

OVERCOMING TEMPTATION

By Andrew Wilson
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1 Corinthians 10: 1-13

The greatest challenge we face on a daily basis is temptation. The kinds of temptations we face change as we mature, but they never go away. To the contrary, they grow stronger as we grow in the image of Jesus.

Today we're going to look at how temptation works; then we'll think about how we can use temptation to our benefit.

Paul shines a light on this topic in the tenth chapter of Corinthians. He's distressed about the news from Corinth. The new Christians there are breaking bad in all kinds of ways. Some of them are on the verge of being lost to the dark side and they need a harsh warning. But Paul wants them to know that it's not too late. The Lord stands ready to bless them with his life and power, if only they'll turn back to him. Actually, that's one of Paul's key messages throughout 1 Corinthians.

Paul has already addressed several alarming problems, including incest and an outbreak of lawsuits among the believers. But now he zeroes on the core problem: Many of the people are completely lacking in self-control. Like their spiritual ancestors who were led into the desert by Moses, they're caving in to every form of temptation. And if they're not careful, Paul warns, they're going to invoke the wrath of God.

"Don't be cocky!" he tells them. "Don't think God's going to overlook your sin just because you're surrounded by corruption! Every Christian faces temptations like the ones you face. And God will give you the strength and the means to overcome them. He's given you his Spirit to help you. So if you're wise, you'll beat a path back to God. You'll learn to say no to the sin that's preventing you from growing in Christ's image."

As Paul suggests, what was true for the Corinthian Christians is true for all Christians. So with the Apostle's wise counsel in mind, let's spend the rest of our time thinking about our own struggles with temptation.

One thing we notice about temptation is that it hits us in the place where we most need to grow. If I need patience, there will be ornery people in my life who will try my patience. If I'm tempted by envy, I'll soon have to work with someone who's smarter, faster, younger and better looking than I am. (Come to think of it, I've been surrounded by those people all my life!)

Another thing you notice about temptation is that it's opportunistic. It always comes knocking when we're weak, or when we're making even the tiniest bit of progress in our spiritual life. And

temptation is never satisfied with just one visit. From the moment we say 'yes' when we should have said 'no', temptation begins to stalk us.

Some time ago I was looking for gifts for Hannah and Holly and I came across an ad for an online women's clothing company. The clothes in the ad fit my girls' hipster hippie look so I clicked in. I looked over the merchandise and decided it was out of my price range. But just as I was about to exit the ad I saw a little square featuring a blonde supermodel in a tiny bikini.

I hesitated – I thought, "I really don't need to go there." But then another voice inside me said, "Holly's living in Kona – maybe she'd like a new bathing suit?"

So I clicked. And suddenly I was looking at 16 supermodels in 16 tiny bikinis. And after looking over each one carefully – you know, to see if anything was on sale – I said, "Wow – WOW!... \$59 for four triangles of cloth that barely add up to 8 square inches? I don't think so!" Then, after another long minute – or it might have been two or three – I clicked out.

You can probably guess where this is going. Ever since then, that clothing company has been bombarding me with ads. They appear on my desktop. They appear on my tablet and phone. And of course the ads don't feature sweaters and jeans. They feature bikinis and lingerie. Two days ago, for example, I was on Christian website reading a sermon and all of a sudden I was staring at three nearly naked women. And I'm thinking, "Holy cow, I can't escape this stuff even when I'm innocently looking for material to plagiarize for my sermon!"

The second we say 'yes' to temptation we open up a crack that let's in a trickle of poison. And if we continue to say 'yes', that crack eventually turns into a gaping hole. That's how temptation works.

In a minute we'll look more closely at how Satan uses temptation to beguile us and defeat us. But we should never lose sight of the good things that come from temptation.

Temptation always presents us with an opportunity to grow. When we say 'no' to a temptation, we take a baby step in the direction of the person God created us to be. Our spiritual maturity comes, at least in part, from resisting temptation, and overcoming doubts and fears.

Think about the different types of temptations we face. Notice that each of them is associated with a different vice and virtue. If I give in to the temptation to cheat on my taxes, I reinforce the vice of deceitfulness. But if I resist that temptation, and I always pay what I owe, I reinforce the virtue of honesty. It's by making dozens of decisions like that every day that we become people of character – people who exhibit the same virtues we see in Jesus. In fact, we don't really know who we are until we've been tempted and tried. Character must be forged by fire.

As we grow closer to God, then, we learn to see temptations as opportunities to do good. Temptation always gives us the chance to fulfill our highest calling, which is to grow in the image of Christ. That's why God allows Satan to tempt us.

