

Lesson 3: The External Battle

Last week we considered the great duty of all believers – that we not enter into temptation. This week we want to look at two things, which will serve as our main headings.

First, we will look at how we can know we have already entered into temptation. This is important to diagnose the state of our own soul.

Second, we will begin to consider how to prevent entering into temptation. The second point we will continue into next week. I will note that there are things we will look at today that we have already considered to some degree in our previous lessons. But reemphasis is good for our souls.

I. How One Knows They Have Entered into Temptation

First then, let's consider four points regarding how a person can know they have entered into temptation. These will build upon each other – or actually the second through fourth will clarify our first point. So, point number 1:

- 1) Rather simply, when a person finds themselves entangled in any sin, they can know for sure that they have entered into temptation.***

Sin is a fruit that comes from the root. We see this progression in our familiar set of verses we have often visited in James. Let's read James 1:14-15 to refresh our minds:

Read James 1:14-15

It starts with desire. We come face to face with temptation, and our desire within lures us and leads us into temptation. Having entered into temptation, the desire is given all the right conditions to “conceive” (v.15) and it births sin. If we find ourselves in sin, we went through desire and temptation in some form or fashion to get there.

- It may be a calculated and slow fade with the person having full knowledge of failing in the hour of temptation
- It may be an oblivious slip into temptation, where the person really doesn't want to sin, but experiences a quick fall due to being unaware and unprepared.

This is why the Apostle Paul instructs in Galatians 6:1 to “keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Owen considers this second approach to temptation (falling due to being unprepared and oblivious) in this way (this is sort of a lengthy quote but I believe its important):

“When they are overtaken with a sin they set themselves to repent of that sin, but do not consider the temptation that was the cause of it, to set themselves against that also to take care that they enter no more into it. Hence are they quickly again entangled by it, though they have the greatest detestation of the sin itself that can be expressed. He that would indeed get the conquest over any sin must consider his temptations to it, and strike at that root; without deliverance from thence, he will not be healed. This is a folly that possesses many who have yet a quick and living sense of sin. They are sensible of their sins, not of their temptations— are displeased with the bitter fruit, but cherish the poisonous root. Hence, in the midst of their humiliations for sin, they will continue in those ways, those societies, in the pursuit of those ends, which have occasioned that sin; of which more afterward.” (pg. 187)

To fight temptation only at the fruit level (particular sins) is like cutting branches off your tree. I'm not a homeowner yet, but y'all know. Periodically you have to cut branches if you have trees in your yard because either they've grown too large and are unsightly or in the way *or* they need to be pruned for increased growth. Well, in the same way, sometimes we cut branches of sin in our lives because they've become unsightly, they are burdensome, they are not becoming. We don't like them and we don't like people seeing them in us. But we leave the trunk and we leave the root. Well, just as the branches of the

tree in your yard will grow back, so will the branches and fruit of sin grow back if the root of temptation is not severed. The cutting off of sin may even act as pruning. For a season sin is cut off, but come the next season/occasion, sin shows up more developed and aggressive because we have so lazily fought the temptation/the root. We must never downplay the occasions that lead to sin. If we are not vigilant against those we will soon find ourselves mixed up in sin. This leads to our second point:

2) Temptation has degrees, and entrance into temptation can be seen since the very beginning – in the lesser degrees

Before temptation leads to open and visible sin, we may find that we secretly like the temptation. There are often many temptations along the way to open sin. Our hearts may desire to feed and heighten the things that serve as temptation in our lives.

As an example, we may get a reputation for being really book smart, or well spoken, or unbelievably generous or the like. People often praise us publicly. We may get satisfaction in that to the point that it feeds our pride. We like that people see us and talk about us. We like that the spotlight is on us. We start to live to be admired by people, to impress people. To make them take notice. And so we study hard (always at the library, sacrificing sleep), we religiously practice our oratory, we seek out causes to give to that other people care about. And with this diverted motivation we may also enter into temptation. We may also find ourselves a slave to our lust, to our pride. It started off fine and good in itself, harmless, it started out small. Studying is good. Preparing well to speak is good. Giving is commendable. And yet the temptation mixed with the lusts of our heart gives rise to sin. This can happen in the ministry. We can become puffed up with pride as people respond positively to our ministry. That's at any level of ministry. We would do well to remember again our own desperate need for God, our own wretchedness apart from Christ - rather than seek glory from others.

3) When a person's lust and temptation meet with occasions to sin, they can know they have entered into temptation

You may remember that in Kent's lesson on mortification he stated that something that mortification is not is self-made rules – that is, external attempts to deal with sin (the fruit), will not touch the root in the heart. The problem is still there. The seeds from the lesser degrees of temptation will sprout when given occasion. The roots of sin (“desires” as we have read in James 1) reveal themselves.

