

# Dealing with Temptation

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<i>Text</i>	Matthew 26:41
<i>Reading</i>	Matthew 26:36-46
<i>Catechism</i>	Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 52

As we grapple the issue of temptation in our Christian lives, and take seriously the Bible's injunctions with respect to it, we must remember always that the devil is a beaten foe in Jesus Christ and if we are in submission to God and we resist him, using the weapons that God has given to us, he will be forced to flee. There is no biblical reason for us to be discouraged, depressed or defeated in our Christian walk. That is not to say that there are no spiritual struggles. Struggle is par for the course in the Christian's experience, and if anyone tells you that they have no struggles at all against sin and the devil in their lives, if they are victorious and holy at all times, then you know that you are dealing with a person whose understanding of God and his laws is deficient at best and non-existent at worst. The Christian life is a struggle but we are not called to fight on our own. The Lord is with us every step of the way, and the promises of Scripture in relation to that struggle are filled with hope.

One such promise is that very famous verse in 1 Corinthians 10:13 which deals with the subject of temptation. If you haven't memorised it yet, I encourage you to inscribe it on your hearts: *"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man."* God will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength. So there is that chain around the neck of the devil. You may be tempted, but God knows that you have the strength to withstand. And furthermore, there is a way of escape. Spiritually, sometimes you may feel like you are trapped under a mountain and the mine shafts have all caved in. But there is an escape route. It has been provided by God and it will lead you to the fresh, cool air of the surface if you find it and take it.

Well, what's the secret, some of you may be asking. Why does 1 Corinthians 10:13 often fail to work? God says he knows I am strong enough to withstand this particular temptation, but my experience tells me that I am not. God says that he will provide the way of escape. But I am still blindly stumbling around in the darkness. I don't doubt that there is a way of escape. If God says it is there, then it must be. But I have had so much trouble finding it that I'm beginning to wonder whether my eyesight is permanently impaired.

The disciples had that trouble in Matthew 26. You know the story. Jesus had been trying to get it through their thick skulls for many months that he was going to be arrested and handed over to people who would kill him. They have just had the Passover celebration and the very first Lord's Supper in which Jesus pointed out the betrayer, and he has gone out to carry on his plan. You would think the disciples would be on the alert, watchful, ready for what was sure to happen, but hey, they were tired. They had had some long days and nights and it had been an emotionally draining time. But Jesus knows what is ahead and he is preparing for the conflict. We find him praying through the coming trial in the Garden of Gethsemane. While Peter, James and John, his three closest disciples were snoring in the background, he was pouring out his heart to God his Father and self-consciously submitting to the Father's will. And the result of this situation is also inscribed in the pages of Scripture for all time. When the arrest finally came, all the disciples left him, and Peter actually denied his Master three times in spite of the loudest protestations that he would rather die than do such a thing. The temptation came; they all entered into

it, including Jesus. In fact in Luke 22, he calls his entire ministry a time of temptations. It is the same word as that of our text. But whereas Jesus withstood the greatest hour of his temptation, and therefore found the way of escape, the disciples fell.

Why? The answer is given in Matthew 26:41, which is another key text on the subject of temptation: *“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* For all our good intentions and desires, and God knows they are there, the flesh is weak. For all our New Year spiritual resolutions to be a better husband, a better wife, a more obedient child, a more diligent servant of God, more faithful in our prayer lives, or whatever, we can end up failing in precisely the same ways and in greater degrees. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. And therefore we must take very seriously the admonition in the first part of the verse. Jesus says: **Keep watching and praying in order that you may not enter into temptation.** Implication: If you are not watching and praying, temptation will be on you before you know it and you will fall. If we think 1 Corinthians 10:13 will work as a magic cure-all and we will be strong and the way of escape will be thrust upon us, we are making a big mistake. For if we are not watching and praying, if we are not taking the advice that Jesus gives us here, then we have the reason why the way of escape has been eluding us up to now.

So, then, what does it mean to watch and pray? Two points by way of response: **First, be on your guard for the particular times when temptation strikes you.** For some of you, tiredness is a real killer. When you are tired, you find it 10 times more difficult to keep an even temper and respond to people and situations the way the Lord calls you to. When you are tired, your toleration levels move over into the area of critical mass and you are liable to explode in a way that you would not do if you had been getting more regular sleep. If there are ways in which you can reverse your circumstances and catch up on some much needed sleep, then that is precisely what you should do. In that case, part of being watchful against temptation is making sure that you get the 40 winks that your body needs. And if the circumstances are beyond your control right now, then this is the time when you must be much in prayer. “Lord, you know that I am tired and today, a few hours from now, when I see that person again, you and I both know, Lord, that I will be tempted to lose it and I ask you now for the grace that I need to see me through. Give me the strength that I need. When he says or does this, help me to respond with love in my heart. Give me the help I need to do what I know Jesus would do in this situation.”

