

How to Overcome Temptation

Rich Nathan
November 16 & 17, 2019
Just Pray
Matthew 6:13

Let me begin with a question. What are the top five self-reported temptations in America? I'm not speaking of these guys

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The Temptations photo

Although these would be my top five Temptations of all time.

According to a Barna survey, the top five self-reported temptations are:

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1. Anxiety or worry

60% of Americans said that they often live in a state of noticeable and debilitating temptation to anxiety or worry. And the younger you are, according to the surveys, the more likely you are to struggle with anxiety.

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1. Anxiety or worry
2. Procrastination

60% of Americans say they are stuck in habits of procrastination. Again, this shows up more with young people than with their grandparents.

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1. Anxiety or worry
2. Procrastination
3. Eating too much

55% of Americans say they are overwhelmed by temptation to overeat.

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1. Anxiety or worry
2. Procrastination
3. Eating too much
4. Overusing electronics or social media

44% of Americans say they face great temptation to overuse electronics and social media, such as Facebook or Instagram or Snapchat or video games.

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1. Anxiety or worry
2. Procrastination
3. Eating too much
4. Overusing electronics or social media
5. Laziness

44% of Americans say they often or are sometimes tempted by laziness. They're not working as hard as could be reasonably expected in their occupations. So, here are the top five.

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1. Anxiety or worry
2. Procrastination
3. Eating too much
4. Overusing electronics or social media
5. Laziness

Maybe you don't see your particular top temptation among those listed. Don't worry. Today's talk will speak to overcoming temptation however it shows up in your personal case.

You know, the Bible is filled with stories of temptation from the beginning to the end. We human beings are constantly facing a decision about whether we're going to choose for good or choose for evil. We read story after story about individuals who choose to either resist temptation and decide to go God's way or those who give in. Temptation is a major theme in the Bible and it's a major theme of all of our lives.

Of course, we have the most famous temptation story in the Old Testament, one that involved our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden. It has all the classic temptation elements – Satan's subtlety, his asking of the wrong question to get us off-track from the real issue, people opening the door for conversation with the devil, the seduction of living life without limits. It is all there in the original temptation in the Garden.

But there are so many other stories of temptation in the Bible. In Genesis, Lot is tempted to choose material prosperity in the city of Sodom. We read of Potiphar's wife attempting to seduce the patriarch Joseph to engage in sexual sin. There's the story of Samson and Delilah in which Samson is eventually seduced to give up his secret. King

David is tempted to commit adultery with Bathsheba and then tempted to commit murder to cover up his adultery. Job's wife tempts him to curse God and die. The rich young ruler is tempted to walk away from Jesus because of his greed. Judas is tempted by 30 pieces of silver.

Other Bible characters are tempted by ambition. Some are tempted by false worship. Some are tempted by the desire for self-preservation or self-protection. Jesus himself was tempted in the wilderness.

How we as individuals and how we collectively as a church respond to temptation will determine whether we will fulfill our individual purposes as followers of Jesus and our collective purpose as a church. God has called his people to live by different standards than the rest of the world – to reflect to the world who God is. The problem with many of us as individuals and the church collectively is that we often don't look any different from the world and, in some cases, we look worse than the surrounding culture.

A divided and angry church has nothing to offer to a divided, angry world. A racially segregated church has nothing to say to a racially segregated world. A church which is absorbed with partisan politics has nothing to offer to a culture that's absorbed with partisan politics. A church with abusive leaders has nothing to offer to a world of abusive leaders. A church whose leaders are obsessed with materialism and prosperity has nothing to say to a culture that is obsessed with materialism and prosperity.

So, we are constantly – individually and as a church – facing temptation. Indeed, I would say that religion or being a religious person can often serve as cloak or disguise for grave sins. Sometimes sin and evil wear a mask of religion and you find the worst behavior in those who claim to be the most religious.

We've been doing a series here at Vineyard Columbus that we've called "Just Pray". It's taken from the Lord's Prayer. Jesus understands the nature of life in this world. He especially understands the temptation of religious people to deny their own vulnerability to succumb to great evil. That's why it was unthinkable for Jesus in teaching his disciples about prayer to not end his instruction about prayer without including warnings about temptation and evil.

Today, as we close out this series titled "Just Pray", I've called my message "How to Overcome Temptation".

Slide Matthew 6:9-13

⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray:

Our father in heaven
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts
as we slo have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from the evil one.