For example, Judas was covetous in his heart. Temptation brought opportunity for him to “help himself to what was put in the moneybag” according to John 12:6, and later it brought opportunity to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. We are simply fooling ourselves if, knowing our own hearts and tendencies, we put ourselves in situations where we are prone to weakness and expect to escape unscathed. We do not sin in facing temptation, but we do once we become entangled under its power. And that is exactly what we invite if we choose to ignore wisdom. I am going to cheat and quote a little from an abridged copy of Owen's work on Temptation that I used to aid my study along with the full text. I think it will be more clear and helpful to us:

“If something in your business, your lifestyle, or your culture suits your lusts, you have already entered into temptation. If we have a propensity for unclean thoughts, ambition in high places, sexual passion, perusal of bad literature, or anything else, temptation will use various things in our society to entrap us.” (Houston pg. 121)

4) When a person is weakened, negligent or formal in duty when before it had been done with joy and genuine interest, they have entered into temptation

We may not know the source or cause of our disinterest with the things of God, but its existence is evidence that there is a disconnect in our hearts. Our spiritual health is measured by vitality, not simply by the performance of duty. So, time in prayer, reading, studying, hearing God's Word, singing songs of

praise, meeting with and serving our brothers and sisters – it begins to feel optional. It begins to seem burdensome. We may not completely stop doing these things (perhaps because of how we think people would react), but we may do them without zeal, grumbling inside, with boredom, to get it over with. This indifference is a symptom of some kind of temptation having gripped our heart and begun to pull us away from the worship of God. Our desires are shifted when entering into temptation so that we seek something more than God.

- We may be covetous and seek the latest things that someone else has – our time is preoccupied with “keeping up with the Joneses.”
- Or we harbor greed and mull over the money (in more noble terms “the financial stability”) that could be ours if we just work hard enough or get into the latest venture. And so our minds and schedules don’t have time for Jesus.
- Or we have a spirit of pride and are continually concerned with how people perceive us – and depending on what group we are trying to impress that can take us in all kinds of directions. Certainly it affects our time and energy.
- Or we are ensnared by lust and we indulge it either mentally or physically. The fascination with sexual desire crowds out the beauty of Christ. It just doesn’t seem as exciting anymore to spend our time praying, and reading, and listening to sermons.

All these and many more, are things that lead to negligence in living out a faithful Christian life. The root is the problem. Owen notes that if we are in Christ, we have a new nature. And that new nature desires communion with God. It delights in considering His Word and being with His people. If joy in these things is disrupted and diminished in a sustained way in the life of a believer, it is evidence that they have entered into some kind of temptation.

II. **How to Prevent Entering into Temptation**

Well, we have spent a lot of time covering what temptation is, what it means to enter into temptation – we have considered its power and felt its danger. Now we want to start looking at how we are to fight. To do this we are going to look again at our theme text for the series, Matthew 26:41. Here Jesus, in His words to Peter, James, and John, gives us our directions:

Read Matthew 26:41

Watch and pray. These are simple instructions, but we want to unpack them as we move forward. So our first point under the heading “How to Prevent Entering into Temptation” is:

a. We should understand the great danger it is for us to enter into temptation

The fact that we must watch and pray means that temptation is not a light thing. We have looked already at the danger of entering into temptation, but as we begin to think of fighting it – this is one more reminder. In your fighting, *do not underestimate the danger of entering into temptation*. We can be lured into believing that if we are not practicing open sin we are safe and spiritually well. However, it is often the small compromises and silencing of conscience that have the capability to lull us into spiritual slumber – into dangerous territory.

Quoting John Piper: *“Forsaking a good conscience is prelude to moral disaster.”*

And quoting Owen:

“Let no man, then, pretend to fear sin that does not fear temptation to it. They are too nearly allied to be separated. Satan has put them so together that it is very hard for any man to put them asunder. He hates not the fruit who delights in the root.” (pg. 193)

“Sin will not long seem great or heavy unto any to whom temptations seem light and small.” (pg. 194)

To have a sober-minded understanding of the danger involved in entering into temptation – how it would grieve the Holy Spirit, how we would lose peace in our souls -- having the sweetness of fellowship with God broken, how it could lead to falling away if pursued unrepentantly (proving that we never truly believed to begin with) – to seriously consider these things and to then to despise temptation and its lies; this is half the battle right here. Much deception is avoided by fighting with a healthy fear and love for God.

b. We should understand that we are not able to keep and preserve ourselves from entering into temptation; therefore we must pray

We are to pray that God would keep us and sustain us. And we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus is ever interceding for us. In the High Priestly Prayer in **John 17:15**, Jesus prayed this for his disciples and by extension for us:

“I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.”

