

# **10 Things You Should Know about Temptation**

October 2, 2017 | by: Sam Storms| *(used by permission)*

Temptation does not end when you become a Christian. It begins. That isn't to say non-Christians aren't tempted, but the primary target of Satan's seductive devices are the children of God. We see this in the experience of Jesus, who was tempted by the Devil for forty days in the wilderness. Notwithstanding Satan's decisive defeat, we read in [Luke 4:13](#) that he only departed from Jesus "until an opportune time." If Satan's attack against our Lord was interminable, we should hardly expect less. So let's look at ten things we should all know about the nature of temptation and how to defeat it.

Before I begin, let's remember that Satan has a strategy. In [2 Corinthians 2:11](#) the apostle issues a warning so that "we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs." The word translated "outwitted" (ESV) or "take advantage of" (NASB) means to cheat or defraud someone by deception. Satan had a clear vision, an agenda, if you will, for the situation in Corinth. To think that he acts randomly and aimlessly is precisely what he wants.

Consider [Ephesians 6:11](#) where Paul again speaks of Satanic "schemes". Here he uses the Greek word *methodia* from which we derive our English term "method." He has in mind cunning and wily stratagems (cf. [Eph. 4:14](#)) carefully crafted to devour unsuspecting Christians. Would it surprise you to know that Satan is operative in the formation and spread of value systems in our society, that he influences institutions, organizations, philosophical movements, political, social, and economic systems? Rest assured that Satan sets his goals and then utilizes and exploits the most effective means, while avoiding all obstacles, to reach his diabolical end.

(1) Whereas God tests our faith, he never tempts it ([James 1:13](#)). The purpose of divine testing is to sanctify and strengthen. The purpose of satanic tempting is to deceive and destroy. Evil neither exists in the heart of God nor is he its author. It most assuredly exists in our hearts and we are its author. Temptation almost always begins in the flesh ([James 1:14](#)). Our flesh sets fire to sin. Satan simply fans the flames. Satan is powerless until we first say "yes" to sin. He exploits our sinful decisions, most often by intensifying the course of action we have already chosen. Paul makes this point in [Ephesians 4:26-27](#). He exhorts us, "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil." Satan is not credited with nor blamed for creating the anger in the first place. We are responsible for it. Satan's response is to use this and other such sins to gain access to our lives and to expand and intensify our chosen course of behavior.

(2) We must remember that temptation, in and of itself, is not sin. This is critically important, especially for those who suffer from an overly sensitive and tender conscience. Jesus was repeatedly tempted (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15; Mt. 4), but he was sinless. We must resist thinking that we are sub-Christian or sub-spiritual simply because we are frequently tempted. It was Martin Luther who first said, “You can't prevent the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” His point is that a temptation only becomes a sin when you acquiesce to it, as it were “fondle” it and “enjoy” it.

(3) Temptation is often strong because it comes in the form of an enticement to satisfy legitimate needs through illegitimate means. The strategy of Satan with Jesus in the wilderness is a clear example of this. Bread is not evil. Neither is the desire to alleviate hunger by eating it, especially after you've fasted for forty days! Divine protection is a valid promise in Scripture (Ps. 91). Authority over the kingdoms of the world is something God promised the Son long ago (cf. Ps. 2). The temptation, therefore, was aimed at seducing Jesus into achieving divinely approved ends by sinful and illegitimate means. Temptation is often strongest when relief or satisfaction seems to dress itself in the very sin that Satan is suggesting.

A related point is that the strength of temptation comes from a tendency to push virtues to such an extreme that they become vices. For example, it is all too easy for the joy of eating to become gluttony, or for the blessing of rest to become sloth, or for the peace of quietness to become non-communication, or for industriousness to become greed, or for liberty to be turned into an excuse for licentiousness. We all know what it's like for pleasure to become sensuality, or for self-care to become selfishness, or for self-respect to become conceit, or for wise caution to become cynicism and unbelief, or for righteous anger to become unrighteous rage, or for the joy of sex to become immorality, or for conscientiousness to become perfectionism. The list could go on endlessly, but I think you get the point.

