

Lesson 1: Nature of Temptation

The theme text that Owen uses for our study on temptation is Matthew 26:41. In context, this is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He goes off to pray, instructing his disciples to keep watch with Him and then comes back to find Peter, James, and John sleeping. He tells them in verse 41 of chapter 26: *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* Over the course of our 4 weeks of study, this verse will serve us in three ways. First, we will look at (1) the evil that is cautioned against – *temptation* (it’s definition and nature); (2) the means of its prevalency – *entering into temptation*; (3) the way of preventing it – *watch and pray*. May the Lord be pleased to bless our study as we seek to live lives that take God seriously, sin seriously and long to conform more every day into the image of Christ.

We want to start our exploration of the subject of temptation by examining it’s nature.

I. The Nature of Temptation

There are two ways to look at temptation. In the general sense and the special sense. First, we will look at the:

a. General nature of temptation.

Most generally speaking, without any sort of connotation, our word tempt comes from a Latin word meaning to test, try, or prove. Using this general definition we can say that God sometimes tempts people. We are more familiar, and it is more clear, in saying that God tests. And in this sense we are also called upon to test ourselves. For example in **2 Corinthians 13:5** Paul says:

“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves [...]”

We are also to pray that God would test us in a certain sense. For example, the way David does in **Psalm 139:23-24**:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any greivous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”

Under the umbrella of the general nature of temptation I want to consider both “why God tempts” and “the way God tempts.”

Also, now that I have laid down Owen’s general and neutral definition of temptation and showed how he attributes that to God, I will use the word “test” moving forward. I just think it will be clearer. We will see later in the lesson that there is also a sense in which God does not tempt. So, we’ll make that distinction.

Why God Tempts:

So now there are two main reasons why God tests:

- ***First, God tests to show man what is in himself, either of grace or corruption.***

The human heart is a constant mixture of grace and corruption as long as we live in this fallen world. We are often self-deceived when we search our own hearts. Owen says that when we look for what grace lies within, corruption/evil appears. And when we probe to see what evil lurks within our hearts, grace appears. So we are often uncertain as to the true state of our inner being – our own tests are inadequate. However, God is masterful in His assessment. He can plumb the depths of our souls to reveal the contents. Owen says (and just as a note I will unashamedly quote John Owen quite frequently throughout our study. I think it is really helpful to hear the exact words from the man himself):

“God comes with a gauge that goes to the bottom. He sends His instruments of trial into the bowels and the inmost parts of the soul, and lets man see what is in him, of what metal he is constituted.” (pg. 153)

Lets look at two examples from Scripture of this:

1) Grace: God tested Abraham to show him his faith.

This took place in Genesis 22, let's read verses 1 and 2 of **Genesis 22**:

*"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."
He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."*

Abraham did not know the extent of his own faith – its power and vigor- until it was tested by this great trial. Later down in chapter 22, in verse 12, when God stops Abraham from lowering the knife on Isaac He says:

"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

A key doctrinal point to remember here. God is omniscient. That is, He is all-knowing. He does not ever learn anything. He does not gain knowledge in a linear fashion like we do – having past, present, and future. To God all is already known – past, present, and future. And so, this text does not portray God gaining knowledge about Abraham's faith that He didn't know before. Rather, He speaks in a way that Abraham would understand, and for his benefit. He acknowledges and commends Abraham's faith, so that Abraham hears that commendation. All of this was for Abraham's sake – to show him the grace within – the strength of his faith.

2) Corruption: God tested Hezekiah to expose his pride.

Let's read in **2 Chronicles 32:24-26**:

"In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death, and he prayed to the Lord, and He answered him and gave him a sign. But Hezekiah did not make return according to the benefit done to him, for his heart was proud. Therefore wrath came upon him and Judah and Jerusalem. But

Hezekiah humbled himself for the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that that the wrath of the Lord did not come upon them in the days of Hezekiah.”

And then skipping down to **verse 31**:

“And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.”

You would need to go to 2 Kings 20 to get the full context of this passage, but for our purposes it is enough to say that after God’s miraculous sign and healing of Hezekiah, the Lord left him temporarily and revealed the pride, self-reliance and ingratitude that resided in his heart. Again, the Lord already knew Hezekiah’s heart. This revelation was for Hezekiah – and it accomplished the Lord’s purpose. The exposure of pride led to Hezekiah’s repentance and humbling of himself.

