

# Jesus' Instructions for Dealing with Temptation

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## Introduction

In the Roman Empire believers were surrounded by an anti-Christian, morally degenerate culture. There was the worship of false gods as well as an idolatrous love of money, status, power and pleasure. Greco-Roman culture was also awash in sexual immorality and perversions of every kind: prostitution, homosexuality, adultery, fornication and virtually every lewd act under the sun. In the first centuries of the church's history there was strong pressure placed upon Christians to compromise with heathen society. There was the outright hatred of believers, persecution, and subtle pressure to conform to the status quo. This was especially true in the economic sphere where paganism saturated business dealings, negotiations and social ties. While Greco-Roman culture was a daily challenge to Christians in many ways, modern American culture is in some ways even worse. Europe and America are post-Christian cultures. Believers are surrounded with temptations of every kind. Virtually every aspect of American society is anti-Christian: the public schools, the news media, the arts, universities, medical philosophy, the music industry, fashion and Hollywood. Through modern technologies disgusting perversions are only the push of a button away. Because of our sinful natures and the ethical cesspool of modern culture, Christians must learn to deal with temptations every single day.

Given the current situation in which we find ourselves we need to carefully examine and heed Christ's warnings given to His disciples regarding the danger of entering into temptation. Our Lord's imperatives, in context, are found in Matthew 26:36-41:

Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed saying, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." Then He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The Spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

## Preliminary Contextual Considerations

Before we examine our Lord's imperatives, there are a few important things to consider relating to the context of verse 41. First, note that Christ's commands come in the midst of His own severe time of testing. After the Lord's supper Jesus and the apostles went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Gethsemane was a secluded olive grove outside of Jerusalem just off a foot path that leads to the Mount of Olives. Near the

entrance of the garden the Savior left eight of the disciples and took His inner circle, His closest friends (Peter, James and John) with Him to pray. It is at Gethsemane that the Messiah is fully confronted with the dreadful nature of the events that are about to come upon Him. It is a time when Jesus contemplates the severity of God's wrath, the excruciating loss of fellowship with the Father and the pain of hell. Our Lord is going through intense anguish and sorrow. He is sweating profusely as He suffers. In His deep agony of soul, Christ leaves even His three closest friends behind, moves forward, throws Himself upon the ground and prays intensely to the Father. Jesus had entered into a state of temptation. It is out of this severe time of testing that the Savior issues His commands.

Second, note that the imperatives flow directly out of Christ's own example. When our Lord entered a time of temptation He watched and prayed. The Savior's instructions are intimately connected with His own practice. The Messiah was tempted in all points as we are yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). The disciples knew the importance of watching and praying by observing Jesus. If the sinless Son of God dealt with trials in this manner, then certainly we who are weak and sinful ought to do the same.

Third, our Lord's instructions were prompted by the apostles' failure to stay awake and watch and pray with Christ. The commands follow an implied, gentle rebuke because the disciples were sleeping while the Savior was praying. It was late at night and the apostles could not stay awake. Jesus' statement "the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak" implies that the disciples' problem at this time was not an unwillingness to pray but one of physical fatigue. Even when our Lord was in severe agony and distress He thought of the needs of His disciples. The Savior's love toward us never rests.

As we consider our text there are four main areas that merit our attention. First, what is temptation? How is it defined by Scripture? Second, what exactly does it mean to enter into temptation? Third, what is the biblical method for preventing or dealing with temptation? And, more specifically, what does Jesus mean by the imperatives: watch and pray (literally in Greek: keep on watching, keep on praying)?

## What is Temptation?

In order to understand our Lord's injunction we must first understand the meaning of the word temptation (Greek, *peirasmon*). It is important to define this word carefully for the same word can have different meanings depending on the context. For example, the word is not always used in a negative sense (i.e. as an enticement to commit sin). Sometimes the term means a trial, a tribulation, a test, a proving of something or even an experiment. The word could be used in the context of testing the quality of gold or the strength of a bow. Thus, the word can have a positive connotation. The word (in the LXX) is even used to describe the purpose of God. In Genesis 22:1 it says that God tested Abraham. Jehovah tested or proved Abraham's faith by ordering him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son. Likewise, 2 Chronicles 32:31 says that God tested Hezekiah. Jehovah wanted to know whether or not the king was filled with pride.