For others, times of prosperity and ease are real temptation periods. When things are tough, you find it no problem at all to be diligent in prayer and people of faith. Give us this day our daily bread suddenly becomes very meaningful when you don't know where the next meal is coming from or how you are going to pay the mortgage this month. But when everything is there and things are fine, you can get laid back and casual about the faith and your spiritual disciplines become lax. So this is not the time to let your guard down. If we do, Satan will strike, and before we know it, we will have fallen into that materialistic snare which the Bible says is the root of all sorts of evil. Again, we must learn to recognise the times of potential weakness and score up ourselves with prayer against them.

Then too, another time of temptation is the times of leisure. Don't get me wrong here. I'm not against rest. God commands periods of it, but the remainder of the command is that we should labour hard for six days of the week. And as teenagers know, and children will realise before too much longer, when you are busy and working hard, and there don't seem to be enough hours in the day, it is much harder to get into mischief. When you are bored and you don't know what to do with yourself and the cookie jar is right there staring you in the face, it is so much easier to reach out the hand and take what you shouldn't have. In this case watchfulness and prayerfulness, means forcing yourself to get back to some good,

honest hard work. If David had been out leading his men in battle, at the time of the year when men go out to war, he would not have been dallying around on his rooftop just waiting to get caught in temptation with Bathsheba. He was like Peter. In both cases, they fell because they weren't watching. The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. And since much greater saints than we have fallen, it means that we must take the admonition to watch and pray with even greater seriousness. It is not enough merely to hate the sin itself. We must learn to hate also the periods of temptation that lead to it and we must be on our spiritual guard.

But then in the second place, in general terms, **we must know our own hearts**. Some of you, in terms of natural disposition, gentle, meek and self-effacing. While others put themselves forward, you are much more inclined to take a back seat. While others speak out, you are much more inclined to listen. In itself, there is nothing wrong with gentleness and meekness. On the contrary, this is the sort of spirit that is to be there in the children of God and it is the kind of spirit whose possessors will inherit the earth, according to our Lord in Matthew 5. But there are dangers with a heart like this. You can refuse to stand up against sinful behaviour in others and choose rather to go with the crowd because that is what everyone else is doing. When circumstances require that you show leadership and make a decision, you can be so frightened about making a mistake that you refuse to make any decision at all, which is about the worst thing that you can do. Or you can become a doormat for others to abuse you and not speak out when you should.

On the other side of the coin, you might be a person who is a natural born leader. A charismatic person, gifted, with a sense of humour and the ability to influence others. You are outgoing, strong-willed, forthright. Well, this is wonderful. God has given you a natural disposition that can be a blessing to many people. But for you, it is so easy to display arrogance, harsh criticism and judgement against others who do not measure up to your standards. You can be so fiercely independent that no-one can tell you anything about yourself, certainly not by way of correction. You are very good at telling others what they should be doing with their lives, but not very good at listening to the counsel of others.

Still another will be naturally carefree, light-hearted, full of joy and always ready to see the funny side of life. Wonderful people to have around, they light up the room and infuse it with mirth. But so easy to be casual, easy, carefree about your spiritual life as well. So easy to be laid back in pray and reading of the Scriptures and attendance at worship and the thousand and one other things that we know we should be doing. Another will be naturally sober in spirit, careful, serious. Again, necessary to have such people around. They so often cut through the frivolity and get to the worthwhile, meaningful things in life. But so easy for people like this to fall into pits of terrible depression and self-loathing.

What I'm saying, brothers and sisters, is that you must know your own heart. Give thanks to God for the way he has made you, for the gifts he has given. We are not all carbon copies of each other. Praise God that it is so. But know your weaknesses, your natural born potential for sin and be diligent in guarding against them.

Be on your guard, brothers and sisters, watch and pray. If you take God at his Word seriously, you will be surprised at the strength God will give you and you will have no trouble locating that way of escape. Again, I close with the words of 1 Corinthians 10:13:

*"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." Amen.*