What are we praying when we pray, “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one”? What exactly does that mean? We might paraphrase this by something like this: “Heavenly Father, don’t allow us to be led into temptation too strong for us. Don’t allow us to be led into temptation that overwhelms us, but rescue us from evil and the evil one.”

There is some debate among translators about whether we should translate this phrase as “deliver us from the evil one” or “deliver us from evil in general”. I think that we ought to pray both. We need to say, Father, I am aware that the evil one – that is, Satan – Jesus took the devil really seriously. He didn’t view Satan as a mythological creature. He didn’t make jokes about Satan. He took the existence of supernatural, personified evil to be very real. So, we need to pray: “Father, I know that the Devil is too strong for me and that I am too weak to stand up to him. And when he comes at me, please deliver me. Help me to not succumb.”

Not just when Satan comes after me, deliver me not only from the evil one, but also from evil – including the evil in my own heart. My own greed. My own lust. My own anxiety and pride and vanity and blindness to my own faults. Help me to not succumb to the evil that is outside of me and help me to not succumb to the evil that is inside of me.

As I said, temptation is a major theme in the Bible and a major theme of our lives. We’re constantly being tested. We’ll either yield to temptation or we’ll resist it. Whether we’ll succumb to evil or submit to God. How do we recognize temptation when it comes?

Temptation doesn’t always knock on our door and announce itself. Temptation doesn’t always shout at us, announcing “I am temptation! I have come to weaken you, to drive a wedge between you and God, to get you addicted, to rob your joy.” Temptation doesn’t always announce itself. How do we recognize it when it comes.

Let me suggest three marks of temptation.

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Three marks of temptation

You can find these in a variety of temptations you will face. Let me parenthetically say that God does allow the evil one to tempt us. But he does so in order to strengthen us. I see temptation as being like weightlifting. God understands that the more we resist temptation, the stronger we will be. Satan wants us to yield to temptation so that we will hurt ourselves and hurt others. God wants us to resist temptation so that we can help ourselves and bring healing to others. Satan wants us to yield to temptation so we'll feel guilty, so we'll hide from God. God wants us to resist temptation. And when we face it to run toward him.

How do we recognize temptation when it comes? Here's, I think, the first mark. Satan's method is always:

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Enjoy now, pay later

Satan is always about getting thrills now with very little investment. Enjoy pornography or illicit sex now and you'll get this immediate rush. Get high, get drunk now and, wow, it'll feel so good. Lie on your resume and get the job. Lower your standards and keep the boss happy. Compromise and get the boyfriend or girlfriend that you want. Work like a crazy person and neglect your family and get the professional recognition you want.

Then, what Satan does is once you're hooked on this no cost scheme, he ups the ante. Anyone who has ever studied addiction or found themselves hooked or read a little bit of psychology understands that over a period of time, your tolerance for some behavior or some compromise grows and it takes more of that thing, more of that compromise, more of that person more of that recognition to give you the same high. You have to do it more and more to get the same feeling.

Anyone who has been in any kind of recovery group, anyone of us who has ever been addicted or does therapy with recovering addicts understands the fundamental demonic principle of increased tolerance over time. We're talking about food or activities of self-harm like pulling out your eyelashes or hair or cutting or TV watching or work or shopping. Satan not only ups the cost over a period of time, he lowers the return. Initially, as I said, we find relief. We may experience a high. But over time, and you know this one, the return goes down and down until Satan's ultimate goal is that you would be completely addicted and dependent and derive no return at all.

God's economy is exactly the opposite. God's training is to press us in to following him, often with very little obvious return. We pray for the sick and nothing happens. We take the risk of sharing our faith and we don't see any response. Maybe the response is really negative. We give and we don't get anything back. God often requires a really high front-end investment with very little initial return. Why? Because he's teaching us

to love God for himself. Not just to love the things that God gives, but to love him and to obey him regardless.

I'll tell you what, because I've been at this thing for 45 years. Over a period of time it changes and when it seemed before like I was swimming against the tide, over time the current shifts. You start seeing progress. You pray for the sick and, my goodness, they get well. You share with a loved one and something changes. You've been leaning in to sacrificing financially and blessing does come. Over a period of time with God, it feels like the cost goes down and the return goes up. We experience more and more of God's kingdom. Obeying God becomes easier and easier. God wants each of us at the end to say, "Lord, it's all been grace. Everything I have that is good, it's all been you."

That's the first mark of temptation – enjoy now, pay later. Here's the second mark of temptation.

