

Don't Take The Bait!

The best time to fight temptation is *before* it strikes.

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Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist everything except temptation." At first we may write off his jesting comment. After all, how often do we find ourselves falling into "deadly" sins such as murder, adultery, or drunkenness? Yet if we look closely, we will have to admit that we are not immune from a host of attitudes and actions that are displeasing to God. We often yield to these everyday sins—a snide remark, a harsh word, pride—before we even realize the presence of temptation.

God's desire is that we triumph not only over the "big" temptations, but also over those we so readily overlook. But how can God's design become real in our lives? How can we resist the temptations that come our way even when we don't detect their presence? In short, how can we live holy lives when it seems the only thing we can't resist is temptation?

According to the New Testament, the key to the Christian life lies in following Jesus Christ. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews declares that Jesus "was tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15). This reminder naturally leads us to His experiences of temptation as recorded in the gospels, especially Matthew's account of His wilderness encounter with Satan. Jesus' example sets forth three admonitions that apply to our struggles today.

On Guard!

First, the account of Jesus' temptation shows that if we are to overcome temptation we must *be on guard*. We must learn to recognize when temptation is likely to strike.

Jesus encountered temptation right on the heels of a glorious event in His life: His baptism. After seeing the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descend upon Him, and after hearing the voice from Heaven say, "You are my beloved son," Jesus went into the wilderness, a place of testing.

Likewise, Satan waited until Jesus was weak to tempt Him. Jesus hadn't eaten for forty days. No wonder Satan thought He would be vulnerable to the idea of turning stones into bread.

Remembering the mountains and valleys of our lives can alert us to occasions when we are likely to face temptation. As a Christian educator, my "mountaintop experiences" include the exhilaration of a lecture well delivered, praise from someone who has found my writing helpful, or the satisfaction of seeing an essay or book in print. But these high points often have pitfalls. They can easily become an occasion to compare myself with others or to build these little successes into a false sense of my own importance.

Conversely, I experience low points when I'm exhausted after pushing myself too hard. At those times I'm vulnerable to the opposite, but equally devastating, tendency to get discouraged by the thought of the apparent irrelevance of all that I do. When I was a pastor I felt like resigning every Sunday evening! Drained after a busy day of ministry, the prospect of launching into the entire weekly routine once again seemed overwhelming.

Being on guard also means that we avoid the trap of thinking we could never fall prey to the "big" sins. The Bible suggests that such an attitude harbors pride. And we know where pride leads! I still recall the pointed declaration of a close friend after he announced his impending divorce: "It could happen to

you." Indeed, unless we stay vigilant, we may discover we've become the hapless victims of temptations we thought would never be problems for us.

Being on guard also means taking stock of our own "pet" temptations. We need to ask ourselves, *What are the everyday trials that repeatedly cause me to stumble? In what situations am I most likely to run into trouble?* Perhaps a coworker always seems to bring out the worst in us—anger, jealousy, impatience, a biting remark. Or perhaps a certain unpleasant task brings out bitter resentment or feelings of inadequacy. I often encounter temptation when I meet highly successful people. I have to continually remind myself that my worth and the worth of others is not measured by what we accomplish, but by who we are in Christ.

Although our experiences differ, we all struggle with certain temptations. By being aware of the circumstances under which we're most often tempted, and the kinds of temptations we're most vulnerable to, we can often avoid a fall.

Stand Firm!

Jesus' example shows us that to be successful against temptation we must *be prepared*. Not only do we need to know when we're most likely to be ensnared, we need to know what helps us stand firm. Again, Matthew's narrative is instructive. He reports that in the wilderness Jesus was fasting and praying. Intimacy with His Father was fueled by times of spiritual renewal, and it played a key role in Jesus' ability to overcome temptation.

Jesus developed a robust relationship with His Father not only through intense prayer but also through a focus on the Scriptures. Consequently, Matthew indicates that Jesus responded to the beguiling suggestions of His foe with the declaration, "It is written." His response reflected more than mere knowledge of the Old Testament, for even Satan could quote from Deuteronomy when it served his purposes. What set Jesus apart was that through His immersion in the Scriptures, He knew the mind and heart of God.

For us as well, the strength to stand against every form of temptation lies in God's provision (1 Cor. 10:13). But what feeds the kind of intimate relationship necessary to withstand the everyday trials of life? From Jesus' model we learn the importance of prayer, not so much as a "spiritual discipline" but as an awareness of living each moment in the presence of God. Equally important is being so saturated with the Bible that its principles infiltrate our hearts. His Word needs to become an integral part of us, not just a collection of verses we have memorized. This, I think, is what the psalmist meant by his statement, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Ps. 119:11).

The ideal, then, is to live in the presence of God in such a way that everyday temptations go by unnoticed, not because we have unknowingly succumbed, but because we have unwittingly been victorious. Now and then God has allowed me to experience this dimension of His grace. One such occasion happened during a short bus tour to a European city. Wanting to see as much as I could, I ignored the interest a woman in the group expressed in accompanying me on my self-guided tour. Only when I learned the next day that she had spent the night with the bus driver did I realize there may have been a dimension to her interest I had not been aware of.

Sometimes temptations come predictably; at other times they arise when we least expect them. For this reason, we must continually follow Jesus' example and be prepared.

Be Wise!

This leads us to the third insight from Jesus' example. If we would be victorious over temptation, we must *be discerning*. Simply stated, we must be able to tell the difference between the seemingly innocent sounds of temptation and the true voice of God. Notice how Jesus was a master at discernment. On each occasion Jesus perceived that the devil was tempting Him to use His power for selfish interests. When confronted with the suggestion, "Turn these stones into bread," Jesus knew immediately this was contrary to God's pattern for provision. When Satan suggested that He gain a hearing through a miraculous public display, our Lord pierced through the misuse of Scripture. He saw through the diabolical scheme to get Him to short-circuit His calling to be the Suffering Servant.

To gain the victory over temptation, we too must be discerning. The key to such discernment lies in knowing God and His desires. Our focus ought to move beyond the "big" things we so readily see as matters concerning the will of God—choice of spouse, career, or where to live. Rather, we must catch hold of the fact that God's concern for our lives centers on who we are in the seemingly inconsequential matters of daily living. To handle temptation, we must grow in our awareness of God's own character, His ways, and His goals.

Jesus' example indicates, as well, that discernment means seeing through the falsehoods and rationalizations that could beguile us. The world's system seems to promote good ends, but it does so out of ungodly motivations or through questionable means. Being discerning means hearing warning bells whenever we find ourselves thinking: "Everybody's doing it"; "Just once won't hurt"; or "I can do this and still be a good Christian."

Recently this struck home for a friend of mine. He suddenly came to realize that his employer was demanding that he act dishonestly toward potential clients. The attitude of the firm had become, "Do what is necessary, even to the point of misrepresentation, in order to land a new contract." He could have rationalized his complicity by asserting, "Compromise is the price of success." But discerning the beguiling sounds of temptation, he chose the hard path of temporary unemployment and an uncertain career future rather than engage in deceit.

Can you resist anything but temptation? Then follow Jesus' example as He stood firm against all evil. Be on guard—know when you are prone to temptation and watch for it. Be prepared—lay hold of God's provision through an intimate walk with God. And be discerning—differentiate the sweet whispers of temptation from the true intention of our heavenly Father.

When we follow these aspects of Jesus' model we will begin to discover that we are growing in our resistance to temptations large and small.

***"Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.
The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."***

Matthew 26:41