

Temptation

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Definitions

In the NASB Bible, I looked at all the verses using the word *tempt*, *tempter*, *temptation*, and *tempted* (there are no words for *tempts* or *tempting*). Here's what I found.

The Greek word, for all of the variations of the word *temptation*, is the verb *πειράζω* (*peirazo*) or the noun form *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*). The difficulty with this word is that it can be either a temptation or a trial. The word is translated *temptation*, *trial*, *experiment*, *attempt*, or *proving*. So the context has to determine the way it's translated.

Here is the "Thayer Lexicon" range of meaning for this word. [The quote is given with my editing. I have not added anything, but I have deleted some words, for example, his Greek quotes, and I have emphasized some words that pertain to this discussion.]

- Universally, *trial*, *proving*...the trial made of you by my bodily condition, Galatians 4:14
- *The trial of man's fidelity, integrity, virtue, constancy* 1 Peter 4:12
- *An enticement to sin, temptation*, whether **arising from the desires or from outward circumstances**, Luke 8:13; 1 Corinthians 10:13; James 1:12; an internal temptation to sin, 1 Timothy 6:9
- The temptation by which the devil sought to divert Jesus the Messiah from His divine errand, Luke 4:13
- A condition of things, or a **mental state**, by which we are enticed to sin
- A lapse from faith and holiness; Matthew 6:13; Luke 11:4; Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:38 Luke 22:40, 46
- *Adversity, affliction, trouble* (cf. our *trial*), sent by God and serving to test or prove one's faith, holiness, character: plural, Luke 22:28; Acts 20:19; James 1:2; 1 Peter 1:6
- Rebellion against God, by which His power and justice are, as it were, put to the proof and challenged to show themselves: Hebrews 3:8 (Deuteronomy 6:16; 9:22; Psalm 94:8)

From Thayer, we can understand:

1. **Temptation/testing may come from God**, as a test we should pray will not happen. *And do not lead us into temptation* [or testing, *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*)], *but deliver us from evil* (Matthew 6:13). God does not tempt us (James 1:13), but He may test us or lead us into a temptation situation, as when *Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil* (Matthew 4:1).
2. **Temptation may come externally**, from the devil or his world system, as with Eve in the garden, the temptations of Christ, and Peter's sifting (Luke 22:31).
3. **Temptation may come internally**, "arising from the desires...or a mental state, by which we are enticed to sin." This would originate in our sin nature. *I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin* (Romans 7:14).

If this comes from God, it is a test, and the objective is not to get us to sin but to prove or develop our capacity to overcome it. If it comes from the devil or his world system, the objective is to tempt us to sin and, therefore, offend the character of God. But temptation also comes internally from our

own sin nature. We don't need the devil to sin. The devil, with his world system, are only a source of sin when our internal sin nature desires what he and his system offers.

Usually, for Most of Us, Most of the Time, Temptation Is Sin

There are two examples of the devil tempting someone without a sin nature.

The first is the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They had no sin nature, but they were not able not to sin. In other words, they had the capacity to either sin or not sin. But they sinned because they desired what the sin offered.

*When the woman saw that the tree was **good** for food, and that it was a **delight** to the eyes, and that the tree was **desirable** to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:6).*

The difference between the sin of Eve and the sin of Adam is that the serpent convinced Eve eating the fruit was not wrong. Adam apparently ate, knowing it was wrong. So maybe women tend to be more easily deceived and men tend to sin knowingly (1 Timothy 2:14). Neither Adam nor Eve had a conscience to guide them. But they both had a command from God, and they both had the capacity to obey or disobey. At any rate, we can conclude that **their disobedience was based in their desire to have what was sinful to have.**

Now let's look at Christ's temptation (Matthew 4:1-11). The devil tempted Jesus along the lines of physical needs (stones into bread), authority (over the angels that would catch Him), and power (over all the kingdoms of the world). Luke then tells us, *when the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time (Luke 4:13).*

The author of Hebrews gives us an interesting statement about Christ's temptation:

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus can sympathize with us because He was offered all human temptations. But when Jesus was tempted *yet without sin*, it was also a temptation of someone without a sin nature. He was the new Adam in the sense that neither Jesus, nor Adam before the fall, had a sin nature. The difference is Jesus was God. Adam was not. That meant Adam had the capacity to desire sin. Jesus did not. Being God, Jesus had no desire for the sin Satan tempted Him with. So His temptation was not such that He said, "I wish I could do that, but I won't." He was *tempted in all things as we are* in that He was presented with every possible avenue of sin, and proved He was perfect by not going down any of them. But it is not that He wanted to go down those paths, because that would mean He had a sin nature, which is impossible, given His deity.