So God tests to show man what is within himself.

➤ ***Secondly, God tests in order to show Himself to man.***

He does this for two reasons:

1) *To reveal preventing grace.*

God shows in an experiential way that it is Him who preserves us and keeps us from sin. Owen remarks that:

“until we are tempted, we think we live on our own strength. Though all men do this or that, we will not. When the trial comes, we quickly see whence is our preservation, by standing or falling.”

(pg.153)

A biblical example of this is Abimelech in Genesis 20. This is when Abraham told a deceptive half-truth (aka lie) to preserve his own life, by saying that his wife Sarah was just his sister. So picking up in verse 2 of chapter 20 we read:

Read Genesis 20:2-6 (emphasis on verse 6)

It was God who ultimately kept Abimelech from sinning. And in every trial we see that it is not our own strength that keeps us standing. We either fall hard and realize how weak we are in ourselves, or God preserves us and we feel how inadequate we would be in the situation without Him.

2) *To reveal renewing grace.*

God revealed to Paul the sufficiency of His grace in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9:

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-9a. Stop after “my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Quoting Owen:

“We know not the power and strength that God puts forth in our behalf, nor what is the sufficiency of his grace, until, comparing the temptation with our own weakness, it appears unto us. The efficacy of an antidote is found when poison has been taken; and the preciousness of medicines is made known by diseases. We shall never know what strength there is in grace if we know not what strength there is in temptation. We must be tried, that we may be made sensible of being preserved.” (pg. 154)

The Way God Tempts

Having looked at “why God tempts” we now will briefly examine the “way God tempts”. There are three ways that God accomplishes this:

1) *First, He gives us heavy responsibilities and burdens that we count impossible to carry out.*

This was the case for Abraham when he was told to sacrifice his son Isaac. Again quoting Owen:

“Many men know not what is in them, or rather what is ready for them, until they are put upon what seems utterly above their strength, indeed, upon what is really above their strength. The duties that God, in an ordinary way, requires at our hands are not proportioned to what strength we have in ourselves, but to what help and relief is laid up for us in Christ; and we are to address ourselves to the greatest performances with a settled persuasion that we have not ability for the least.” (pg. 154)

It is through a test like this that God reveals the grace that is available to us in Him. The cliché that God never gives us more than we can handle is simply untrue. God will at times deliberately give us more than we can handle in our own strength so that we will rely upon Him and that He might show forth His might in our lives. It is working good in our lives, but in the moment we see it as a trial.

2) *Second, He reveals Himself through great sufferings.*

Throughout history, saints have realized great grace within them in the darkest of hours. As one of the most extreme examples, martyrs have found inexplicable resolve and faith in the face of tests that end in death. The apostle Peter explains this way of testing a little in 1 Peter 1:6-7:

Read 1 Peter 1:6-7

The “various trials” are likened to gold being tested by fire. The fire purifies the gold and reveals its true nature. The trial purifies the person, and reveals the true nature of their faith. And the true nature of their God.

3) *Third. God reveals Himself through His providential disposition. That's just big words to effectively say “the way God orders events.”*

An example of this is found in Deuteronomy 13. I’m going to read verses 1-3:

Read Deuteronomy 13:1-3

The Lord gave a warning to His people about prophets to come who would seek to lure them into idolatry. It was providentially *in the plan* that the false prophets would come and tempt the people to sin. It was a test. He gave the instruction and then set up the occasion.

- We have looked at why and how God tests. There is so much to think about with this aspect of testing. And yet, this is not the real direction of our study. I wanted to spend some time on this aspect of temptation simply because this little section in Owen's treatise really gripped me. More than I thought it might. It is so helpful to know that when we face trial, we can be assured that the Lord is doing something through it in our lives. We are people who want to know "why" and "how". We can't figure everything out this side of eternity, but hopefully this little treatment on the general nature of temptation or more aptly "God and testing" has been helpful.

b. The Special Nature of Temptation

The Way Satan Tempts

We now turn our attention to the special nature of temptation. This is what the remainder of our lessons will deal with.

