



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

TEMPTATION: VULNERABLE FLAW OF WEAKNESS • Chuck Swindoll

Mark Antony was known as the “silver-throated orator of Rome.” He was a brilliant statesman, magnificent in battle, courageous, and strong. And he was handsome. As far as personal qualities are concerned, he could have become a world ruler. But he had the very vulnerable and fatal flaw of moral weakness, so much so that on one occasion his personal tutor shouted into his face, “Oh, Marcus, oh, colossal child! Able to conquer the world, but unable to resist a temptation.”

That indictment, I’m afraid, applies not just to Mark Antony, and not just to the people of the unsaved world. If the truth were known, it is applicable to many in the evangelical ranks. We all face temptation, and it is a very real fact that many do not yet know how to resist it and overcome it when it appears.

That, very simply, is what I want to deal with here. To write a book on the struggles of the saints without a chapter on temptation would be both unrealistic and incomplete. Why is temptation so “successful”? What makes it work? How can we handle it? Can we learn something that Mark Antony never did—how to resist it?

[Trials or Temptations? Knowing the Difference](#)

There’s a definite difference between trials and temptations. Trials are ordeals—tests of our faith. Normally, there is nothing immoral involved in experiencing a trial. A trial is a hardship, an ordeal. But it is generally not something that is evil or brought about by evil. You will notice that James 1:2,3 addresses the problem of trials.

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.”

James goes on through verse twelve writing about trials. But in verse 13 he speaks about temptation.

Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God.”

Take, for example, Job’s trials. He lost his health, his family, his home, his business—he lost everything! But nothing immoral brought about Job’s problems; it was a test—in fact, a severe series of tests, as we studied in Chapter 4. Or look at a depressed Elijah under the juniper tree. When his life was threatened, he went away to hide and pleaded with God.

“It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers” (1 Kings 19:4).

Nothing immoral or evil caused Elijah’s experience of depression. It was a test, a hardship, an ordeal.

John (the author of the Book of Revelation) was banished to the Isle of Patmos, but not for moral wrongdoing. He was tested by being removed from all that he knew and called dear. It was a trial.

But when we get to temptation, it’s different. That is why in James 1:13, the verse includes the word “tempted.”



Although it is the same Greek word we have read in verses 1 through 12, in the writer's mind it meant something different. It changed from the idea of an ordeal to the idea of soliciting evil.

A glance at your dictionary will inform you that temptation is “the act of enticement to do wrong, by promise of pleasure or gain.” That's right! Temptation motivates you to be bad by promising something good. Isn't that just like the devil?

We tend to think first of the sensual aspect of temptation. If we were to ask, “What is temptation to you?” the vast majority of readers would say, “It is that which is related to the lower nature, the sensual part of life; that which has to do with the lustful eye and the lustful desire of man.” That is temptation.

But that isn't all of it. We can be tempted to gossip . . . to steal . . . to hold a grudge . . . to lie. There are temptations of every sort. So don't categorize it just in the realm of sensuality, although sensual lust is the most common kind of temptation.

There is a Simple Answer

Temptation can be counteracted very definitely by a particular act. This act is a fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22,23 we read:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

The word we are looking for is self-control. The Greek word literally means “in strength,” and that's exactly what it is. The fruit of the Spirit is inner strength. It is frequently rendered “mastery, or the mastery of self” in extrabiblical literature. In other words, one of the things the Spirit of God promises to do for the child of God is to enable him or her to master self, weaknesses, and areas of temptation. How is temptation counteracted? By self-control. Rivet that thought into your head.

But wait a minute. As you read this, you may be tempted to say (as would those who attend the so-called deeper-life conferences), “This isn't something I do; it's something God does. I am not able to do anything. I am only passively involved. God is actively involved because, after all, it is the fruit of the Spirit that is self-control.”

Let me tell you, that view is unbiblical—and it doesn't work. If you try to passively deal with temptation, it will conquer you every day of your life! The power and fruit of the Spirit are available; self-control comes from God; but I want to say it again: We carry it out. Pause and let that sink in.

How do we know this?

The apostle Peter wrote about self-control.