We know that the same Greek word has different meanings (one of which is not necessarily negative) because although we often read that God tested a particular individual we also read that God never tempts an individual. "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone" (Jas. 1:13). Jehovah is a righteous, just and holy God and thus never tempts or

entices men to commit evil. The trials and tests that believers receive at the hand of God's providence are for their own spiritual good and edification.

God lovingly separates the wheat from the chaff and the gold from the dross. The apostle Peter describes this wonderful process. He writes: "You are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet.1:5-7).

The Captain of our salvation leads us by His providence to the trials, tribulations and sufferings of life and enables us to conquer by His precious blood and resurrection power. He causes us to grow in patience, maturity, love and grace. The Savior leads us into battles for our own good (Rom. 8:28ff.). He does not allow us to be wounded or crippled but rather tempered and refined. Jesus strengthens us so that we may win many kingdom victories, that we may crown our glorious king with many crowns.

Another manner in which the word *peirosmon* is used is negative. It means temptation in the sense of an enticement to commit sin. It denotes a power, argument, operation or inducement towards sinning. "Temptation, then, in general is anything, state, way or condition, that upon any account whatever, hath a force or efficacy to seduce, to draw the mind and heart of a man from its obedience, which God requires of him, into any sin, in any degree of it whatsoever."<sup>1</sup> This meaning is the one given in our text and therefore it will be a main focus of our doctrinal and practical exposition of Jesus' exhortation.

Temptation as a power of seduction toward sin is a very broad term. It can refer to all the various external temptations: the allurements of the world, the subtle deceptive solicitations of Satan, the arguments and enticements of the unregenerate as well as all inner temptations arising from the sinful desires that remain in us (envy, unlawful lusts, impure imaginations, covetousness, thoughts of unlawful revenge, etc) All of these forces can work upon us in virtually an infinite variety of ways.

## Entering Temptation

Now that we understand the meaning of temptation in the negative sense as an enticement to commit sin we need to consider another important question: What does it mean to enter into temptation? The phrase "enter into temptation" indicates that believers at times *enter into* more intense periods or situations of temptations. There are a number of reasons why entering into temptation is a unique situation of spiritual danger beyond one's average everyday existence.

(1) The context of our text indicates that the disciples were about to enter into a higher level of temptation. For example, Christ warned Peter that Satan would attempt to sift him as wheat (Lk. 22:31). The disciples were about to enter a period of severe testing where they would be tempted to deny the faith to save themselves and their families from torture and death. After Jesus' arrest the disciples were scattered, depressed and fearful. The context reveals the urgency of our Lord's exhortation.

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, "What is it to Enter Temptation?" in *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974) 6:96.

(2) There are a number of passages in Scripture which teach that there are periods or circumstances of special, more intense temptations.

a) In the Lord's prayer (Mt. 6:13) we are told to pray, "lead us not into temptation." These words assume that there are situations of temptation that go beyond the common everyday general temptations of life. If there were not periods of serious temptation then this petition would be a request to leave off this body and earth altogether, which it obviously is not.

b) In 1 Timothy Paul warns believers that "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare" (6:9). The apostle compares falling into temptation to becoming ensnared or entangled in a trap. It is analogous to being caught in a net or of falling into a pit.

c) In 1 Corinthians Paul says, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man" (10:9). The apostle speaks of temptation as something that overtakes a man. This language reminds one of a person who is overtaken and tackled by a football player; of someone overtaken and hit by a wave. Interestingly, to be overtaken by temptation does not mean that the one overtaken has sinned for Paul says that God has provided a way of escape.

d) The apostle Peter comforted Christians when he said that "the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations" (2 Pet. 2:9). Sometimes the godly become entangled but God comes to their rescue and delivers them.