The active sense of temptation is when we are lured into evil. This means that the *intended end of the tempter* is to accomplish this downfall in the tempted. Under this definition we can clearly say that God does not tempt. We see this in James 1:13-15:

Read James 1:13-15

Now we've learned that God often does test through trial. But these verses in James refer to what we call the special nature of temptation – that is with the intention to lure into evil. James clearly says that God is not tempted by evil and does not tempt anyone else in that way. Our own evil desire entices and if seen all the way through leads to sin and death. God does not tempt in this way, but our adversary the devil does. We are to heed the warning in **1 Peter 5:8**:

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

Owen notes that this special temptation toward sinning can come by Satan directly, the world, other people in the world, from ourselves, or from a combination of these causes. Lets examine these briefly:

➤ ***Satan sometimes tempts by himself – taking no advantage of the world or ourselves.***

He does this by (I like the word Owen uses here) “his injection” of evil and blasphemous thoughts into the hearts of God’s people. These fiery darts come from *outside of us*, directly from his malicious bow.

➤ ***Satan sometimes makes use of the world and the people in it.***

He tried this with Jesus by showing and offering to Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory, if He would just bow down and worship him. And we can all speak from experience I’m sure of the endless ways we’ve experienced temptation from Satan using aids from the world and the people in it. This external temptation can be utterly draining.

➤ ***Sometimes Satan gets assistance from ourselves in his temptation.***

When he tempted Jesus, there was no corruption or evil within Jesus. But that is not so with us. We have a fallen nature, and a heart of indwelling sin. Against our deepest will to honor the Lord, we have a willing participant in Satan’s schemes dwelling continually with us – the law of sin. And in the hearts of

every person, Christian or not – Satan has assistance in his temptation. We think again of the words in James 1:14-15.

Read James 1:14-15

One example is Judas. We read a short summary in Luke 22:3-6:

Read Luke 22:3-6

Satan was at work by himself in that “he entered into Judas”. He put it into his heart to betray Jesus.

Satan employs the assistance of the world and the people in it – the priests and Pharisees agreed to give thirty pieces of silver as enticement – and finally all of this comes together because of Judas’ own inner corruption – his covetousness and greed. All of this conflated to end in sin and death.

The devices that Satan employs in temptation are complex and interwoven in such a way that it would be impossible to examine every way. But, this provides us with a basic understanding of how Satan tempts.

Owen would summarize by saying:

“That is a temptation to any man which causes or occasions him to sin, or in anything to go off from his duty, either by bringing evil into his heart, or drawing out that evil that is in his heart, or any other way diverting him from communion with God and that constant, equal, universal obedience, in matter and manner, that is required of him.” (pg. 156)

II. Defining Entering into Temptation

In the time we have left we will look at what it means to “enter into temptation” as referenced in our theme text of Matthew 26:41. This is what Jesus specifically warns against.

a. What Entering Into Temptation Is Not:

1) *To enter into temptation is not merely to be tempted.*

There is no promise from the Lord that we will ever be free from temptations. We will always be tempted to some degree as long as we are on this earth. Owen notes that the direction we have for our prayers is “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Not “deliver us from temptation.” We are to pray against entering into temptation.

2) *It is more than the ordinary work of Satan and our own lusts.*

We will be tempted everyday by our natural personalities and makeup. Rather, this refers to a peculiar allurement to sin.

3) *To enter into temptation does not imply that the person is conquered by the temptation or falls into the sin that allures.*

This clarification is helpful for not overstating its meaning. It is possible to enter into temptation and yet be delivered from it – God providing the way of escape.

So, then, the obvious big question is – what *does* it mean to enter into temptation?

b. What Entering Into Temptation Is

Owen points to Paul’s words in **1 Timothy 6:9** to give some help:

“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”

It is to fall, as into a pit – to become ensnared and entangled. A person is not yet killed and destroyed when caught in a trap, but they are detained without any knowledge of how or ability on their own to get free. So it is with entering into temptation. It is the *pathway* to ruin and destruction. Here is Owen:

“When we suffer a temptation to enter into us, then we “enter into temptation.” While it knocks at the door we are at liberty; but when any temptation comes in and parleys with the heart, reasons with the mind, entices and allures the affections, be it long or a short time, do it thus insensibly and imperceptibly, or do the soul take notice of it, we “enter into temptation.” (pg. 160)

We now want to consider the conditions surrounding temptation or the circumstances required for entering into temptation:

c. Conditions Surrounding Entering Into Temptation

➤ ***First, Satan must be more earnest than usual in his allurements to sin.***

He will use all the means we have mentioned to ensnare us.