(4) Satan especially likes to tempt us when our faith is fresh, i.e., when the Christian is only recently converted and thus less prepared to know how to resist his seductive suggestions. This is precisely Paul's grounds for warning against the premature promotion of a new Christian in 1 Timothy 3:6. An elder, says Paul, must not be “a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. This isn't to suggest that older, more mature believers are exempt, for according to 1 Timothy 3:7, Satan is able to exploit any blemish on the reputation of any Christian leader.

Satan especially likes to tempt us when our faith feels strongest, i.e., when we think we are invulnerable to sin. If we are convinced that we have it under control, we become less diligent. “An unguarded strength,” said Oswald Chambers, “is a double weakness.”

(5) Satan especially likes to tempt us when we are in an alien environment. Gordon MacDonald explains: “In the environs of home life with family and friends, there is a schedule of routines, a set of support systems, and a way of doing things, all of which lends encouragement to responsible living and, conversely restraint against irresponsible living. Virtually all of these external systems fall away when a person is hundreds of miles from home” (*Rebuilding Your Broken World*, 100). Certainly our desire is that our internal resistance to the temptation of sin, nourished and sustained by our fascination and joy with the beauty of God in Christ, would be adequate in such circumstances. But when the external boundaries that often unconsciously govern our behavior are removed, or are expanded, we soon discover the depth (or shallowness) of maturity in our souls.

(6) Satan also likes to tempt us when our faith is being tested in the fires of affliction. When we are tired, burnt out, persecuted, feeling excluded and ignored, Satan makes his play. His most common tactic is to suggest that God isn't fair, that he is treating us unjustly, from which platform Satan then launches his seductive appeal that we need no longer obey. Physical pain, relational and financial loss, when combined with the silence of heaven, serve only to intensify the appeal of temptation.

(7) Satan especially likes to tempt us immediately following both spiritual highs and spiritual lows. Periods of emotional elation and physical prosperity can sometimes lead to complacency, pride, and a false sense of security. When they do, we're easy targets for the enemy's arrows. The same thing happens during the doldrums when we find ourselves wondering if God even cares. We become bitter and despondent and sin suddenly seems the reasonable thing to do.

(8) One of Satan's more effective tactics is to put his thoughts into our minds and then blame us for having them:

“When thoughts or inclinations contrary to the will and ways of God creep in, many dear Christians mistake these miserable orphans for their own children, and take upon themselves the full responsibility for these carnal passions. So deftly does the devil slip his own thoughts into the saints' bosom that by the time they begin to whimper, he is already out of sight. And the Christian, seeing no one but himself at home, supposes these misbegotten notions are his own. So he bears the shame himself, and Satan has accomplished his purpose” (William Gurnall).

When lying to God about you doesn't work, he lies to you about God. He does everything in his power to convince you that God isn't good, that he can't be trusted, that he's holding out on you, that he won't be there when you need him most (Gen. 3; Matthew 4). And if that weren't enough, he lies to you about yourself (Eph. 6:16), seducing you into believing you aren't what God says you are and that you will never be what God has promised you'll be.

A related tactic of temptation is for him to launch his accusations as if they were from the Holy Spirit. In other words, he couches his terms and chooses his opportunities in such a way that we might easily mistake his voice for that of God. So how do we distinguish between satanic accusation and divine conviction? Among other things, the former comes in the shape of condemnation that breeds feelings of hopelessness. We are told that our sin has put us beyond the hope of grace and the power of forgiveness. Satan's accusations are devoid of any reference to the sufficiency of the cross. Divine conviction for sin, on the other hand, comes with a reminder of the sufficiency and finality of Christ's shed blood, together with a promise of hope and the joy of forgiveness.

**(9)** Know yourself. Ask the question often: "If I were the devil, where would I attack me?" In other words, be quick to identify your weaknesses, your vulnerable spots, areas where you've failed before, and take extraordinary steps to protect yourself in the future. If you are susceptible to the effects of alcohol, don't toy with a casual drink. If your fantasies are easily fueled by visual images, stay away from R-rated movies.

**(10)** Confront and conquer temptation at the beginning, not at the end. The best and most effective tactic against temptation is to deal with it from a position of strength, before it has an opportunity to weaken you. Better to take steps up front to eliminate temptation altogether (if possible), than to deal with it later when your defenses are down.