoon a certain mother forbade her son to go swimming in the river. Nevertheless, that afternoon, when he went to the river, he took his bathing suit with him. Upon missing him, the mother suspected that her son had disobeyed her, and had gone swimming. When she arrived at the river she found him swimming. When she asked him why he had taken the bathing suit with him, after she had told him not to go swimming, he replied: "Because I was afraid that I might be tempted to go swimming." Instead of avoiding an unnecessary temptation, the boy had actually provided his own temptation. Many others do the same thing. Everyone should heed God's warning in Proverbs 4:14-15: "Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away."

4. You must really want to overcome temptation.

Do you really want to win the victory over your temptations? If so, it is possible for you to have it.

5. You must use the Word of God.

The Psalmist said: "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word. With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (119:9-11). As you fill your mind with the good thoughts found in God's Word, there will not be room for sinful thoughts. Read, study, memorize, and quote the Bible. You would not expect to lead a healthy physical life unless you ate your meals regularly. Show the same good judgment about building up your spiritual life into a healthy, vigorous state. Daily Bible study is essential to victorious living and real Christian growth.

6. You must pray for the necessary strength.

Ask God to give you an instinctive repugnance to temptation to sin and then recoil from it. Call upon God to help you to overcome temptation. Earnest praying each day is as vital and necessary to you as is your daily food. In answer to such praying God promises to give you the strength that is necessary to overcome temptation.

7. You must yield yourself to Christ.

Paul said: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service: (Romans 12:1)

Yield yourself to the Lord completely and unreservedly and let Him have complete control of every area of your life. Such dedication will guarantee the strength that is needed to overcome temptation.

"Yield not to temptation, For yielding is sin;
Each victory will help you Some other to win;
Fight manfully onward, Dark passions subdue;
Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.

Shun evil companions, Bad language disdain;
God's name hold in reverence, Nor take it in vain;
Be thoughtful and earnest, Kind-hearted and true;
Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.

To him that o'ercometh, God giveth a crown;
Thro' faith we will conquer, Though often cast down
He who is our Saviour, Our strength will renew;
Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.

Ask the Saviour to help you,
Comfort, strengthen, and keep you;
He is willing to aid you,
He will carry you through.

-- H. R. Palmer