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It can't be wrong when it feels so right

You know this one don't you? Haven't you ever seen someone do something that is obviously contrary to the commands Jesus gives us or what we read in the scripture, but they justify it saying, "How can it be wrong when it feels so right? He or she makes me feel so alive. After all, God is good and he wants me to be happy and he wouldn't want me to continue to be unhappy. Doesn't God know that I love her or I love him?" People have actually said to me, "You know, my wife never was the perfect will of God for me. Sure, I stood at the altar and swore in front of God and many witnesses to take this person for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, till death. But she was never my true soulmate."

Let me put it really simply. Giving yours and my incredible capacity to rationalize away all of our faults, it can absolutely be wrong even though it feels so right – whether we're talking about a marriage or a divorce or breaking a promise or gossiping or getting back at someone who hurt us. The only sure standard for doing what's right is what God says in his word. It's not your feelings or mine. It's not what you want or what everybody else says is really ok. The only sure standard of right and wrong is what God says in his word.

Here's the third mark of temptation. As I said, temptation doesn't always announce itself, it doesn't always scream, "I'm here!" to drive a wedge between you and God. So we need to be able to recognize it when it comes. So what's the third identifying mark of temptation?

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I can get close to the edge without falling in

Jesus is telling us, “Don’t pray hypocritically.” Don’t pray “lead me not into temptation, and then lead yourself into temptation.” And here, I think we need to know ourselves. You know, one really helpful question that each of us can ask ourselves is this: If I were the devil, where would I attack me? In other words, what are my weak points? Where am I vulnerable? Where have I failed before and if I don’t take precautions, I’ll likely fail again?

If you’re susceptible to getting drunk, don’t go into a bar, don’t go to certain parties, don’t have alcohol in the house. If you’re susceptible to overeating, don’t put ice cream in the freezer, don’t walk down the ice cream or chips aisle in the grocery store. If you’re susceptible to pornography, have someone put a block on your computer. If reading someone’s Facebook page or tweets makes you angry or anxious or jealous, unfriend them or unfollow them. Just don’t go there.

Any sin we commit, if we’re self-aware, we’ll see that there are multiple links in the chain that got us to the point of falling. If we battle temptation at the beginning, when it first shows up, and not at the end when we’re already weakened. How did you fall? Well, how close to the cliff were you leaning before you fell off? We were sharing the intimate details of our lives together. We were mutually complaining about our spouses. We were spending lots of time together. I began fantasizing about what life would be like with this other person. I don’t know how I had an affair.

Brothers and sisters, do you really think that you can take 99 steps toward sin and stop before you hit the final 100th step? If you believe that, you are set up to fall.

I’ve talked about three marks of temptation. What are three times when temptation comes? When can we expect it to come knocking on our door?

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Three times when temptation comes

The first time we can expect temptation to come is

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When we are outside of our routines

Gordon MacDonald wrote this:

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“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 of these external systems fall away when a person is hundreds of miles from home.”

If you do a lot of travel for work or your schedule is really irregular, you need to know that you are more vulnerable to temptation. Away from support, away from routines, away from healthy habits, away from church. On the road, I make it my aim to set my alarm so that I have enough time in the morning to run to the gym for a quick workout and back to my room for extended times of devotions. If I stay in my routines – left foot, right foot, left foot – I do well. If I break my routines for a few days, I don’t do well.

There’s a second time when temptation is likely to come.

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When we feel strong

Slide 1 Corinthians 10:12

¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!

Satan especially likes to tempt us when our faith feels strongest. It always makes me shutter when I hear someone say, “I don’t think I could ever have an affair.” If we are convinced that we could never be tempted, we become sitting ducks for the enemy. Satan is way stronger than we are. You have no idea of the depth of our own brokenness and depravity.

Often when we’re coming off a mountaintop experience with God is when we’re most vulnerable to temptation because we’re not depending on the Lord to keep us safe. We’re relying on yesterday’s experience of God.

When does temptation come?

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- When we’re outside of our routines
- When we feel strong

And...

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When we feel weak

Jesus was tempted in the desert just the Children of Israel in the Old Testament were tempted in the desert. The desert is a place of dryness, a place of emptiness. When we feel burned out, when we feel exhausted, when we feel depleted and wrung out, and especially when we feel isolated and alone, we’re subject to temptation.

