

Successful Christian Living, Part 10
Temptation and Obedience

The chorus of a very popular hymn states a fundamental truth of the Christian life very well. “Trust and obey, for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” In many ways, living the Christian life successfully can be reduced down to those three words. Trust and obey.

We have defined successful Christian as, “*a person who has been saved from their sins by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and, as an adopted child of God who worships Him, is bringing glory to His name by being conformed into the image of Jesus by submitting themselves to the will of God in faithfully pursuing holiness and blamelessness along with serving the Lord in doing the good works He has prepared before hand.*” That is the direction that God wants us to go, but we have a battle on our hands to go that direction for there are two forces working to get us to go in another direction. They are our adversary, the devil, and our own fleshly desires to have pleasure, fame, wealth, power, happiness and security. The successful Christian faces the same temptations, and perhaps even more, than anyone else. The only difference is in how they handle those temptations. This morning I want us to learn how we can use what God has provided for us to face our temptations and conquer them.

DEFINING TEMPTATION

But what is temptation? Webster defines temptation as, “to entice to do wrong by promise of pleasure or gain.” That definition fits the common idea of temptation being something that lures people into gross sin, for gross sin often includes the promise of the fleeting pleasures or the promise of some sort of personal gain. Yet, temptation is more than that because even gross sins such as drunkenness and most drug abuse is not so much about gaining pleasure as it is with removing one’s self from pain. In addition, how would such a definition fit such verses as Deut. 6:16 (KJV) which says, “*Do not tempt the LORD your God . . .*” Is God enticed to do wrong by the promise of some pleasure or gain? What pleasure could entice a being that is all sufficient in Himself? What gain could be promised to the omnipotent one, the omniscient one, the almighty of whom no one can resist His will?

Another definition given to temptation by Webster is “to test,” and that adds the depth of the meaning of the word. It is the sense of “testing” that Deut. 6:16 refers to. We are not to test the Lord.

In the New Testament, there is only one word used to cover the meaning of two words used in the Old Testament. That is one reason there can be some confusion over what temptation actually is. For example, in James 1:13 says that no man is tempted by God, yet in Gen 22:1 it says in the KJV that God “did tempt Abraham.” Does the Bible contradict itself? NO! The reality is that “tempt” in Gen 22:1 is not the same as in James 1:13.

Testing of Our Faith

In the Old Testament, we find that this word, *nasah* (5254), which is sometimes translated as “tempt,” is better translated “test” or “prove.” It is the common word used of testing or proving the worthiness of something. For example in 1 Sam. 17:39 the same word is used to describe the proving or testing of battle armor. It is used of God testing or proving the faith of the Israelites in Exod 16:4 (manna), and Dt 4:34 (brought out of Egypt). David asked the Lord to “test” his integrity in Psalm 26:2. It is also the word used in Dt 6:16 that we are not to “test” the Lord our God. This same word is used to describe God “tempting” - better translated “testing,” of Abraham in Gen 22:1. This word is never used in the OT to refer to Satan’s act of enticing men to sin.

The New Testament speaks of God’s testing too. James 1:2-4 says, “*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let*

endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” We can rejoice when the difficulties of life come against us because God can use them to test our faith and make us perfect, mature, complete - lacking in nothing. The idea of our faith being tested is that of proving what we actually believe. Troubles force us to consider God and His promises and to rely on Him. As we believe what God says is true, then we step forward in faith to do things His way, and trust Him to fulfill His promises. In that way my faith is tested or proved and I mature.

For example, last week I spoke about evangelism. Talking to people about Jesus can be kind of scary. What if the people don't like what I say and reject me. 2 Tim 3:12 even says, *“And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* That is not something I look forward to, yet the Bible is clear that God wants me to warn people about the judgement to come and tell them about salvation from sin through Jesus. He wants me to be faithful to witness and leave the results in His hands. If persecution results, then Jesus already told me that I am blessed and should rejoice to suffer as the prophets of old did (Mt. 5:10-12). It is an act of faith to believe and step forward and do what God says, but the more I do this the more mature in Christ I will become. Witnessing become less frightening and I become more bold in my faith.

Enticement to Sin

But there is another side to temptation. In the Old Testament, a different word, *nasha* (5374), is used for temptation that is an enticement to sin. An example of this is in Genesis 3:13 where we find Eve giving her excuse to God for her sin by saying that the Serpent beguiled/deceived her. Deception is a good word for the temptation brought about by Satan for his design is to call into question God's command and doubt God's goodness, wisdom and justice and thereby entice someone to do something other than what God says to do. That is temptation. Turn to Genesis 3 and let's see Satan's work in temptation to sin.