Acknowledging that we are a needy people at all times – soberly aware of the danger and sway of temptation - will keep us looking to the Lord for our preservation. The beginnings of temptation are often so subtle that we may not even realize we are walking into a trap. If we are relying on God continually we will find the lure of temptation sticks in our mouths less firmly, and the pull is not as violent.

So, Jesus prays for us. We acknowledge we are in need. We then pray ourselves for God’s preservation.

This is our hope. Our hope is in Him.

Owen says:

“he that would be little in temptation, let him be much in prayer.” (pg. 196)

And it is not as though we are stifled in regard to our access to God in prayer. Through the atonement we have been given an audience with the King. We read these wonderful words in Hebrews 4:15-16:

Read Hebrews 4:15-16

There is mercy and grace, there is help laid up for us in Christ.

Lets consider a familiar passage in **Ephesians 6**, where the Apostle Paul talks about the Armor of God.

He says to take up the armor “that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (v.11) and “that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm” (v. 13). This is standing in the face of temptation. And then at the end of the list of pieces of armor he says in verse 18:

“praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.”

At other points in Scripture, Paul instructs to “pray without ceasing” and to “be constant in prayer.” This is a major part of the battle. Prayer frames our hearts and minds Godward. It is a way we “set our minds on things above.” And as we focus on God’s glory; His person, attributes, and works, we will be less enticed by temptations to fleeting pleasures.

This is something we can engage in everyday. To come to the Lord, acknowledge our need, praise Him for who He is and how superior He is to the sin and temptation we encounter. We can pray that He would preserve us, keep our hearts, guard and establish our steps, fill our hearts with the joy of our salvation, that we would be watchful and vigilant in our daily activities, and that He would glorify Himself in our lives.

I know for me I have sometimes been so focused on “what do I need to do or learn – what strategy is there for fighting sin or fighting temptation?” And I tend to leave serious prayer until I’m really in the thick of it. But we miss a great benefit by treating prayer only as a “during the battle” call for help. It absolutely is that! And we should avail ourselves of the Lord’s gracious help by crying out to Him in the

middle of our need and trouble. But prayer is also meant to be communion with God. Spending time with Him. Laying our hearts before Him. Coming before the Lord regularly orients our hearts to another world and to a greater reality. We are more conscious that we are living before the face of God.

We all know we should pray more. We often feel the need to pray more. Let this morning be an encouragement to that end. There are many blessings in having a regular pattern of prayer, and one of them is it aids in our battle against temptation.

c. We should watch the seasons where people tend to enter into temptation

In addition to prayer, we are called upon to be watchful. There are numerous ways that we can apply the command to be watchful. First, we should “watch the seasons” where people tend to enter into temptation. We will look at four:

1) A season of outward prosperity

Prosperity, while it can be a blessing, is also a temptation. As we have established already, temptation in itself is not a sin, and so being prosperous is not sinful. However, it can divert us from devoting ourselves to the Lord. This is why in **Proverbs 30:8-9a**, Agur prays:

“give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the Lord?””

This happened to Israel as we read what the Lord says in **Hosea 13:6**:

“but when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore they forgot about me.”

We can find ourselves so materially fulfilled that we forget who is the Giver of every good gift. We may begin to trust ourselves and find our security in our possessions – in our bank accounts, our retirement

savings, our investments. We may find that we feel less dependent on God and therefore less zealous and more formal in our devotion to Him.

This is not to say that we should not be joyful when things are going well for us. We should enjoy the Lord's good gifts and give thanks. We are a people who are so undeserving. And yet in kindness He has given so much for us to delight in. And yet we still are to be watchful in this state, because Satan's schemes abound.

2) A season of spiritual slothfulness or formality of duty

We have addressed this a bit already, but it is truly one of the seasons. While being spiritually lethargic and apathetic in Christian disciplines is not good in itself, it is also a prime atmosphere for temptation to thrive and take hold of us. This happened to Peter. He was one of the disciples asleep while Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. They were experiencing both a physical and spiritual drowsiness. He was warned by our Savior to "watch and pray" and yet being spiritually unprepared he would shortly go on to deny Jesus. He fell prey to temptation. We must recognize spiritual drifting in our lives, or have friends close to us who recognize and are willing to confront us with our spiritual drift. And by God's grace, wake up and make a course correction.