There are occasions when a similar thing is true of us, namely, when we are tempted in areas we are not inclined to accept. A friend of mine, when he was driving home from college one day, unknowingly picked up a hitchhiker who was a homosexual. After a time, the homosexual laid a hand on my friend's leg, and my friend slugged him in the shoulder, claiming he was aiming for his jaw and missed. In a categorical sense, my friend was being tempted with homosexuality, but he had no inclination to succumb to the temptation. This would be more similar to Jesus' temptations (without the slugging). If that had been a pretty girl, my friend would have been in a different situation. That would be a temptation he would desire to give in to. But Jesus never had this kind of temptation, because a desire to give in to sin requires a sin nature. The whole point of Jesus' temptation was to prove that He was the Son of God and, therefore, had no sin nature.

Augustine, on the Ability to Sin

One of history's greatest theologians was Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.). Augustine concluded,

- a) Adam and Eve were **able not to sin**
- b) Unsaved people after the fall are **not able not to sin**
- c) Saved regenerate people are **able not to sin**
- d) In heaven we are **not able to sin**

Here is a good summary of Augustine's position (provided by Ken Silva, June 4, 2011):

Augustine argued that there are four states, which are derived from the Scripture, that correspond to the four states of man in relation to sin: (a) able to sin, able not to sin (*posse peccare, posse non peccare*); (b) not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*); (c) able not to sin (*posse non peccare*); and (d) unable to sin (*non posse peccare*). The first state corresponds to the state of man in innocency, before the Fall; the second the state of the natural man after the Fall; the third the state of the regenerate man; and the fourth the glorified man.

There is no question that Augustine was correct about his first two points. As to his fourth point, I would rather say, "The glorified person in heaven **will not sin**." The way Augustine put it sounds like in heaven we lose our free will. That's consistent with his emphasis on sovereignty, but it neglects free will. I'd rather say we are like the angels in heaven, in that we have the capacity to always not sin.

But that's not my concern here. I want to focus on Augustine's third point (c). Is it true that we who are saved, still living on earth with our sin nature, are "able not to sin?" It's been said that "Even though sin is inevitable, it is also avoidable." But is sin really avoidable?

The only verse that sounds like that is 1 Corinthians 10:13.

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, so that you will be able to endure it.

If this verse is saying that there is always a way to avoid sin, then Augustine is correct. Notice, however, that the one providing *the way of escape* is the same one providing *the temptation*. But James said that God never tempts anyone.

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 (James 1:13).

Apparently, *temptation* is not a good translation in 1 Corinthians 10:13. The word for *temptation* is also the word for *test*. In that case, 1 Corinthians 10 is saying we are not *tested beyond what we are able*. Also, the word *escape* [ἐκβάσις (*ekbasis*)] means *a way out* or *an end*. The only other place this word *escape* is used in the Bible is in Hebrews 13:7, where it means the *result of their conduct* or *the end of their lives*.

*Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the **result of their conduct**, imitate their faith.*

It seems that the idea is not that there is a way to escape sin, but that there is a way to endure the trials that life brings our way. In the context of 1 Corinthians 10, Paul is saying our life-tests do not have to lead to sin and rebellion, as they did with the Israelites in the wilderness, because God *will provide the way* to endure those trials, to have a way through those trials to the end of our lives.

In the notes of his Study Bible, Ryrie says, “*the way of escape*. Lit., the way out. Not necessarily relief but power to be able to bear the testing.”

David K. Lowery in the “Bible Knowledge Commentary” says, “The temptations that seized the Corinthians were like those people had always faced. They could be met...looking for a **way out** by endurance.”

Temptation and the Sermon on the Mount

Let’s take a look at Jesus teaching on the subject from His Sermon on the Mount. While teaching His disciples, Jesus gave several moral principles that are stated in the form of *You have heard...but I say to you*. Consider His teaching about anger, lust, and resisting an evil person.

Matthew 5:22 “*But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.*”

If you are tempted to be angry with someone, then you are already angry with him or her. If you were not angry, then you would not know that you are tempted to be angry. The only way to separate the temptation of anger, from the sin of anger, is to say that you might become angry with someone you are not angry with yet. But as soon as you realize a specific anger temptation against a specific someone, then it’s too late to avoid sin. You are already angry. The temptation and the sin are the same.