Verse one. The serpent comes and questions what God has said. The form of the question is in somewhat of a challenge in the sense of “is God holding back from you any tree in the garden?”

Verse 2 & 3. Eve answers the serpent, but notice she does not repeat what God has said, she goes beyond it and adds that she is not allowed to touch it either. The command was given to Adam, so the inference is that Adam taught the command to Eve. It is possible that Adam in an effort to make sure she would obey tells her not to touch it. Eve combines God's command and Adam's instruction into one command - God says, “don't eat it or touch it or you will die.”

Verse 4,5. The serpent responds with a challenge to God's command by calling into question God's character - in specific his goodness and fairness. Satan contradicts God and tells Eve she would not die, but instead here eyes would be opened and she would become like God in knowing good and evil. In short, Satan calls God a liar and says that He is holding good things back from Eve.

Verse 6. Eve then looks at the fruit. It looks good to eat. It is a pretty fruit and she would like to be as wise as God, so she eats it. She then gives it to her husband to eat and he eats it. The bottom line is that she rejects what God says and believes what Satan tells her. She then acts upon her new belief and goes against God's command and sins. In verse 13 her excuse to God is that the serpent deceived her, and indeed he did, for he lied to her. Eve believed the lie and sinned.

Two Sided

Understanding both of these aspects of temptation, both testing of faith and enticement to evil, we can define temptation as any challenge to follow God's will. God can reveal something to us He wants us to do and challenge us to follow it, such as He did with Abraham. That would be a test of our faith. Or we may be enticed by our own desires or Satan's lies to do something other than God's will. That would be an enticement to sin. Often both aspects of temptation can be and often are present at the same time.

For example, God tells us in Matthew 6:33 that we are to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and that He will provide for our needs. Your faith is tested by the challenged to believe and follow His will in setting the priorities of your life according to godliness. At the same time, your flesh may desire more than God gives you, or Satan's lies may deceive you into believing you need things God has not given you. That is an enticement to sin, for it is sin to not believe God and put getting those things as more important than God's kingdom and righteousness.

We are all both tested and tempted on this point. We set our priorities and make our economic decisions, but how often are the things of God, His kingdom and His righteousness, really a part of those decisions? Too often people make their employment decisions based simply on money. While salary is important, so are other things like work hours that do not hinder you from being with your family or serving the Lord. This would have to include the length of the commute. There is also the ethics of the company. Do they have practices that would require you to violate Scriptural commands or compromise your own testimony for Christ?

It is common to find couples in our society in which both work exhausting hours to purchase a home and luxury items they hardly have time to even enjoy. The children have all the latest stuff, but they know the child care workers better than mom and dad. The tragedy is that this is as common among professed Christians and non-Christians. Wouldn't it be better to trust God to provide what you actually need and live on less income than compromise how God wants us to live? God does not evaluate parents by how much stuff they give their kids, but by the character the parents develop in the children. The kids need you, not toys, gadgets and fashion clothes.

There is also the quest for holiness. God calls on us to be holy even as He is holy (1 Peter 1:16). We spoke on this topic a few weeks ago. There is a test and a temptation in this as well. We live in a wealthy society, but what will we do with our time and finances? Will we use our resources to pursue holiness and serve the Lord or will we just live like everyone else in the pleasures of the moment. It is a shame, but so many Christians seem to easily spend time and money on hobbies, entertainment, and creature comforts, yet they are so hesitant to do the same to improve their walk with the Lord and to serve Him. What books have you read in the last month? How have you served God in the last week? When was the last time you went on a retreat so that you could focus on the Lord, even if it was just a few hours off by yourself in a quiet place? How much time do you spend each week in personal Bible study and devotions as compared to your amusements such as television and games? When was the last time you personally corresponded with a missionary and did something to encourage or help them in their work? Are you pursuing God's kingdom and righteousness? Are you becoming more holy in your daily walk? Is your faith being tested or are you being enticed to sin?

The challenge to live according to God's will covers both sides of the issue. There is the testing of our faith as we follow His will and there is the enticement to sin.

SOURCES OF ENTICEMENT TO SIN

The temptation of enticement to sin comes from two sources. The first is from your own desires. James 1:13-15 brings this out. *"Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. 14 But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15 Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death."* Paul also speaks of this in Romans 7 in his description of the conflict between his will, which has been changed by salvation, and his flesh, which is awaiting final redemption.

The second source of temptation comes from Satan and his minions who lie and seek to deceive us (2 Cor. 2:11; 11:3; 1 Thess. 3:5) just as he did Eve back in Genesis 3. We have an adversary and we must be properly prepared to resist him, just as Paul explains in Ephesians 6 in describing the armor God has given us for protection.

