

What About ... Temptation?

Is It a Sin to Be Tempted?

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If you were like me, you'd probably say, "Well, Jesus was tempted and He didn't sin, so temptation itself cannot be sinful." And, of course, that's true—for Jesus. But a closer look at the word for "temptation" in the New Testament shows that it has two distinctly different uses. The same Greek word is translated "tempt, tempted, or temptation." It's the word *πειρασμός* (*peirasmos*) as a noun, and *πειράζω* (*peirazo*) as a verb. Here are the two uses for the word *temptation*:

1. To be presented with an external opportunity to sin. Hebrews 4:15b, [Jesus] *has been tempted* [*πειράζω* (*peirazo*)] *in all things as we are, yet without sin.*
2. To have an internal desire to sin. James 1:14, *But each one is tempted* [*πειράζω* (*peirazo*)] *when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.*

So temptation is the external opportunity or internal desire to do things contrary to God.

The first use is best illustrated by the author of Hebrews who uses the word *tempted* [*πειράζω* (*peirazo*)] four times in three verses (Hebrews 2:18; 4:15; 11:37), and it always refers to an external possibility to sin presented or placed in the path of someone (Jesus in 2:18 and 4:15, martyred saints in 11:37). This temptation was never sinful for Jesus because He had no sin nature. He never had a desire for it. Satan placed these things in His path. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1). But Jesus never had a desire to succumb to, or pursue, those presentations.

That's true of all of us concerning certain temptations. For example, I might be presented with an opportunity for homosexuality, anorexia, or drunkenness. But for me, those things are not something I have any inclination or desire for. They are only temptations in the sense of Jesus' temptations. Satan may present them, but I have no desire for them.

The second use of *temptation* is a desire to sin rooted in our sin nature. James says, *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* [*πειράζω* (*peirazo*)] *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). This temptation is not our sin nature itself. If that were so, then God would be tempting us to sin. We are born with a sin nature because of a judgment on the sin of our original parents. We might say, "I was born with a tendency to sin." Yes, but that is not a temptation from God, it's a judgment of God on Adam and Eve. James 1 refers to some sinful possibilities placed in our path, which we would be inclined to follow. These are things which, when we apply our lust to them, result in sin.

The problem is, James says lust leads to sin and Jesus says lust makes us guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. So is lust sin, or does it lead to sin? I suspect James is using the word *sin* to refer to a sinful act (like adultery or murder). But clearly, Jesus referred to lust (desire for sin) as sin. Desires for sin are sinful (in our heart) with or without an external opportunity (Genesis 6:5). Jesus extended the sins of murder and adultery to anger (basically murder lust) and adultery lust (Matthew 5:21-28). So when there is a presentation of a potential evil (by Satan or his world system) and we have a desire for it, our sin nature becomes personal sin, even if we do not commit the act. That transition is where the temptation itself is sinful.

So temptation, which is a presentation of evil, is not sinful, but temptation, which is a desire for evil, is. Desire for sin is sin.

