

The Purpose of Temptation
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Last week I preached a message entitled A Way of Escape. It was based on 1 Corinthians 10:13 which says:

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.

There are several truths we learned about temptation from this sermon.

- Temptation is not sin.
- Temptation is common to us all
 No matter how overwhelming or insurmountable your temptation might seem, it is merely a common human problem that has already been faced and overcome by countless believers in the past.
- We saw that there are only three types of temptation.
 We find them in 1 John 2:16.

For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world.

- Every single temptation that any has ever faced or will ever face is in one of these 3 categories.
- We saw that God never tempts us to sin.
- We saw that God will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear.
- God always provides a way of escape.

We discussed several different ways of escape.

But we also saw that the way of escape is not always an escape *from* temptation! The text says: with the temptation God will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. To bear it means you will be able to endure the temptation.

- There is no temptation beyond what you are able to resist – with God’s help.

I remembered a story of two alcoholics who were living in the streets when a revival meeting started close by. They saw crowds of people and went to see what it was. While there – they heard the Gospel and got radically saved. They went their separate ways and then ran into each other years later.

One said, “God is so good. When I got saved He delivered me from alcohol and I’ve never had the desire to drink again.”

The other one said with a tear in his eye, “Yes God is good. Since I got saved there I’ve been tempted to drink every single day. But by the grace of God, I’ve never had another drink.”

Of course – we all want to be delivered from temptation like the first guy. Sometimes God does that. But sometimes he leaves the temptation and gives us the grace to resist it. And His grace is sufficient!

As I was preaching last week – as it often happens – thoughts came to me that were not in my sermon notes. One of those thoughts was James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face temptations of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

I just spoke for a few moments on this, but I knew immediately that I needed to do a follow up message called The Purpose Of Temptation.

This passage shows us the goal of temptation – that we become mature in our faith. We see a progression in this passage: Temptation → Perseverance → Maturity

We usually try to avoid all temptation, but this passage says it is a necessary part of growing to maturity in your faith. Your faith must be tested to grow! Testing develops patience, perseverance and endurance. And that eventually leads to maturity.

That’s why James said to face the temptation with joy! It’s going to work in you to conform you to the image of Jesus Christ. That’s the ultimate purpose of temptation. And knowing God’s purposes for temptation empowers you to resist it! Here are some other purposes of temptation.

Temptation shows us what’s in our hearts.

When studying the meaning of the word temptation in the original Greek I found that in addition to meaning to tempt – it also means to test and to put to proof. Prove as in the word assay, which means to test metal to determine its ingredients and quality. That’s what temptation does for us. It shows us the areas of our hearts that are not yet submitted to God.

We think we know our own hearts, but Jeremiah 17:9-10 says:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind.

Our own hearts can deceive us, but God tests us to show us what’s really in our hearts and minds. Proverbs 17:3 says:

The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.

Ultimately, God's purpose is to approve us – to test us to show that our faith is real and strong. But, temptation can show us impure areas of our hearts that we are completely blind to. James 1:14 says:

Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

So, temptation serves the purpose of showing us what's in our hearts so that we can repent of it and turn from it.

By the way – tests are not always about being tempted to partake of forbidden fruit. Sometimes God tests us by removing the sense of His presence. This happened to King Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 32. That chapter lists all the great things Hezekiah did, then it says in v. 31:

God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart.

This very same thing happens to all of us at various times in our life. We all have times where it seems like God is not there, God is not listening, or God is not answering.

It's tempting to turn away from God at those times. But now you know God has a purpose in it! His goal is to get you to press deeper into Him. His purpose is always to strengthen our faith! Because temptation shows what's really in our hearts:

Temptation humbles us

Deuteronomy 8:2-3 says:

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Temptation humbles us by showing us that there are things we cannot do in our own strength. Every single one of us has something in our lives that on our own we cannot defeat. This causes us to press into God and seek His help. But we're never going to get help until we see the need for it. Jesus said in Mark 2:17

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.

He is saying that the self-righteous do not see a need for a Savior. The self-sufficient do not see a need for help.

It is the grace of God that He allows us to see our own weakness – because that’s what drives us to Him. Temptation keeps us humble. Also...

Temptation tests our faith and commitment to God

Deuteronomy 8:2 says:

Remember every road that God led you on for those forty years in the wilderness, pushing you to your limits, testing you so that He would know what you were made of, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

Temptations are always a test of our faith. And remember this, God’s tests are always multiple choice. What do I mean by that? It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when God told Adam and Eve they could eat anything except the fruit of one tree. Why was that tree there? To give them a choice!

Everything was going fine until the enemy came along and tempted them to choose their own will over God’s will. That is the essence of sin and that is the same battle that rages in all of us this very day – choose you THIS DAY whom you will serve!

Satan always tries to lure us away from our commitment to God. In 1 Thessalonians 3, Paul told the Thessalonians about how much he missed them and how concerned he was for them. In verse 5 he said:

I was afraid that in some way the tempter might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless.

