



# Understanding Temptation



By Martin A. Bowman

*"We've all had moments of weakness when trying to control ourselves. We eat a donut while dieting. We lose our temper with the kids. We drink a bit too much. We don't plan these lapses in judgment. They just sort of happen."*  
 – Anonymous

*<sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*  
 – 1 Corinthians 10:13

## Introduction

Our culture celebrates temptation, injecting its allure and influence into our psyches, emotions, and brains. Even Christians will quietly roll their eyes at the topic, attesting to its psychological power. I once saw a bumper sticker that read, "O Lord, lead us not into temptation. We can find it all by ourselves!" Our daily battle with these urges and feelings triggers unfortunate behavior in every phase of our lives - business, political, social, and personal. Although both the church and the bible demand we flee temptation's grip, secretly, we think we are slaves to its power and ineffective in our attempts to master it. We cannot control something that we do not understand. For the bible says -

*For a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.* – 2 Peter 2:19

## Definition

Temptation is the convincing feeling/desire to embrace behavioral urges that gratify in the short term but threaten our flourishing and goals in the long term. Temptation also refers to the actions and behaviors that attract, allure, bait, and coax us into corrupt and destructive ends. Yet, businesses have always marketed their services/products (fragrances, clothing, autos, etc.) based on these seductive principles. Social media revels in the appeal of temptation, both in what we post and read. Temptation is overpowering as an aphrodisiac and as a balm for the hurting. Thus, remaining aloof and unaware of temptation is a green light for its destructive power and compromising results. Once again, the first step of any 12-step process is always to admit we are powerless against temptation and compulsive urges.

## Emotional Immaturity

A baby experiences a menu of emotions - joy, sadness, fear, anxiety, and peace - long before it understands those emotions. Although a baby feels this range of emotions, its brain has not developed enough to think or reason with any rational, logical progression. Thus, we learn to feel long before we learn to think. Feeling is an automatic behavioral response while thinking requires intentional, disciplined effort. That is why our emotions easily override our thinking, reasoning, and logic. As a child feels sadness, joy, anger, pain, resentment, and jealousy, the child must learn (be taught) to understand (and control) those emotions. Every traumatic event, every condition we encounter, and every feeling we feel has an emotion attached. Unless we educate our emotions to become more emotionally mature, our logic and reason will be easily swayed and captured by our negative emotions. Short-term gratification will dominate long-term flourishing. Temptation feeds on emotional immaturity.

### **Our Stumbling Blocks to dealing with Temptation**

Before examining Jesus, let's look at ourselves. We can't deal with the problem (the sin, the compulsion, and the corruption) until we deal with its source. But a significant stumbling block to resisting temptation is self-righteousness. When we are strongest, we're less aware of our vulnerabilities. Feeling invincible, we drop our protective guardrails. Filled with self-righteousness, we judge our fallen neighbors, never acknowledging our weakness to the same causal temptations. Secondly, our instructions on coping with temptation come from an authoritarian stance. Thus, we harshly judge the specific conditions of others while our differing conditions remain hidden and untouched by the light. To deal with our temptations, we must stop judging the struggles of others.

### **The Temptation of Jesus**

Firstly, understand that temptation is **not** a sin. Jesus was, at all points, tempted, yet he *never* sinned. Thus, examining the temptation of Jesus and his strategies for resistance is highly beneficial. Jesus begins his ministry as a young adult, between 28-34 years old - the prime years of his life. Our greatest season of temptation is always when we are most primed for success yet least likely to protect ourselves. Young adult Christians, though inexperienced, have the most ability to change the world. Therefore, Satan instills terrible habits early in our years. When you don't control habits and urges early, they will always eventually control you at later stages of life.

#### *Temptation in the Wilderness*

*Then Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan River. He was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for forty days. Jesus ate nothing all that time and became very hungry.*

- *Then the devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf of bread." But Jesus told him, "No! The Scriptures say, 'People do not live by bread alone.'"*
- *Then the devil took him up and revealed to him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. "I will give you the glory of these kingdoms and authority over them," the devil said, "because they are mine to give to anyone I please. I will give it all to you if you worship me." Jesus replied, "The Scriptures say, 'You must worship the LORD your God and serve only him.'"*
- *Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, "If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, 'He will order his angels to protect and guard you. And they will hold you up with their hands, so you won't even hurt your foot on a stone.'"* Jesus responded, *"The Scriptures also say, 'You must not test the LORD your God.'"*

*When the devil had finished tempting Jesus, he left him until the next opportunity came.*

*– Luke 4:1-13, NLT*

Temptation attacks when we are feeling our best and at our strongest. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, affirmed by God, with favor resting on his shoulders, filled with the Spirit, bolstered by prayer and fasting for 40 days. At the height of his spiritual connectedness with God, fulfilling every requirement for success, Jesus endures a blistering attack from the devil. If Jesus is subject to such an onslaught, we are naive to think we're ever beyond the reach of temptation.