“For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love.” (2 Pet. 1:4-7)

In that series of commands, the Lord includes our responsibility: You supply self-control. Sounds like a contradiction, doesn't it? Paul calls it the “fruit of the Spirit,” and it is. Self-control is an ingredient from heaven that God gives us when the Spirit of God lives within and controls us. But Peter said we are to “supply it”!



The alleged contradiction is resolved when we realize that God is the source of the power, and that this means we pave the way for it to take place. The same basic supply is given to every child of God, but it is our responsibility to obey and carry out the action of self-control for it to happen in our lives.

Four Facts About Temptation

There are four basic principles regarding temptation. Before we deal with how to handle it, let's get those principles down. They all lie within three verses of James 1.

“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. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.” (James 1:13-15)

1. *Temptation is inevitable.*

“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God.’” James did not say, “Let no one say, if he is tempted . . .” He said, “when he is tempted.” And there’s a difference.

It would be wonderful if we could live without facing temptations. But the simple fact is we cannot. If you think you’ve found some place, some unique Christian victory secret, some perfect location, some uninhabited island, some ideal church, some area where there is no chance for temptation, don’t go there. Because when you do, you’re going to spoil it! You see, when you go you take with you your mind—your thoughts, which is the vehicle of temptation. We will never be in a place on earth where there is no temptation. Never.

The monk who lives behind cloistered walls wrestles with temptations as real as the businessman in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles. The salesman who faces the temptations of competitive life wrestles with allurements no less (and no more) than one who is engaged in the work of Christian ministry. Every one of us faces temptation. It is inevitable. We cannot get away from it.

2. *Temptation is never directed by God.*

He permits it, to be sure, but He never directs it. God does not direct us into sin. Notice, in James 1:13, that God cannot be tempted by evil, and God does not tempt. Remember the words of 1 John 1:5: “God is light. In Him there is no darkness at all.” What that means is that God cannot fellowship with sin. He cannot tolerate it, nor does He direct us into it. We sin by our own choice. When the angels surrounded the throne of God in Isaiah 6:3, they rendered to Him the praise of “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts.” “Holy” means “totally separate from sin.”

Let me say it as carefully as I can: There is nothing wrong with facing temptations. It is not sinful to have tempting things come before us. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” But how do we react to temptation?

“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God.’” (James 1:13)

Have you ever found yourself doing that? The classic illustration is Adam in the Garden of Eden. When Adam ate of the fruit, God came and asked, “What is it that you have done?” Do you remember what Adam said? “The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate.” What was he saying? “God, You set me up! Here I was, enjoying the bounty and blessing of the garden, and along came this lady that You brought into my life. And if it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t have been tempted.”

That thought is exactly what James wanted to contradict. God is not even indirectly engaged in bringing us into sin. To be sure, God certainly permits the events of our lives to take place as they do. But when we yield to the temptations that appear before us, God has had absolutely no part in that act. Instead, it is you and I who have disobeyed and given in to the temptation.



3. *Temptation is an individual matter.*

“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.” (James 1:14)

I want you to underscore “each one” and “own.” When we choose to yield to temptation (and we’ll deal with that process in just a moment), it is an individual matter. You cannot blame anyone else. Nothing outside ourselves is strong enough—not even Satan—to cause us to sin. Sin takes place when we agree to the temptation and follow it. It takes an agreement on our part. Not until I individually involve myself does sin take place. Up to that point I am safe and pure.

Let me illustrate it this way. I have an attorney friend who works in conjunction with the Federal Reserve Bank in another city. His work involves numerous trips to the Federal Reserve, where stacks and stacks and stacks of paper money are kept and counted. If you’ve never seen it, you can’t imagine it!

He made the mistake of taking me there one afternoon. We walked in together and were checked all over. (You know how thorough they are if you’ve ever been there.) We walked down a narrow hallway and were checked again. We were on closed circuit security TV cameras all the way. Behind a large section of bulletproof glass (and the construction of the building is such that you cannot get beyond the glass) are people who do nothing but count money. There were numerous stacks of crisp new hundred-dollar bills. He told me there were also stacks of thousand-dollar bills.

I asked him, “How can they stand it behind there?” (revealing something of my own depravity!).