(3) We can learn a lot about what it means to enter into temptation by examining some historical examples of believers who become ensnared in temptation. As we look at these examples, note that certain circumstances can come into a Christian's life which lead to a period of strong temptation.

a) There is the example of Job. This godly patriarch entered into temptation when by, the permission of God, Satan was allowed to change the circumstances of his life in a very negative direction for the testing of his soul. Job suffered a number of calamities from diseases, the loss of family members, property destruction and severe physical pain. Also, Satan used his own wife and friends to attempt to shake his faith in God. The devil skillfully used the circumstances of life as well as close friends and family members as tools of temptation. Job entered into a period of temptation, yet through God's grace he prevailed. Job's faith was not shaken.

b) There is the example of King David who through various circumstances and spiritual negligence entered into temptation. Note how through a combination of factors David was ensnared by serious temptation. First, David was at the height of his power, glory and popularity. The king at this time was filled with pride. Second, David had been married for a long period of time and was not content with his many wives. Third, he had become careless regarding spiritual matters and his own vocation. Instead of attending to his civil and family duties he was spending his time in idleness and luxury. It was at this time of spiritual lukewarmness, when all of these circumstances rendered him the most vulnerable, that he observes beautiful Bathsheba bathing on her roof. The circumstances of David's life, his spiritual carelessness, pride and indolence coupled with outer enticements and inward lust led the king into the pit of temptation. He was entangled in a net of temptation, the cords of which held him fast and, tragically, he succumbed. David grievously sinned by committing adultery and then murder to cover his tracks.

c) There is the example of the apostle Peter whom Jesus said Satan wanted to sift as wheat. There were a number of circumstances that made Peter vulnerable for an attack. Jesus had been arrested and the disciples had been scattered. As a result the aid, strength and counsel of the godly were unavailable to Peter. Also, the apostles at this time did not yet understand the necessity of Christ's death for kingdom victory. Thus, the apostle was doctrinally vulnerable. Before their understanding was enlightened and the resurrection occurred the faith of the disciples was weakened. Further, there was a great fear of arrest, persecution, torture and death. As all of these external and internal circumstances come together Satan strikes through the words of those assembled near the warmth of the fire: "Are you not one of them? Do you not know Him?" (cf. Mt. 26:69-75) Peter entered into temptation and fell. He not only denied Jesus three times but he did so emphatically with curses.

## Christ's Injunctions for Preventing Temptation

Knowing that the disciples were about to enter a period of temptation our Lord instructed them with the means of preventing and preparing for such times. He sets forth two imperatives: "watch" (lit. keep on watching) and "pray" (lit. keep on praying). These commands are central to a believer's safety from temptation. If we are to persevere and protect ourselves from sinning we must understand and heed the Savior's commands.

Before we consider these imperatives there are some preliminary issues that need to be discussed. First, the command to watch should not be regarded as a command that only applies to the apostles. Christ's injunction is very broad and refers to the needs of every Christian to be alert, to be on guard and consider every manner in which situations may arise that bring us into temptation.

Second, the command to watch presupposes a standard (the infallible Word of God) by which a believer can identify what is evil and what leads to iniquity. The Bible is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). Watchfulness that is in accord with Scripture can only occur when a person has obtained a competent grasp of the contents of the Bible. The Psalmist writes: "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11). Paul says that we need to "Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13).

Third, the Savior's imperative assumes that there is a great danger when believers enter into temptation. Many Christians fall into serious sin and are scarred for life because they do not consider temptation to be a big threat. There is a great danger in complacency and pride. No one should ever regard themselves as so mature in the faith that watchfulness is not needed. Scores of believers who have walked in the faith for many years have fallen into temptation and then grievously failed. David was a mature believer when he brought ruin to himself, his family and the whole nation.

Remember and take heed, all sin begins with an entering into temptation. Therefore, if a person fears sin, he must also fear temptation. If we have a biblical, holy hatred of sin then we must continually and diligently watch and be on guard against sin's entry point—temptation. Temptation is the gate where the enemy of holiness gains entry. Therefore, that is where the battle for godliness must first be fought. If we are to destroy the iniquitous fruit we must strike at sin's root. We must not have a careless, lukewarm antinomian spirit. Watch! Be alert! Put on the whole armor of God!

Fourth, note that the Savior couples watchfulness and prayer. These two things are not brought together by accident. The necessity of prayer is an acknowledgement that keeping ourselves out of temptation and preserving ourselves in times of temptation is not something that is dependent upon our own power. We must continually look to Christ for we are kept by His power. Our sanctification is dependent upon union with Him in His death and resurrection and our perseverance is dependent upon His intercession and preserving grace. Therefore, as we consider these two imperatives (“watch and pray”) we must remember that they are always to be taken together. In order to be faithful to Jesus we must observe both duties.

## Keep on Watching

Our Lord’s first imperative is to continually watch or be on guard against temptation. This command is comprehensive for watchfulness encompasses every possible temptation that can come from the world, the devil and even from within ourselves. There are a number of areas that merit our attention.