Paul’s concern was that the tempter – Satan – might have tempted them to turn away from faith in God. And that same concern goes for us! When temptations, tests and trials go on and on – there is a strong temptation to throw in the towel. We say, “This is too hard. I can’t keep doing this.” Like the Children of Israel – you get tempted to go back to your former life. And the enemy has a way of making you forget all the pain and misery of that life! He somehow twists it to make it look good to you.

But when that happens – when you are tempted to turn from God – that is the time to turn to God! That’s the time to press into Him more than ever before. Persevering through the times that test your faith is what builds your faith!

Temptation teaches us to rely on God’s Word

Deuteronomy 8:2 says:

God tested you so that He would know what you were made of, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

No one is able to overcome ungodly desires in their own strength.

Even if our spirit is willing, our flesh is weak. Jesus said in Matthew 26:41

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Most of us have tried to talk ourselves out of sinning and found that it was only effective for a while. Soon, Satan bombards us with more temptations until we grow weaker and weaker. Temptations are spiritual battles and need to also be fought spiritually, not just mentally. It is only with the help of the sword of the Holy Spirit, the Bible, that we can fend off our enemy. Ephesians 6:17 says:

Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

When tempted by Satan in the desert, Jesus did not rely on His divinity to banish the devil. He used the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. For each temptation, Jesus referred to scripture and replied, "It is written..." If Jesus relied so heavily on the Word of God, then we should certainly follow His example.

I told you last week that there are only three temptations: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. Those were the original three temptations in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:6 says:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

She saw the fruit was good for food – that's the lust of the flesh.
She saw that it was pleasing to the eye – that's the lust of the eyes.
She saw it was a way to gain wisdom apart from God – that's the pride of life.

Adam and Eve gave in to all three temptations and sin and death entered the world. Fast forward to Jesus after He was baptized by John and filled with the Spirit. Immediately after that, Matthew 4:1 says:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

Here's the interesting thing – remember from last week that the Bible says that Jesus was tempted every way we are, yet without sin. And in the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus with the same three things he tempted Adam and Eve with. Yet – where Adam and Eve failed the test – Jesus passed the test!

Jesus had fasted for 40 days and night and was hungry, so Satan tempted him to turn stones into bread. But in Matthew 4:4

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Jesus overcame the lust of the flesh with the word of God!

Then the devil took him to the highest point of the city to tempt him to throw Himself down and expect the angels to catch Him. But in verse 7

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Jesus overcame the pride of life with the word of God.

Then the devil took Jesus to a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and said he would give it to Jesus if He would worship him. But verse 10 says:

Jesus said to him, "Away from Me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'"

Jesus overcame the lust of the eyes with the Word of God! And we must do the same.

And here's an amazing truth. Every Bible verse that Jesus quoted was from the book of Deuteronomy. They were all spoken to the Children of Israel when they failed tests and gave in to temptation. And remember from last week – everything they went through was an example for us so that we would learn from their mistakes!

Jesus was tempted in every way like Adam and Eve. And where they lost, Jesus won! Jesus was tempted in every way like the Children of Israel. And where they lost, Jesus won! Hebrews 2:18 says:

Because He Himself has suffered when tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.

One of the ways He helps us is by His example. So we should learn from His example of how to overcome temptation by speaking the word of God.

Temptation teaches us to rely on God's Word!

Temptation teaches us the power of God's Word!

Resisting temptation builds our strength to resist temptation!

Our resistance against temptations is like a form of "weightlifting" that builds our spiritual strength and resilience. Pastor Deb and I lift weights six days a week. Lifting physical weights can feel painful as it causes tiny micro-tears in muscle fibers. But as our sore muscles repair naturally, they grow bigger and stronger. A reasonable amount of muscle strain and damage is therefore helpful and, in fact, necessary for increasing our physical strength.

Not everyone likes to lift weights. Most of us rather sit back and relax by a swimming pool somewhere. This, however, makes us weak and complacent over time. If we accidentally fall into the pool one day, we may not have the strength to pull ourselves out of the water.

Our Heavenly Father allows us to go through spiritual strength training so that we strengthen our resilience.

Temptation reveals the depth of our love for God

It's easy to say, "I love God." But the way we live proves it. Jesus said in John 14:15

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

This does not mean we must be perfectly sinless. But it does mean that we will love God more than our sin! And when we do fall into sin, we will be quick to repent because of our love for God. The way we respond to temptation shows how much we really love God. Deuteronomy 13:1-3 says:

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love Him with all your heart and with all your soul.

When we love God we will resist all temptation to turn from Him.

When we love God we will fight the temptation to love sin more than Him.

When we love God we will rejoice in our times of temptation because we know God loves us and is using everything we go through to make us more like Christ!

So, in the future, when you face temptation, you can do what James told us to do and count it all joy! You can do what the Bible says in 1 Peter 1:6-7

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

In the past you could find no joy in temptation and trials because you did not understand their purpose! Now you can rejoice because you know the purpose of temptation!

Temptation is showing you what's in your heart

Temptation is keeping you humble

Temptation is proving the reality of your faith and commitment to God

Temptation proves the depth of your love for God

Temptation teaches you to rely on the word of God

Resisting temptation builds your strength to resist temptation!

And most importantly – temptation is part of the process of maturing you and making you like Christ!