THREE AREAS OF TEMPTATION

There are three areas in which temptations comes, whether it is by the desires of your own flesh or the enticements of Satan. John explains these in 1 John 2:16, and we already saw in Genesis 3 that Eve was tempted in each area. Starting in verse 15, *“Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and [also] its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.”* There are the things our physical bodies desire, those things we find pleasant to our eyes and therefore our minds, and there are those things that feed our proud egos.

GOD’S PROVISION AND RESTRICTIONS

One thing we should keep in mind in all of this is that regardless of the source or particular area of temptation, God is still sovereign. God will test our faith to produce greater maturity in us, but He never allows either our faith to be tested or a temptation to come upon us which is beyond our ability to deal with it. As 1Cor 10:13 states, *“No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.”*

You will not receive some unique temptation that cannot be resisted nor will God allow a temptation to come that is beyond your ability to withstand. It may feel that way at times, but the truth is that God always provides a means of escape from the temptation so that you can endure it. Please note this carefully. There is a way of escape. That means you may have to flee from the situation in which the temptation is present. Paul told Timothy to *“flee youthful lusts”* (2 Tim. 2:22). Romans 13:14 tells us, *“put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to [its] lusts.”* God does not promise to protect you from temptation that you willfully stay in. If you’re tempted by gluttony, you have to get up and walk away from the table. If you’re tempted by pornography, you have to get rid of what you have, not buy any more and use a filter on your computer to keep it out. If you’re tempted to touch what doesn’t belong to you, put your hands in your pocket so that you can’t.

Even when Satan strikes against us, he is not free to do whatever he wants. He is restricted by our sovereign God. An example of this is found in 2 Cor 12 in Paul’s thorn in the flesh, which verse 7 says was *“a messenger from Satan.”* Paul understood God’s sovereignty in the situation. It was not something He could flee, so he entreated God to remove it, but God said that His grace was sufficient for Paul. God was using even Satan to accomplish His own will, which in this case was to keep Paul from exalting himself (verse 7). This same thing can be seen in the beginning chapters of the book of Job. Job is severely attacked by Satan by which he loses everything he owns, then his family except for his wife (which in his case became part of the problem since she called for him to curse God and die), and then his health. Yet Job’s faith remained firm. *“The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord”* (Job 1:21). *“Though He slay me, yet I will trust Him”* (Job 13:15).

Satan is real and he does attack, but he can do so only to the limit God has set for him. He cannot overcome you. James 4:7 tells us to *“submit to God, resist the devil and he will flee from you.”*

WITHSTANDING TEMPTATIONS

What are the ways in which we can withstand temptation? It will boil down to trusting God and obeying Him, but here are some of the specifics.

- 1) Do not make provision for it - as already pointed out from Romans 13:14.
- 2) Flee from it whenever possible as already discussed. God does not give medals for staying in a battle you should not remain in.
- 3) *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”* - Romans 12:2. This means your mind needs to be set on things above and not on the things of this earth (Col.

3:2). You need to think about those things which are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). However, you cannot do this if you do not know the truth, which is Word of God (John 17:17). You have to hide the Scriptures in your heart so that you might not sin against God (Ps. 119:9-11).

4) You need to act on the truth of your conversion and consider the members of your earthly body as dead to sin (Col. 3:5f). Sin is no longer your master so you need to quit obeying it and instead obey God in righteousness (Rom. 6).

THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

This is the very example that Jesus set for us when He was tempted by Satan. Turn to Matthew 4 and let's see how the Lord overcame temptation so that we might do the same. *'Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.*

The first thing we note is that the Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness for the specific purpose of being tempted by the devil. This is not something happening by chance, fate or bad luck. It is not something the devil arranged. God the Spirit leads God the Son into the wilderness to face the Adversary.

Second, we see here that the devil is real. He is not some guy with a red suit with a long pointed tail carrying a pitchfork. He is a fallen angel that seeks to usurp God's glory and honor and take it for himself. Throughout this section of Scripture we will see Jesus address the devil as a real personal being.

Third, the temptations Jesus will face are real. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was *"tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin."* He felt the full force of every temptation because He never gave in. By way of analogy, a tree that is blown over in a storm only felt the force of the wind until it was blown over. It is the tree that remains standing after the storm has past that has felt the full force of it.

And just to point out again the nature of Satan's attack, the name used for him here is διαβόλος /diablos which means "Slanderer." As we go through the passage we will see that is exactly what he does. He slanders what God has said.