(1) Watchfulness involves a careful, continuous, close examination of our own hearts or minds. We need to hold our hearts up to God’s law and identify our weaknesses, sinful tendencies and every area where there is a prior pattern of failure or unfaithfulness. Temptations that come upon us receive their power from our inner lusts. “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (Jas. 1:14-15). Spurgeon writes: “A man who carries gunpowder about with him, may well ask that he may not be led where the sparks are flying. If I have a heart like a bombshell, ready to explode at every moment, I may well pray God that I may be kept from the fire, lest my heart destroy me.”<sup>2</sup>

This point is very important because we need to understand that nothing outside of us can force us to commit sin. The fruit did not force Eve to commit sin, nor did Satan. The gold and beautiful clothing did not force Achan to steal. The very attractive Bathsheba did not force David to commit adultery. The bottle of liquor on the shelf does not force the drunkard to become inebriated. It is only when men and women make peace with sinful desires, contemplate them and then consent to them in the heart that sin breaks forth. Sinful acts always begin in the mind with an inner consent to lust; with an internal agreement in the mind to commit sin. We must wage war against inner lusts in a biblical manner if we are to avoid entering into temptation and committing evil acts. “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). “True mortification of sin consists not only in abstaining from the outward acts thereof, but in the weakening of the root and power of sin within, and the inclinations and desires of the soul after the acting thereof, which are here called fleshly lusts.”<sup>3</sup>

The remaining corruption of our nature is the reason temptation is so dangerous. Paul warns believers in Romans 7 that there is “the sin that dwells in us” (v. 17), “the flesh” (v. 18) or “lusts” (vs. 7-8), “the law of sin in our members” (v. 23). Our corrupt natures and sinful inclinations draw us toward what is evil and “wars against the law of

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<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Lead Us Not into Temptation” in *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996 [1863]) 14:394.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Nisbet, *1 and 2 Peter* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982 [1658]), 85.

our minds” (v. 23). The apostle often warned Christians of this inner war: “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things you wish” (Gal. 5:17).

The battle within raises an important question. How are we to watch against an enemy within that wages war against our desire to be holy and glorify Christ? There are a number of things that we can do. First, we must carefully identify our own specific problem areas. Some men have a problem controlling their anger, while others may have a good amount of control in this area. Some people are often tempted to drink an excess of alcoholic beverages. There are others who are not tempted by the bottle at all. Some professing Christians are drawn to an excess love of material things and to pride. Others, however, are very content with their station in life. Many men have a particular problem with the lust of the eyes and temptations relating to sexual things.

We must study and learn the state and condition of our own hearts. There must be an honest self-evaluation in the light of Scripture. Those who choose to live in self-deception and refuse to judge themselves according to God’s word have a false self-understanding and are vulnerable to an attack in a weak area. A cunning enemy will strike us at our weakest point. Therefore, we must identify and strengthen our problem areas. Spurgeon writes: “There is a weak point in every one of us; and remember, the strength of a rope is to be measured, not according to its strength in its strongest but its weakest part. Every engineer will tell you that the strength of a ship should always be estimated, not according to her strongest but her weakest part, for if the strain shall come on her weakest part, and that be broken, no matter how strong the rest may be, the whole ship goeth down.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, we must carefully watch and be on the alert against every circumstance that may provoke or stimulate our inner corruption. If a man has a strong desire to drink alcoholic beverages in excess, then he must avoid all situations that will tempt him to get drunk. Obviously, he should not allow any alcoholic beverages to be kept in his house. He should not go into bars or restaurants that serve liquor. Also, he should not keep company with men who like to drink.

If a man is struggling with sexual lust, then he should not watch any TV programs or videos, or look at magazines that will pour gasoline on his corrupt embers. (In our sex-saturated culture this task will take continued diligence.) King David should not have been on the roof of his house watching a beautiful woman (who was not his own wife) taking a bath. Young Christian men and women should never go out on dates where they are alone and can easily fall in to the sin of fornication.