➤ ***Second, we may be so entangled that our heart cannot resist the trap of temptation.***

When we are caught off guard and unprepared by a sudden and peculiar temptation, it is usually harder to get free from it. We may cry out and yet not be delivered. This deep entanglement can occur either:

- a. When Satan has permission from God for a specific affliction – to gain advantage in the soul. This was the case for Job and then also for Peter in **Luke 22:31-32** (to sift Peter as wheat). This is done for a purpose of the Lord’s often known only to Him.
- b. Or, more experientially, when our own weakness and sinful inclinations meet with a particularly provoking situation or set of circumstances. This conflates with a certain season of life we are in, to lead us into temptation.

That experiential time Owen calls the “hour of temptation”. It is when temptation comes to a head and we are in the thick of it. This is an especially dangerous time – and this is how Owen talks about it:

“Hence that very temptation, which at one time has little or no power on a man – he can despise it, scorn the motions of it, easily resist it – at another, bears him away quite before it. It has, from other circumstances and occurrences, got new strength and efficacy, or the man is enervated (debilitated) and weakened; the hour is come, he is entered into it, and it prevails.” (pg. 161)

We can feel secure in resisting temptation at certain seasons in our life and yet if we let our guard down at later times, that same allurements could be what ensnares us. We must not be caught unprepared and asleep as Jesus’ disciples were, but be ready for the pull of temptation at any time. The devil will not cease seeking to navigate us into temptation. This he did with Jesus. When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness and triumphs over Satan, we read this in **Luke 4:13**:

“And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

Though he left, he did not stop. We must be on guard.

Again Owen:

“ They will have a season wherein their solicitations will be more urgent, their reasonings more plausible, pretenses more glorious, hopes of recovery more appearing, opportunities more broad and open, the doors of evil made more beautiful than ever they have been. Blessed is he who is prepared for such a season; without which there is no escaping.” (pg. 161-162)

Three distinguishing marks to know that temptation has reached its hour are:

- 1) First, that continuous solicitations toward evil cause the mind to think less seriously about the temptation.**

Owen:

“It may be when first it began to press upon the soul, the soul was amazed with the ugly appearance of what it aimed at, and cried, “Am I a dog?” If this indignation be not daily heightened, but the soul, by conversing with the evil, begins to grow, as it were, familiar with it, not to be startled as formerly, but rather inclines to cry, “Is it not a little one?” then the temptation is coming toward its high noon; lust has then enticed and entangled, and is ready to conceive.” (pg. 162)

2) *Second, that when temptation and sin has overcome others, the soul is not filled with disgust and repulsion.*

When sin overthrows others, it may soon have its hour with us. An example is the falling of Hymeneus and Philetus. We read that when they “swerved from the truth”, it overthrew the faith of some. We are meant to learn from the fall of others – it should serve as a warning and wake up call to be spiritually prepared.

3) *Third, that the temptation is mixed with things that are not in themselves evil.*

For example, the Galatians were tempted to dilute and in fact undermine the gospel – some benefits that made this more appealing were: freedom from persecution, unity, and harmony with the Jews. By focusing on these things rather than the sin of falling away from the truth of the gospel, they gave life to the temptation. It was a stronger pull. The same for us – if we focus on the perceived benefits, rather than the horrid nature of the sin itself, we will find ourselves entrapped before long.

At its peak, temptation will become relentless – the devil seeking to make the most of the opportunity while the darkness of the soul remains. Owen comments that there will also be a conjunction of “affrightments and allurements” or fears and lusts. In David’s sin with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of Uriah – these both were present. David feared Uriah’s revenge on his adultery and feared

public exposure of his sin; and yet also was allured still by desire for Bathsheba. And so he had Uriah murdered and acted out on his lust. This was temptation at its peak. We are capable of being carried away by our love of a certain sin, and then further entangled due to our fear of what might happen if we stop. This is a dark place of confusion – an awful state.

There is a remedy – its mentioned in our theme text – watch and pray! But we'll get to that in a future lesson. The line in the hymn Amazing Grace goes " 'tis grace that caused my heart to fear". My prayer is that we would have a healthy fear of temptation – the notion of sinning against our God horrifying us. We do not fear because we are hopeless, because the rest of the line says "and grace my fears relieved." If we are in Christ we have been loved with an everlasting love. We have all the grace and help the gospel has promised. And yet we are called to live in step with the direction of our Master. Let's aim to do that solemnly, and yet joyfully.