How does Satan use temptation to trip us up? His strategy is subtle, but it's not hidden. There are five stages to the process. To help you remember them, we'll identify them on the screen with words starting with 'D'.

The first word is desire.

We tend to think that temptation begins with some object or person outside of us, but that's a mistake. Temptation always begins with a desire that wells up from deep within us.

Jesus drives home the point for us. He says:

From within, out of your hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these come from within and defile you.

- Mark 7:22-23

Temptation works by feeding a desire. Sometimes the desire that is stirred up is an unhealthy one. For example, it might be a desire to get even with someone that has hurt us. In a situation like that, temptation adds fuel to a fire that's already burning.

Just as often, however, temptation begins with a desire that's healthy and normal. It might be a hankering for a hot fudge sundae, or a longing for affection. In those instances, temptation works to corrupt our desires. It amplifies them, and fires them, and blows them out of proportion so that my wants become inordinate and even destructive to my body and soul. And now it's not enough for me to indulge in a big dessert on special occasions – I have to have feed my sweet tooth every three hours. It's not enough for me to enjoy sex with my spouse – I need to supplement my diet with pornographic images, or maybe other partners.

The main point is that, while people and circumstances and things sometimes seem to conspire against us, temptation really begins in our own mind.

Satan understands all of this far better than we do. He knows all the places where we're vulnerable. He knows, for example, that we all want to be financially secure. So his ploy is to show us all the shortcuts we might take to getting there. Maybe we could max out our credit cards? Maybe we could buy penny stocks on margin? Now there's a brilliant plan! His strategy is to stir up our desires so that we'll fulfill them in ways that are destructive.

Deception is Satan's next strategy.

When we're tempted we're vulnerable to lies. In the immortal words of Prince, "It's hard for me to say what's right when all I want to do is wrong." When we give in to temptation things only get worse. Our self-understanding becomes warped and blurry. We think our small compromises are no big deal. We convince ourselves that we have everything under control. But our dishonesty causes us to sink farther and farther into sin's quicksand.

Think for a minute about all the brilliant people whose careers have been destroyed because of their abuse of women – Harvey Weinstein, Charlie Rose, Bill O'Reilly, Matt Lauer, and dozens of others. How did all of those geniuses manage to mess things up so badly? Obviously, they couldn't see what was obvious to the people they worked with. They couldn't see that their behavior was venal, disgusting and unbelievably stupid.

The Bible calls Satan "the Father of lies" (John 8:44). Satan knows that when we're tempted we're likely to believe all kinds of nonsense. So his strategy is to deceive us into thinking our small, hidden sins are no big deal, that everyone is guilty of them, and that no one is going to hold us accountable.

Satan's next ploy is to cause us to doubt so that we begin to rationalize bad choices.

He suggests to our minds questions that make us uneasy, and that get us thinking about new possibilities: It is so wrong for to want a better life? Is God really concerned about all the minor details of my personal finances? Doesn't he want me to be financially secure? And after all, what's wrong with gratifying my desires as long as I'm not hurting anyone? Isn't that right in line with the mantra of our age?: Anything goes – I'm free to pursue anything my heart desires – as long as I'm causing no harm.

The doubts that lead us into temptation aren't rational. They're *rationalizations* that aren't based on sound logic or facts. They're driven by our need to justify our evil thoughts or our sinful actions. We tell ourselves that when we say 'yes' to temptation we say yes to freedom. But in reality, sin leads to slavery. It makes us slaves to our appetites. Real freedom comes when we're able to control our passions and say 'yes' to the things of God. That's the consistent message of the New Testament.

The next step – disobedience – is one we take all by ourselves. We can't blame Satan when we decide to cave in.

James describes the process. He makes it clear who's responsible when we give in to temptation:

[E]ach of you is tempted when you are dragged away by your own evil desire and enticed.

Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived my dear brothers and sisters!

- James 1:14-16

After our fall, Satan employs yet another strategy to defeat us. He sows the seeds of discouragement. He convinces us that we should give up on God because we've poisoned our relationship with him and he has given up on us.

At that point, Satan has us exactly where he wants us. He no longer needs to tempt us because our negative thoughts and destructive behavior have become habitual. His goal at that point is to convince us that we're beyond redemption.

In those dark times we have to remember God's promise of forgiveness and new life. God's love for us never ends. His gift of grace extends to the worst of sinners. All that he requires of us, in our moments of discouragement and defeat, is that we confess our brokenness and look to him to make us whole.

God has given us everything we need to defeat Satan and untangle his lies. Let's end today by thinking in practical terms about how we can deal with temptation on a daily basis.

Pray! Use God's 24 hour hotline!