In the past, when our culture was much more directed by the Christian world view, there were many societal rules that flowed from biblical principles. Men and women, until the twentieth century, dressed in modest attire. Even at the beach in the nineteenth century men and women were properly covered so that lust would not be stimulated. Today, however, men and especially young ladies purposely dress immodestly with the specific goal of inciting illicit lust. In the past it was generally understood that a man should never enter the house of woman if her husband was not home. Young men and women were not allowed to be alone together. If a parent could

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<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “Lead Us Not into Temptation” in *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 14:394.

not be present, then at least a trustworthy chaperone was always there so youthful passions would not be stimulated.

The societal rules of the past were all based on the biblical idea that we cannot trust ourselves, that our hearts are deceitful and corrupt. A person who understands the biblical teaching regarding the heart of man (even the regenerated heart) will know the necessity of diligent watchfulness. Because of our remaining sin we know that once we meet with certain temptations that a fire may begin to rage within us that is very difficult to quench. Therefore, we must watch our own hearts. We must identify our weak areas and then act upon that knowledge. We must never willingly expose ourselves to temptations. If we do, then we are violating biblical principles, setting ourselves up for a fall and have no biblical reason to expect any special assistance from God in such a situation. It is for these reasons that Jehovah warns us not to associate with evil doers. "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed" (Prov. 13:20). "He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; therefore, do not associate with one who flatters with his lips" (Prov. 20:19). "Do not be envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them; for their heart devises violence, and their lips talk of trouble-making" (Prov. 24:1-2).

(2) Watchfulness involves a biblical analysis and an awareness of the common allurements of the world. The Word of God tells us that certain circumstances in life are often accompanied by certain types of temptation.

a) A person who becomes very rich can be filled with pride, tempted by greed, and/or drawn away from spiritual matters to the concerns of status, pleasure and keeping up with the rich elite. It is not an accident that in Israel's history, times of great prosperity were also often times of serious declension. Sadly, in America great economic prosperity has not led to thankfulness to God and to godliness but to a love of vanities, perversions and an obsession with sports and entertainment. In the United States and Europe there is a great neglect of the means of grace, an almost universal profanation of the Christian Sabbath, a mountain of debt for unnecessary luxuries, a neglect of family duties, an incredibly high rate of adultery and divorce, and a worship of media stars and sports figures. Jehovah warned Israel of the temptation to set aside the things of God in times of economic prosperity:

Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today. Lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Deut. 8:11-14).

b) There are also temptations that accompany money problems and poverty. Some people in such situations are tempted to neglect their family, work on the Sabbath or take jobs that are shady and unscriptural. Such situations can tempt a person to worry, become irritable and fight with his spouse. "Give me neither poverty nor riches—feed me with the food allotted to me; lest I be full and deny You, and say, 'Who is the Lord?' or, lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God" (Prov. 30:8-9).

c) There are temptations that often accompany various types of modern visual media. For example, television is full of lewd and lascivious behavior that is not fitting

for the eyes of Christian families. The film industry and cable programs are even worse. Many professing Christians have fallen into sin through the easy access to sexual perversions over the Internet. If we know that there are certain situations where temptation will be inflamed and illicit lusts greatly stimulated then we must by all means avoid such things. One thing believers can do is install a good filter on the computer that is designed to block pornographic sites and their unwanted advertisements. “Being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality...who knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them” (Rom. 1:29, 32).

(3) Christians must not only understand and avoid common situations that cause temptation they must also prepare themselves to deal with temptation when it does occur. To prepare against temptation believers need to consider the following points.

a) First, we must meditate upon what Jesus did for us and our love and loyalty to Him. There should be no greater motivation to live a holy life than our love to Christ and our adoration and devotion toward God. We find an excellent example of this love in Joseph. When he was confronted suddenly with a strong temptation he immediately replied, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9) Note that Joseph’s motivation for obedience was his love, devotion, loyalty and dedication to Jehovah. His concern was not: “I better not do this or I might get caught;” or, “I am not going to do this because I am afraid of going to hell.” Rather, he thinks, “I will not sin against my covenant God. I refuse to engage in behavior that my Lord hates.” His statement flows from a heart that loves Jehovah; that exudes loyalty and faithfulness. Oh God, give us hearts like Joseph that are saturated with love for You.