2 And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry. 3 And the tempter came and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." 4 But He answered and said, IT IS WRITTEN, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'" (Deut 8:3)

After this length of time, you can only imagine how hungry Jesus must be. The Devil, comes and entices Jesus in the area of humanity of physical flesh by telling Him to make stones into bread and satisfy His hunger. THE TEMPTATION IS TO SATISFY THE DESIRES OF THE BODY THROUGH HIS OWN MEANS AND METHODS RATHER THAN RELYING UPON GOD TO PROVIDE (V 3). In essence, the devil is saying to Jesus, "God has not provided for You even though You are His son, so take charge and provide for Yourself." Jesus responds by quoting Dt. 8:3 *"Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."* Jesus puts his body in subjection to God and waits for His provision.

Next, Satan attacks in the area of pride. The tempter tells Jesus to perform a great sign and miracle. *5 Then the devil *took Him into the holy city; and he had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 and *said to Him, "If You are the Son of God throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'HE WILL GIVE HIS ANGELS CHARGE CONCERNING YOU'; (Ps 91:11) and 'ON THEIR HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, LEST YOU STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'"* (Ps 91:12). In essence, the devil is saying to Jesus, "You're the son of God and yet God has not caused the people to give you honor and glory the way they should. Take charge and gain it for yourself. Throw yourself off the pinnacle of the temple and let the people see the angels catch you." The devil even quotes some verses to prove his point. (Which just shows that the origin of Scripture twisting is the Devil himself). THE TEMPTATION IS FOR JESUS TO GAIN THE FOLLOWING OF THE PEOPLE BY HIS OWN MEANS AND METHODS. Again Jesus quotes from

Scripture and says, *7 Jesus said to him, "ON THE OTHER HAND, IT IS WRITTEN, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'"* (Dt 6:16) Jesus subjects His pride to God and will wait for God to do things in His way and timing.

The third temptation against Jesus is in the area of the lust of the eyes. *8 Again, the devil *took Him to a very high mountain, and *showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; 9 and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me."* The devil slanders God again and tells Jesus that God has not come through, but if Jesus would do what Satan says, Satan will give Him the Kingdoms of the world. THE TEMPTATION IS FOR JESUS TO GAIN THE WORLD THROUGH HIS OWN MEANS AND METHODS AND NOT GOD'S PLAN FOR THE CROSS. This time Jesus not only quotes another Scripture, but rebukes Satan *10 Then Jesus *said to him, "BEGONE, SATAN! FOR IT IS WRITTEN, 'YOU SHALL WORSHIP THE LORD YOUR GOD, AND SERVE HIM ONLY'"* (Dt 6:13). Jesus subjected Himself to the Father's will, even knowing that it would take Him to the cross.

*11 Then the devil *left Him; and behold, angels came and began to minister to Him.*

Please understand that JESUS DID NOT DEFEAT SATAN BY QUOTING SCRIPTURE. HE DEFEATED SATAN BY KNOWING THE SCRIPTURES AND BEING OBEDIENT TO THEM. Scripture cannot be used like some magical incantation. Memorization of Scripture without a willingness to apply it and be obedient to it will not keep you from sin.

We need to know the Word of God well enough so that we can continue to operate according to the truth even when the devil comes and slanders what God has said and tries to deceive us. If Eve had held to the truth and been obedient to it she would not have been deceived and fallen into sin. If Adam would have held to the command God gave him and refused the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the human race may have taken a different course. Let us learn from them and not to fall into the deceptions of the devil.

Do you know the truth well enough that you can stand firm when the deceptions come? Can you stand strong when your emotions are in confusion and seeking to lead you astray? Or will you waver, and sway and fall to the devil's slander that *God is not good; God has not been fair; God has taken away what you want; God has not given you what you would like; God does not know what is best, so take charge of your own life.*

Those slanderous charges can be direct or very subtle as we have already seen in our various Scripture passages this morning. Do you know the truth well enough that you can hold them tight even when everything in your life seems to have come apart and you face the full onslaught of Satan's deceitful slander?

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU SUCCUMB TO TEMPTATION

And finally, what about when we do fall prey to Satan's devices and succumb to the temptations and sin? It is this point that marks the true Christian from the religious person. True Christians do not make themselves out to be without faults or only very minor ones. They acknowledge their own sinfulness (1 John 1:8,10) and will grieve over those sins and confess them to God (1 John 1:9) because they want the relationship to be right. They don't try to hide their failures, but will even use them as warnings to teach others to avoid the same failures (Psalm 32 & 51).

Temptation is part of the Christian life. God tests us to prove our character and mature us. We are also enticed to sin by our own desires and Satan's deceptions that play upon those lusts. Overcoming temptation requires that we know God, what He has said, believe Him and then obey Him. There is no other way to live the Christian life successfully other than to trust and obey.