3) A season of great spiritual enjoyments

This is one of the saddest realities we must face. Even at the pinnacle of Christian experience; in seasons of immense measures of experiencing God's love and nearness, the devil is never far behind. The famous example of this is the experience of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. He was shown glorious things in the third heaven, in paradise. He was privileged with grand spiritual experience. Let's turn there to 2 Corinthians 12 and read starting in verse 7:

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-9a

And so with us. At times God may be pleased to fill our hearts with extraordinary measures of His love. He may press upon our souls joy in our salvation as we have never known before. We may be overpowered with thoughts of God, His glory and the wonderful benefits of regeneration, redemption, justification, adoption. I mean, we're on cloud nine. This would seem like the most secure situation we could ever find ourselves in. We may think, "the devil can't touch me here." And yet temptation is always lurking. In all our excitement with what God is revealing, we may put off the work of guarding our souls. Just like with prosperity, we should enjoy and thank God for spiritual growth and thriving. However, we should never think we have arrived. As long as we are in this fallen world, we will always need to be watching, warring against the enemy of our souls.

I find this point to be very true in my own experience. It is often times when I feel closest to the Lord, and am happily occupied with His words and works; times when I am seeking to honor Him with a full heart – there is the enemy to meet me. He is so sinister. He likes to lure and disrupt our peace with malicious blows. He will not stop and if we are not prepared to fight we will fall. And then the devil will be there to make sure we are miserable after failing our God. "You were just thinking about how much God loves you", "You really think He loves *you*? Look at you, a failure, a hypocrite. You have no business coming to God. You think He loves you, but you are deluding yourself. He's disappointed in you. You are not worth His time." And many many other accusations. These accusations sting all the more in this season of having experienced great spiritual highs. But, we fight with God's promises. We stand on His Word. We get up and keep going because of Jesus and what He has done on our behalf – being Himself our righteousness. And to fight temptation when it first strikes, we aim to go into every season of our lives prepared.

4) *A season of self-confidence*

As we learned last Sunday, one of the things we must know about ourselves when we face temptation is that we are weak. And part of that weakness is thinking that we are actually strong enough in ourselves to get by. There are times when this attitude of self-confidence rises and is front and center. This was the case with Peter in his response to Jesus in Matthew 26. Lets read that to try to visualize the scene. Starting in verse 31.

Read Matthew 26:31-35

He was confident in himself and his devotion. To the point that he says he alone would be the one to stand. He compared himself to the other disciples and considered himself stronger and more devoted. He's saying, "they may all fall away, but I'm not that fragile or easily swayed." And yet he had no idea that he was on the brink of denying his Master who stood right in front of him.

Peter failed and entered into temptation in this trial because of his self-confidence. However, after the Resurrection, Jesus would approach Peter again and Peter now had a different attitude. Lets look at John 21:15.

Read John 21:15

Here Jesus directly asks Peter a question that would prompt him to compare himself to the other disciples. And yet Peter is done with comparing. He has been humbled through his temptation and sin. This is the evidence of repentance and the fruit of the trial he went through. Instead of comparing, and saying something like, "Yes Lord, I love you more than all of them. All of them put together. Even if they all stopped loving you, I will always love you." Instead, Peter simply says "Lord, you know that I love you." He will not compare or boast in his own love, but instead leaves it to Jesus' own knowledge. He is dependent on the Lord for his own love and devotion. So are we.

We must not let confidence in our self blind us to the danger of temptation. As we have said before, we are to have confidence in Christ, but not in ourselves. We are vulnerable when we presume that we would never fall into traps; that “other people may do this or that, but that’s because they are immature and foolish. They are not seasoned like I am.” The moment we assume grace and stability, we have given fuel to temptation’s power in our lives. The reminder in **1 Corinthians 10:12** is a sober warning:

“Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall.”

Here is Owen:

“Would you think that Peter, who had walked on the sea with Christ, confessed Him to be the Son of God, been with Him on the mount when he heard the voice from the excellent glory, should, at the word of a servant-girl, when there was no legal inquisition after him, no process against him, nor anyone in his condition, instantly fall a-cursing and swearing that he knew Him not? Let them take heed of self-confidence who have any mind to take heed of sin.” (pg. 201)

Conclusion

So these are four of the seasons that we are to consider as we endeavor not to enter into temptation. May the Lord give us soft hearts and spiritual sight to notice these things in our lives – prosperity, spiritual dullness, spiritual highs, and self-confidence – and know how to respond appropriately.

Well, next week is our last lesson in the series on temptation and we will continue to consider what it means to watch. We will also look at how to proactively fight and prevent temptation.