This same kind of love motivated the apostle Paul and directed his whole converted life. He writes: “For the love of Christ compels us...He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Cor. 5:14-15). We who have been forgiven much ought to love much. We must believe, trust, obey, serve and love Christ with all our hearts. As poor sinners saved by grace we must glorify and honor the Savior in all things. We must endeavor to base all our thoughts, words and actions upon our love for and devotion to Jesus.

b) Second, believers must place in their arsenal all the biblical battle armor and weaponry that God has provided in order to deal with all the various temptations that arise in life. Where do we get this battle armor and weaponry? We must go to the Bible—the inspired and infallible Word of God. Jesus said, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). Peter said to new believers, “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby...” (1 Pet. 2:2).

When the apostle Paul was instructing Christians on how to live a godly life, he said that believers need to be “led by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:17). They must continually “live in the Spirit” and “walk in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:25). What does it mean to be “led” or “walk” or “live” in the Spirit? Does it mean that Christians are to be directed mystically? Are they supposed to listen to voices or wait for visions? Now that the canon of Scripture is closed and prophecy has ceased (1 Cor. 13:8-12; Rom. 22:18) the Holy Spirit directs us and guides us by His Word (the Bible alone). Therefore, if we are to grow in holiness and battle against temptation and sin we must learn the Scriptures. What then ought we to do?

One thing every Christian should strive to do is read the Bible each day. Get a good, literal translation of the Word of God, not a sloppy paraphrase (e.g., the NIV), and

read three to five chapters every single day. By reading the Bible over and over we saturate our minds with Scripture and provide much inspired material that the Holy Spirit can bring to our minds and apply to our hearts when tough circumstances or temptations arise. If we do fall short and sin the Spirit will apply the Word to our hearts and convict us of sin so that we will confess our sins and learn from our failings.

Another important thing to do is to learn and memorize portions of Scripture that can be utilized when temptations arise. If a person has a problem with anger, then the passages that deal specifically with how to handle anger biblically need to be learned. If someone is tempted by drunkenness, or fornication, or dishonest business practices then specific passages that can be applied to each of these areas should be written on little cards, memorized and meditated upon. Specific areas must be met head on by appropriate Scripture passages. What did Jesus do every time He was tempted by Satan? He quoted Scripture: "It is written..." (Mt. 4:4). "It is written..." (Mt. 4:7). "Away with you, Satan! For it is written..." (Mt. 4:10). Not only did our Lord quote Scripture, He quoted verses that specifically applied to each temptation. This tactic is exactly what we ought to do when we are tempted.

Note that there is a great power in God's word both in directing the righteous and confounding the wicked. To observe the relevancy of the Savior's method of dealing with temptation consider the following example. John is a young Christian man who is studying engineering at the local secular university. One day a beautiful non-Christian (pierced and tattooed) young woman invites John to a party which will involve drunkenness, drugs and fornication. How does John respond? He politely explains that he cannot attend the party because he is a Christian and the Bible explicitly teaches in 1 Corinthians 6:9 that "fornicators and drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God." This biblical response not only strengthens John's resolve to be obedient to Christ, it also immediately and firmly tells the heathen that she is wasting her time and must look elsewhere for a partner in sin. Such a direct biblical response usually sets a heathen back on his or her heels; the light of Scripture sends Canaanites back to the darkness of their pagan companionship.

c) Third, Christians should have a plan of action to deal with the most common temptations in their life. That is, a premeditated plan that deals with weak areas or areas where there is a pattern of past failures. Like an army that never goes into battle without a predetermined plan based on careful analysis, believers need to plan ahead. They need to ask themselves probing questions regarding future contingencies. For example, what Scripture passage will I meditate on and quote if necessary when such and such temptation arises? What will I say if a certain circumstance occurs? What exactly will I do if this particular temptation comes before me? How can I arrange my affairs at home, work or school to lessen the possibilities of temptation?

A Christian can avoid many problems at work or school by making rules based on biblical principles that are non-negotiable. For example, a married believer should make it very clear to everyone at work that he is a strict Christian, that he is dedicated to his wife and will have nothing to do with other women, that he will not partake of filthy talk or coarse jesting, that he will not go to a bar and hang out with unbelievers after work. Loose women under such circumstances will eventually understand that such a man is a waste of time, that there is no point in even approaching such a man. A single Christian in college must in each and every case make it crystal clear that dating or being alone

with the opposite sex is off limits and that courting unbelievers, Roman Catholics or Arminians is unscriptural and unacceptable.