Our immediate instinct when we're tempted should be to pray. God has a 24 hour hotline and he stands ready to help us. Others may think of it as lame or weak to ask the Lord to rescue you, but Satan knows in that instant that you have called in an invincible ally.

Remember, the Lord was tempted in all the ways that we are tempted. So we can be confident when we pray to the Lord that he understands our hearts better than we do and that he's fully equipped to protect and deliver us.

That's the most important advice you'll ever hear about overcoming temptation.

It's better to flee temptation than to fight it

Conventional wisdom tells us we should "resist temptation." But what we discover when we try to do that is that temptation only grows stronger. We have much more success in defeating temptation when we flee from it. Or better yet, when we redirect our focus to other things – to the work God has given us, or to things that are working well in our lives.

We have a great example in the Bible in Joseph. When he was propositioned by Potiphar's smoking hot wife, remember, he literally ran out of the room.

It's fascinating to watch what happens up on the sky when a hawk is attacked by crows. You can sometimes see this happening right here in the Crescenta Valley. Obviously, the hawk has all the weaponry it needs to take apart a crow, yet it chooses not to fight. It knows that where there's one crow there are 20. It knows that crows fight together and that they're too persistent to beat. So the hawk pursues a defensive strategy. It simply circles higher and higher in widening circles until its tormentors give up the fight.

When Satan and his minions are attacking us, we should follow the same strategy. Instead of trying to play offense, we should make a hasty retreat.

Figure out when, where and with whom you're most vulnerable.

Remember: Satan is an expert fisherman. He always baits his hook according to the appetite of the fish. So we need to identify the times and places when we're most vulnerable to unhealthy desires. We should constantly be asking ourselves: Where do I feel most tempted? Is it at home? When I'm on the computer at work? When I'm traveling?

And we should think about the people we spend time with. Am I most tempted when I'm with my friends? My co-workers? People I don't know? Or am I most tempted when I'm alone?

Homer's *Odyssey* provides a powerful story about understanding your vulnerabilities and taking preemptive action to resist temptation. Ulysses was worried because his ship had to pass by the coast where the Sirens lived. The Sirens, remember, were sea nymphs who used beautiful songs to charm passing sailors, causing them to throw themselves overboard to their death. Before they got near, Ulysses ordered every sailor to seal his ears with wax so they couldn't hear. He also had them bind him to the ship's mast. He told them they were not to untie him under any circumstances until they were well past the Sirens. When the Sirens began their ravishing songs, Ulysses struggled like a madman and begged to be free, but the sailors ignored him. And when they finally passed out of earshot, Ulysses' sanity returned and the sailors' ears were unsealed.

As Dirty Harry reminds us, "A man's got to know his limitations." So try to identify your personal pattern of temptation and then arrange your life so you avoid situations where your weaknesses show up.

Fortify yourself by practicing the spiritual disciplines

We all need to have a clear picture in our minds of the kind of person we want to become. That picture doesn't come from someplace deep within us. It comes from God. It comes into view for us as we worship, pray, read the Bible and hang out with Spirit-filled people.

When our souls are dried out sin looks more attractive to us. We're most vulnerable to temptation when we're feeling empty and dissatisfied. We use sin to fill the void that ought to be filled with God and his truth. That's why the spiritual disciplines have to be a part of our daily life.

Confide in Christ-centered friends

We also need to seek the counsel and friendship of mature Christians. Too many of us are trying to deal with temptation on our own. We aren't relying on friends in our church family to help us. Mostly it's because we don't want to reveal our weaknesses. We don't want others to know we're struggling.

We all need people in our lives who are willing to counsel and pray with us in confidence, especially when we feel temptation rising or we're dealing with a temporary defeat. Many people do that in context of a small group that meets regularly.

We've covered a lot of ground. Let's think now about where you go from here.

Remember: every defeat is temporary as long as you have the faith and humility and wisdom to crawl back to God and seek his grace. It's never too late to be reconciled with God; you're never so far gone that God won't welcome you back home. That was Paul's message to the confused and morally-compromised Corinthians, and it's the Lord's message to us today.

Remember, too, that the Lord was tempted in all of the ways that we are tempted. My instinct as a Father is to shield my girls from evil, but God the Father used temptation to strengthen his Beloved and prepare him for his battle against sin and death. He exposed Jesus to every form of temptation and used it to strengthen him for his battle against sin and death.

Jesus never faltered – he never disobeyed his Father – he never deviated from the path God had for him. Because of his victory, Jesus is able to grasp the full width and height and depth of our sin. More than that, he's able to defeat the sin that holds us captive and leads to death.

But he can only do that if we trust him.