He said, “Everything is fine if they remember their job is only to count pieces of paper. If they begin to concentrate on what those pieces of paper represent, then we have problems.”

As long as they are just counting slips of printed paper, that’s fine. It could be a stack of magazines or a pile of mail. But if they think, “Hey, this is a spendable hundred-dollar bill I have in my hand!” or “Man, a thousand dollars!”—then they’re in for trouble.

Open doors to sin face us all each day. The person centered on Christ and His righteousness says, “Nothing doing,” and willfully walks away. The person intent on satisfying his own desires for sin (whether he is a Christian or not) says, “Oh, I just can’t help myself,” and walks in. The good news for the Christian is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can help it!

4. *Temptation that leads to sin always follows the same overall process.*

Verse 14 begins the process, and verse 15 carries it out. Pay close attention:

Step 1: The bait is dropped.

Step 2: The inner desire is attracted to that bait.

Step 3: Sin occurs when we yield—when we bite the bait.

Step 4: Sin results in tragic consequences—we end up hooked and fried.

I’m using these vivid and analogous terms because of James’ terminology. Watch what he wrote:

“But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.” (James 1:14,15)

The word “entice” (v. 14) is a fishing term. When you fish, you’ve got to provide a bait that interests and entices a fish. Where I live, fish like shrimp. You put a juicy little shrimp on the hook and try to keep him alive so he keeps



snapping and dancing, just as if he's swimming, and you cast out into the ocean. A big gulf trout cannot resist it, if he sees it. If you handle things just right, you've got a sure strike. Why? Because you have chosen a bait that interests the fish.

Here is that fish—safe, casual, doing whatever fish do. Then the bait drops. He has to reckon with it. I don't know how fish think, but they probably look and think something like, "Wow, that looks great!" And when that fish leaves his hiding place for the bait, he's as good as caught.

So are we.

As long as we remain obedient to the Lord, drawing our strength and our delight from Him, the evil system around us can drop all sorts of bait and it won't seriously interest us. Oh, it's there. But our Lord's Word and power are stronger and more important to us than anything out there.

But when we choose not to obey God and slip out after the bait, we're as good as gone.

Perhaps you're wondering how to say no consistently. Look at Genesis 39 for the classic means to handle temptation:

"Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the body-guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites, who had taken him down there. And the Lord was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian.

"Now his master saw that the Lord was with him and how the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and became his personal servant. Potiphar made him overseer over his house, and all that he owned he put in his charge.

"And it came about that from the time he made him overseer in his house, and over all that he owned, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house on account of Joseph. The Lord's blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.

"So he left everything he owned in Joseph's charge; and with him there he did not concern himself with anything except the food, which he ate. Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance. And it came about after these events that his master's wife looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me.'

"But he refused . . ." (Gen. 39:1-8).

Did you notice the bait that was dropped? Here is a handsome single man, alone in Potiphar's home. And Potiphar's wife has a lustful desire for this man and says, "Lie with me." Now, that's what I'd call dropping the bait! Nothing subtle about Mrs. Potiphar!

But Joseph refused—and look at his answer:

"Behold, with me here, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:8,9)

Isn't that strong! Here is a man whose heart for God took precedence. "How can I sin this way against God?" He consciously and willfully rejected the bait.

"And it came about as she spoke to Joseph day after day, (Don't think for a moment that once you have resisted it will end. The same tempting thoughts will come over and over and over. Just because you say "no" once doesn't mean Satan quits.) that he did not listen to her to lie beside her, or be with her.

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“Now it happened one day that he went into the house to do his work, and none of the men of the household was there inside. And she caught him by his garment, saying, ‘Lie with me!’ And he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside.” (Gen. 39:10-12).

I like that! He took off. He ran like mad. She got the garment, and he (eventually) got his reward. By the way, there’s a name for folks who linger and try to reason with lust: victim.

It can be done! Look, we have made resisting temptation some mystical, unreachable, unattainable talent reserved either for the very old or the very pious. Baloney! Saying “no” is something all of us who belong to Christ can do. There’s nothing magical about it. You simply put Jesus Christ at the helm of your life and say “NO”!

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