When believers set up rules and policies that are formulated by a careful study of Scripture during private devotions and then *habitually* follow those rules, they will find themselves automatically following the *Spirit-directed mind*. In other words, a biblical response to temptation becomes second nature. It becomes a godly habit. Such a procedure is much wiser and more successful than being unprepared, fumbling and trying to come up with a biblical response to a situation of temptation.

Remember, we are not to trust our own hearts. We should never be careless or unprepared and place ourselves in a situation of having a debate between our sinful lusts and our Spirit-directed mind in the heat of battle. Once again, our goal in learning biblical principles, their application to our daily lives and practicing these rules repeatedly is to develop habitual patterns of godliness. This sanctification process from knowledge to application to repeated obedience is what biblical wisdom is all about. Note how Solomon describes a prudent man: “Every prudent man acts with knowledge, but a fool lays open his folly” (Prov. 13:16). “The simple believes every word, but the prudent considers well his steps” (Prov. 14:15). “A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished” (Prov. 22:3). “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but whoever walks wisely will be delivered” (Prov. 28:26).

d) Fourth, believers must watch against temptation by obeying God’s law, by keeping Christ’s words. In other words, obedience, or the practice of righteousness, leads to greater obedience and blessing. Likewise, a lack of obedience leads to even greater temptation. A person who engages in some sinful behavior can be further caught in a web of other related temptations. David’s adultery with Bathsheba led to a complicated cover up with lies, intrigue and murder. The Christian’s best defense against sin and temptation is a good offense. Thus, we repeatedly encounter the apostle Paul not merely commanding believers to put off some sinful behavior like lying, fornication or theft; but also to replace the old sinful habits with godly behavior. The man who once stole is now to work with his hands and help the poor (1 Cor. 4:12). The man who had a problem with lust and fornication is to find himself a godly wife (1 Cor. 7:2ff.). The biblical pattern for avoiding temptation is not to leave the world by entering a monastery or living in a cave, but by applying God’s holy law to everyday life. As fervent Christians we want to be so consumed with serving Christ that we do not have the time or energy to waste on the service of the flesh.

Our precious Savior said that hearing is not enough. Both hearing *and* obedience are the keys to perseverance. “Therefore, whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded upon the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall” (Mt. 7:24-27).

e) Fifth, watchfulness involves contemplating the disastrous consequences of giving in to temptation. A fool acts without any consideration for the future. For a moment of pleasure, years of misery are brought upon many people. A wise man does the exact opposite. He understands that true peace and joy come from obedience; that sin

may be sweet like, honey, but in the stomach it is bitter and painful. The Bible warns us in this regard by giving us historical examples of men who have fallen. The inspired record of the bitter fruit of sin is there so that we would not repeat the iniquities of our spiritual forefathers.

Public sins (e.g., adultery, unlawful divorce, fraud, murder, etc) are particularly grievous, because they bring reproach upon the name of Christ and His Church. When hundreds of believers lead holy lives and go about helping the poor and doing good works, the world does not even notice. But when a notable Christian falls into sin the whole world will speak of it and delight in it. Can one forget the virtually endless coverage of the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart fiascoes or the gleeful faces of the whore-mongering, secular news reporters as they repeatedly recounted the hypocrisy of these two men? Beloved, it is one thing to bring reproach upon our own name and shame our families by our sinful behavior. However, it is something else to bring reproach upon the precious name of our God and Savior Jesus Christ. Anything that we do that causes the heathen to blaspheme God's Son ought to bring anguish to our hearts.

Sin also brings a loss of communion with God. The comfort, peace and sweet fellowship with Jehovah is disrupted when we sin against Him. Look at King David lying in bed, covered with sweat, tossing and turning, groaning in agony. For a moment of pleasure David brought several months of spiritual pain and torment upon his head. "Pray that penitential Psalm over, and you will soon discover that sin is the father of sorrow, and that a saint cannot slip without much damage to himself."<sup>5</sup> When we contemplate the humiliation, agony and suffering that Jesus endured in our place and his infinite love toward us how can we do anything to grieve the Spirit of God? It is stupid, insensitive and unloving to remove ourselves from the special fellowship with Christ for a season of sinful pleasures.

