

How Does Temptation Relate To Sin?

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In Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, Rochester pleads with Jane to go away with him to the South of France—a wrong thing for her to do. She stands up against the temptations of his argument, saying,

Laws and principles are not for the time when there are no temptations; they are for such moments as this. . . . If, at my individual convenience I might break them, what would they be worth?

Jane successfully endured and overcame temptation, as God has called us to do throughout our Christian lives. Temptation is a common part of life and is present wherever we need to make a choice. No one is immune: No matter what our age, sex, race, nationality, background—or even length of our conversion—we can be tempted.

Do you recall the last time you were tempted? It was probably not too long ago—maybe hours, maybe just minutes. If you are like most people, the thought rarely crosses your mind that you have been tempted. Temptation for some people might be an attraction to money. Others are tempted by food and drink, and some by sex, drugs, alcohol or heady thrills. For a great many the enticement comes from entertainment: movies, music, theater, sports.

Whatever it is, we are all susceptible to temptation.

Trials and Tests

Temptation is a serious matter because it begins the process of sin. The apostle James, pastor of the headquarters church in Jerusalem, provides some insight into this process:

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. (James 1: 12)

"Temptation" is from the Greek noun *peirasmos*, which can refer to trials or tests with a beneficial purpose or effect—or to trials or tests designed to lead to wrong doing. The outcome depends on how the tempted person reacts. Temptation of itself is not sin; one must accept it before it results in sin. Thus, it is a forerunner of sin, warning us that the potential for sin is not far away.

James continues his thought in verse 13:

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.

Temptation does not originate with God, and it is impossible to tempt Him to sin. His character is so strong and fixed that temptation has no power over Him. Nevertheless, God tests and approves us while we endure temptation. As we resist temptation, God teaches us lessons about His way of life, thereby refining our character.

Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, endured frequent temptation just as we do, yet He remained sinless (Hebrews 4:15). Though Jesus did not sin, life was not easy for Him. He earned His perfection as He won victory after victory in the constant battle with temptation. His focus on the Father was so intent that He never lost sight of the Father's holiness. He knew that all sins are committed against God, and He prayed for the strength to resist. And resist He did.

Where does the responsibility fall for our reaction to temptation? James answers:

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. (James 1:14)

Temptation is an appeal to think or do something contrary to God's law. We are drawn away from truth, virtue and God's standard of righteousness.

In this context, desires are forces of attraction in the wrong direction: We long for it, crave it, covet it, want it. We are enticed or attracted when we are offered hope of reward or pleasure (e.g., food, drink, sex, money, drugs, entertainment).

The verbs "drawn away" and "enticed" derive from the activities of fishing and hunting. "Enticed" usually describes the drawing of fish out of their original retreat. We are tantalized, as fish are with bait. What is on the end of a fishing line? A LURE! James pictures man's desire first attracting his attention and persuading him to approach the forbidden thing, and second, luring him by means of bait to yield to the temptation.

Another analogy that illustrates the force of enticement is that of a magnet. If one places a small piece of iron close to a magnet, invisible forces reach out from the magnet to attract the iron. By moving the piece of iron a little closer, the attraction intensifies. Nudge the iron still closer, and the magnet will draw it all the way to itself. The closer one moves to a desired thing or the more one's interest grows, the greater and greater the pull becomes.

Who does the luring and enticing? Who does the tempting? Paul calls Satan "the Tempter" in I Thessalonians 3:5: "The tempter had tempted you." "Tempter" is the present participle of the Greek word *peirazo*, which basically means "to tempt." When preceded by an article, it literally means "the (one) tempting." Satan uses temptation to entice us into sin (Matthew 4:1). James 4:7 says, "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." Following Christ's example in Matthew 4:1-11, we should strongly resist the temptations of Satan, causing him to flee from us.

Sin Spawns Death

In James 1:15, the apostle changes his description from a snare to conception and birth:

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

Notice the reference to the growth of a person from fetus to adult—from complete innocence to corruption by the world.

First, temptation comes when desire, like a mother, conceives and "gives birth to sin." Then sin, the child of desire, develops until it is full-grown. When sin is full-grown, it becomes a way of life that

without repentance ends in death. Paul concurs in Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death." God says through the prophet Ezekiel:

The soul who sins shall die. . . . When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies. (Ezekiel 18:4, 26)

"Brings forth" in James 1:15 is a phrase Greeks used to refer to an animal giving birth. It means that sin "spawns" death. This suggests that man, once conquered by desire, becomes less than human, sinking to the level of a beast. He has not progressed to be more like God but has regressed to the moral level of animals.

To summarize, temptation begins the process to sin and ends in death. God plays no part in tempting us; to the contrary, we are either drawn away by our own desires or enticed by Satan. Illicit desire begets sin, which in turn spawns tremendous destruction and—eventually—death. We can diagram the process as follows:

Temptation Desire Sin Death!

Temptation and Deception

Deception often accompanies temptation, and James recognizes this with a warning in verse 16: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren." How do we avoid being deceived?

Several factors contribute to avoiding deception, but a major one is simply staying alert. The writers of the Bible often caution us to stay awake, be sober, watch, be aware, walk circumspectly and so on. James echoes these thoughts in verse 19:

Therefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

Putting it more generally, he tells us to listen and observe carefully and wisely choose our course of action.

In Matthew 26:41 Christ admonishes the disciples concerning temptation when He went to pray in Gethsemane:

Watch and pray, lest you enter into [or yield to] temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

The temptation of and by itself is not sin; it is merely a choice presented for us to act upon. It does not become sin until we enter into it, accept it or submit to it.

Thus, when faced with a temptation that is camouflaged by deception, by observing and analyzing it righteously, praying for God's mind and strength, we can repulse it with the help of the Holy Spirit. If we do this, we will have faced and vanquished potential sin *before* it can contaminate us and separate us from God.

A Very Present Help

God does not expect us to resist temptation by ourselves. He, by the mediation of our Savior Jesus Christ, understands and sympathizes with our weaknesses

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

God allows temptation as a way of purifying us, and we become righteous and holy as we work with Him in overcoming.

In I Corinthians 10:13, the apostle Paul encourages the members of the church at Corinth by saying that God promises to help us:

No temptation has overtaken you except as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able, but with the temptation will also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

When we are tempted, God will help. He will provide a way out, not to avoid temptation, but to meet it successfully and to stand firm under it. This is testing as permitted and controlled by God to produce sterling character that is a reflection of His own.

God is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear and successfully conquer. He challenges us to meet the temptations that spring up before us on the road of life, beat them down, learn the lessons and move on to receive the crown of life. He promises to be with us every step of the way. We can be

... confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ... (Philippians 1:6),

when He will give us our reward (Revelation 22:12).

The key is to capture every wrong thought before it leads us into sin (II Corinthians 10:4-5). God will back us with His omnipotent power to overcome the temptations that lead to sin, if, as Jesus taught His disciples, we stay close to Him spiritually by watching and praying.