Matthew 5:27-28 *You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery;” but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

If a man looks at a woman he considers attractive, then he has already looked to lust, since he would not be looking if he wasn’t lusting. Of course, there are ways to admire beauty without lust. But that never happens to a normal male when an attractive girl walks past.

Matthew 5:39 *But I say to you, “Do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.”*

If you have identified someone as *an evil person* that should be resisted, then you have already resisted him or her. If you are not resisting a person for being evil, then you do not consider them evil. So the identification of the evil person and the temptation to resist him or her are the same.

Yeah, I know, you can play around with words. You can say: “I’m upset with my brother but not angry.” “I’m admiring a woman without lusting.” “I’m cautious about an evil person but not resisting.”

Even if that’s true in some situations, it’s not always the case, it’s not usually the case, and, actually, it’s hardly ever the case. Playing with descriptions is usually just an excuse to justify anger, lust, and resisting an evil person. And it’s the same with all sin. Temptations to sin are already sin, if you are inclined to enjoy the sin.

"Temptation" Throughout the New Testament

Matthew 6:13 *And do not lead us into **temptation**, but deliver us from evil.* Notice, to be in temptation requires being delivered from evil. So the temptation itself is an evil that we must be delivered from.

Luke 8:13 *Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of **temptation** fall away.* Notice, all those who are tempted fall away. There are no rocky-soil believers who don't fall away when tempted. The temptation is inseparably connected to the falling away.

1 Timothy 6:9 *But those who want to get rich fall into **temptation** and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.* Notice, the desire to get rich itself constitutes a *fall into temptation*. And part of that temptation includes foolish and harmful desires.

2 Peter 2:9 *...the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from **temptation**, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment.* Notice, those rescued from temptation are contrasted with those punished on *the day of judgment*. The godly are rescued from entering into temptation and those *under punishment* are not. So a rescue from temptation is a rescue from the sin punished on the day of judgment. So the temptation itself is sin.

1 Corinthians 7:5 *Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not **tempt** you because of your lack of self-control.* Notice, Satan's temptation is inseparably linked to their desire to commit adultery or have an affair or something, because of *lack of self-control*. No distinction is made between the temptation and the lack of self-control. So the temptation is also sin.

Galatians 6:1 *Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be **tempted**.* Notice Paul's warning is not just about succumbing to temptation but the temptation itself. The temptation to be caught in a trespass, like the person you are restoring, is inseparably linked to the trespass you might be caught in. So the temptation itself is sinful.

1 Thessalonians 3:5 *For this reason, when I could endure it no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the **tempter** might have **tempted** you, and our labor would be in vain.* Notice Paul is concerned about their being tempted. Why would temptation make Paul's labor in vain, if it wasn't sinful? Why wouldn't he say he was concerned that they had not succumb to temptation? Apparently, the temptation is also sinful.

James 1:14 *But each one is **tempted** when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.* Notice James does not say we are sometimes carried away by our lusts when we are tempted, but each one who is tempted is also the one who is carried away by his lusts. The one tempted and the one carried away by lust is the same one at the same time. So the temptation is inseparably connected to being enticed by lust and is, therefore, also sinful.

If our sin nature always tempts us toward evil desires, and if evil desires are sinful, then we are continually, incurably, inevitably, sinning. So,

How Can We Relate to a Holy God?

The answer is, on our knees, in humility, through the blood of Christ. The reality is, we are far more sinful than we think we are. However sinful you think you are, you are far more sinful than that.

The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one (Psalm 14:2, quoted in Romans 3:10-12).

Our sin is not just in external deeds, it reaches into our *thoughts and intentions of the heart*, so that when those thoughts and intentions are inclined toward sin, and they continually are, then our temptation is our sin. God revealed things about Himself throughout history, and inspired men to write them in the Bible, because

The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

We are not simply told to keep the Law of God, we are told to seek the heart of God. The spiritual life is not keeping rules but *trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord* (Ephesians 5:10). When Jesus said, “*You have heard...but I say to you,*” He demonstrated that keeping from sin is not difficult, it is impossible. Everything Jesus taught about sin, righteousness, and judgment proved that we cannot please God with our deeds. We are totally dependent on what He accomplished on the cross. Our hope is not in trying to justify our sin as something that can be overcome, or something separated from our temptations, or that we are somehow “able not to sin.” *If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us* (1 John 1:8).

The only reason we have hope is because *...while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly* (Romans 5:6). The only reason we have hope is because *He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).