Think about the person whose life is marked by too much giving out, too many people that they need to serve, too many demands over too long a course of time, too much activity, too much work, too many days in a row of work without a break or a Sabbath. When our reserves are totally depleted, when there's no input and we're not taking time to just be with God, when we're not taking time to worship and be in God's presence, when we have no replenishing relationships in our life, that's when we fall. We need people in our lives who love us and we love them, people who encourage us and we encourage them. When we are weak, you can bet the tempter will be knocking on our door.

We talked about the fact that temptation is a major theme in the Bible and it's a major theme in our lives. We're constantly being tested. We're either going to succumb or we're going to resist. We'll go our way or we'll go God's way. We talked about how temptation often comes and when it comes, but this series is about prayer and our need to just pray. So, what are two prayers that you and I always need to pray, especially when we're experiencing pressure?

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Two prayers to fight temptation

The first prayer that we need to pray because of our great awareness of Satan's power and our own weakness is:

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Lord, keep me from quitting

Here's what we read:

Slide James 1:12

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Let's understand James' thought process. When you face a trial your marriage, in your health, in a relationship, in your business, or a loved one faces a severe trial, one of the questions that will be posed to you is "Is it worth it?" Is it worth it to keep following Jesus when he is obviously not answering my prayers? Is it worth it to keep obeying Christ and honoring my commitments when I am not getting anything in return? Is it worth it to keep trusting Christ when my financial condition is not turning around and I keep treading water? Is it worth it to keep refusing to compromise in an area, when others seem to be happier when they compromise? "Look at that woman. She slept with her boyfriend and they ended up getting married." I keep refusing to give in and

men keep leaving me. “Look at that guy. He got divorced and now he is happily remarried.”

Why not just give up? Why not give in to temptation? Lots of people do. Why not settle for mediocrity? I got my ticket stamped when I accepted Christ. But to follow God, to radically pursue him, to live a cut above, especially when I am in pain—is it worth it?

Friends, Satan will come along and tell you that the fact that you are fighting means that there is a problem. The fact that you are struggling and wrestling with your emotions means that you have a problem.

Fighting is never a problem. Your wrestling and trials, your difficulties, is never a problem. The danger is always that you might give up fighting. That you might stop striving. That you might quit wrestling. That you might throw in the towel and say to God, “Forget it. It is not worth it!” That’s one of the two greatest dangers we always face: quitting. Quitting the church because someone offended us. Quitting a ministry because someone didn’t compliment us or said something rude to us. Quitting school because it is just too hard. Quitting a marriage because it’s just too hard to fight for it. Quitting God because we’re not getting what we think we deserve.

James says, “Do you know the way to eternal life?” The crown of life is, I think, another metaphor for eternal life, the enjoyment of full life with God. He says, “*Do you know the way to eternal life? Perseverance.*”

Slide James 1:12

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

James is concerned that people would take another option when they encounter temptations other than persevering and that is quitting. We ought to be praying not only “Lord, deliver me from this particular temptation”, but “Lord, keep me from quitting.” And our second prayer ought to be:

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Lord, keep me from sinning

We all understand this, don’t we? When we’re pressured, there is a temptation to become bitter about the way we’re treated or take revenge against someone who has hurt us. When somebody talks poorly about us, we have a temptation to gossip and speak poorly about them. We let things drop in conversation – little critiques and judgments about a person – because they’ve hurt us. When we experience trials, we are tempted to sin – to seek a more fulfilling relationship outside of our marriage. We

might want to escape and use our particular drug of choice – for some of us it may be eating, for others shopping, for others substance abuse, for others social media, or overwork or procrastination or TV sports.

God wants us to draw near to him. He wants us to not live life independently of him. The whole point of this series “Just Pray” is we need to stop acting and living as if we can do life – much less the Christian life – entirely on our own strength or figure out problems entirely with our own smarts. God wants us to draw near to him. The whole point of the series called “Just Pray” is to encourage you to pray, to recognize that the life you want for yourself and your loved ones and this world is available but only if you regularly connect with God. This is all the more true regarding our temptations. We can’t battle them in our own strength or by our own smarts or our own willpower. We need to draw near to God. We need to pray.

How to Overcome Temptation

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November 16 & 17, 2019
Just Pray
Matthew 6:13

- I. Three marks of temptation
 - a. Enjoy now, pay later
 - b. It can't be wrong when it feels so right
 - c. I can get close to the edge without falling in

- II. Three times when temptation comes
 - a. When we are outside of our routines
 - b. When we feel strong
 - c. When we feel weak

- III. Two prayers to fight temptation
 - a. Lord, keep me from quitting
 - b. Lord, keep me from sinning