### **The Source of Temptation**

The sources of temptation are internal and external. Internally, the bible points to the "flesh" - highlighting immoral, perverted, and gluttonous behavior as the source of temptation. However, our behaviors are influenced, even controlled, by legitimate feelings and emotions that manifest in our actions and outward inclinations. Jesus **was** hungry/tired. The fast was over, and he **deserved** to eat. He was confronted with the chance to gratify his needs quickly. Thus, emotional maturity (delaying gratification)

is essential to understanding and controlling temptations. Externally, the bible references the “world,” its indifference and opposition to God’s design and instruction. The “world” is our surrounding environment, blatantly reinforcing and normalizing selfish behaviors.

### **The Nature of Temptation**

The most important lesson from the temptation of Jesus is his self-awareness as capable/powerful amid a world that considered him powerless. The inevitable triggers we confront all remind us that we are powerless against temptation according to the standards of our world. We celebrate and value what we do, what we have/possess, and what others say about us. In the temptation narrative, the devil zeroes in directly on these points. He demands that Jesus do something (turn stone into bread,) possess something (giving him all the kingdoms of the world,) and care about the opinion of others (angels will catch you when you fall.). Jesus self-affirms his existence as one whom God (not others) calls His beloved son.

In summary, Jesus speaks to temptation, *“Whatever happens, whatever I do, whatever I possess, whatever they say about me, I know who I am.”* We are surrounded by people who deny, justify, and even celebrate sin until it all crashes around them. The temptation gets stronger when we are convinced that we’re powerless against it.

The affluent culture ironically thrives on scarcity as our “never enough” problem. We are never good enough, cute enough, rich enough, strong enough, smart enough, or safe enough. Even as Christians, our concept of blessing reacts to our fear of scarcity. Feelings of “lack” and scarcity flourish in a culture that is hype-aware of status, the opinion of others towards us, and our possessions. Focused on what we can’t do and don’t have, we live lives compared to a media-driven vision of perfection. Jesus was the ultimate counter to the culture - self-affirmed and self-motivated.

### **Weapons of our Warfare**

As young adults, we have weapons against temptation, but the emotional, biological, and learned behaviors pushing us toward temptation are also strongest early. As we get older, utilizing and benefitting from our gifting, we acquire the resources to cover up. Thus, we learn to live with and hide our vulnerabilities and temptations as they become normalized and accepted by the environment and culture. Soon we defend our vulnerable areas, self-sabotaging and protecting them from healing. We believe the myth that vulnerability is weakness. But awareness of vulnerability is courageous, exposing ourselves to uncertainty and propelling us into creativity and change. Our instinct to self-protect and not be “perceived as weak” keeps us from resisting temptation. Unfortunately, resisting temptation is seen as shameful and failure, an admission of weakness. Thus, we try to resist by being strong. Most men would rather die than risk the perception of weakness. Yet, Paul says,

*“When I am weak, then I am strong.”* - 2 Cor. 9:10

Through years of counseling, I’ve heard many women beg men to be vulnerable. They beg men to let them in, pleading with men to share their fears, to be honest with them. Unfortunately, most men claim that when they reveal their vulnerabilities to women, many women can’t handle it. Men complain that many women see real vulnerability in a man and recoil in fear manifesting into reactions ranging from disappointment to disgust. Men think women see weakness. Thus, most men detect this and decide, *“Not a chance.”* They just shut down. But the need to confront vulnerability is essential. The power to resist temptation will not be genuine without vulnerability. The ability to achieve lasting results does not happen until we confront vulnerability. Thus, our well-being cannot occur unless we become vulnerable to uncertainty and emotional exposure.

## Resisting Temptation

### 1. Recognize and Admit

We are vulnerable to temptation because of our emotions. Neurohormone secretions in our brains of dopamine, adrenaline, and others shove us toward certain behaviors. Our brain's reasoning and logic are overwhelmed by the emotional part. Yet, our choices are always our choice. (James 1:14-16). Fill our minds with positive things. (1 Tim. 6:11)

### 2. Prayer as Focus

In Gethsemane, Jesus instructs them “watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Matt. 26:41). Prayer shouldn't be a “begging” list of stuff we want. It should be an “ask” for protection against the things that hinder us from moving forward. We should pray for discernment to recognize and remain vigilant against temptation. We should pray for clarity when emotions distort and blind our minds toward short-term things threatening long-term goals. God does not deliver us from evil and temptation without our humble, hard work of repentance, forgiveness, and confession.

### 3. Become Self-Aware

Repentance involves knowing ourselves well. We must stop looking outward and start looking inward at our hearts. Our greatest enemy and the best friend to temptation is always our old, corrupt flesh. As we study our personality, circumstances, and disposition, we become aware of our vulnerable areas.

### 4. Take Preventative Actions

Embracing our vulnerability involves being keenly aware of the areas of attack. We become acutely sensitive to triggers that inevitably occur. Remember that 20% is what happens, and 80% is how we respond to what happened. (Rom. 7:21; Eph. 4:22). We should know when something or someone hits our “hot” button. We must learn to be proactive and not reactive. We can't be on guard for something we're unaware is there. Sometimes preventative actions don't look pretty. Remember, Joseph ran, screaming naked, from Potiphar's wife.

### 5. Battle Feelings of Being Powerless

God claims He never allows us to be tempted beyond what we can take but always provides us with a way out. (1 Cor. 10:13) Everything around us supports our feelings of powerlessness against temptation. Giving into temptation means surrendering to its power. Failure isn't failing. Failure is giving up.