Sin is a very destructive thing. It can bring calamity and misery upon a person or even a whole household for many years. While it is certainly true that there are many believers who have fallen into sin, backslidden and then have been restored. The consequences of sin, however, can last for many years. If a man who is a professing Christian commits adultery and then sincerely repents, God will forgive him and maybe even his wife will forgive him. But think of the pain that poor woman must endure. Sin causes emotional anguish and can even scar people for life. For example, David was a broken man after his sin with Bathsheba. "You will never find David dancing after his sin with Bathsheba. Not he; there was no dance in him after that! He limped to the day of his death."<sup>6</sup> Beloved, let us not fill the mouths of the heathen with blasphemies against Christ because of carelessness and sin. We must continually watch and pray. People who willingly enter into temptation and fall will wear a garment of sorrows and sleep on a bed of thorns. They will be scourged by their consciences daily.

(4) We must also consider the necessity of prayer in our fight against temptation. Jesus commanded us to watch and *pray*. What He has put together we must never separate. Prayer is crucial because keeping and preserving ourselves from entering temptation is not within our own power. We are dependent upon the intercession of Christ and the assistance of the Holy Spirit. We can only be kept by the power and mercy of God. Peter says that Christians "are kept by the power of God through faith for

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 14:395.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:5). Paul says that “the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom” (2 Tim. 4:18). With Jude we should bless Christ for imparting His preserving power unto us. “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy...” (Jude 24).

There are a number of important things to consider regarding prayer and deliverance from temptation. First, biblical prayer is based on a humble acknowledgment that we are saved and sanctified by Christ alone; that we are totally dependent on the efficacy of Jesus’ work for progress in holiness. The person and work of the Savior is the foundation of our holiness and the power behind progressive sanctification. Thus, we are to look to Him, “the author and finisher of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). “He alone evokes and stimulates faith; and it is because he is the pioneer of our salvation (Heb. 2:10) that he is the author of our faith. Our faith, moreover, is initiated and sustained by him because he has prayed the Father that we may come to faith (Jn. 17:20f.) and that our faith may not fail (Lk. 22:31f.). Thus we look to him as ‘the apostle and high priest of our confession’ (Heb. 3:1), and have assurance that he who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6).”<sup>7</sup>

As we go about our lives in a world of sin and temptation we must continually look to, believe in and trust in our precious Savior, our great high Priest, in our time of need. Our hope and faith is not in our own strength, power or wisdom but in Christ and the efficacy of His life, death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-7:6). Therefore, we lie prostrate before His throne and make our supplications known. We humbly beg for assistance with joy and peace in our hearts because we know about His infinite love, his tender mercies and the power of His resurrection. We know assuredly that our prayers are not in vain. It is because of who Jesus is and what He has accomplished that we can pray with a bold conquering faith. “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:14-16).

Second, the command to pray and watch indicates that sanctification is a process in which the believer must cooperate. There are many places in Scripture where Christians are commanded to pray (Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2; 2 Cor. 1:11; Col. 4:2; 1 Pet. 4:7; Eph. 6:18; Phil. 4:6, etc). The need for prayer shows us that prayer is a very important activity for holiness. God expects us to ask for His special assistance in watching against or resisting temptation. We are to pray, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” every day. How are we to expect God’s special aid in this area if we do not bother to ask for it? When discussing prayer James chides believers who do not petition God for the things they need and for asking for the wrong things (Ja. 4:2-3). We know that God wants us to be holy (Lev. 11:44; Ex. 22:31; 1 Pet. 1:15) and to pray for His help against sin and temptation (Mt. 6:13). Therefore, when we pray for godliness we know that we are praying according to God’s will, for what He requires. This knowledge ought to increase our faith and our fervency when we pray for this aid.

Third, our prayer must be mingled with a sincere confession of sin. In other words, our prayer in this regard must not be hypocritical. If we know that we are about to

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Edgecumbe Hughes, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 522.

purposefully, with a “stiff neck,” rush headlong into temptation and sin then praying for God to keep us from sin is nothing but empty words. It is a mockery of biblical prayer.

Jesus gave us the biblical pattern of prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord placed the confession of sin immediately before the request for deliverance from temptation and evil. “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us in to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Mt. 6:12-13). Although we acknowledge that we are totally dependent upon Christ for our sanctification; for the enabling power to flee from sin and pursue righteousness; we are still responsible to repent, to mortify the flesh, to die daily, to avoid temptation, to put away sin and turn to obedience and godliness. We are valid secondary agents that must do everything we can do to study God’s law, place it in our hearts and obey it promptly and sincerely.

The Bible couples the confession of sin with repentance (Prov. 28:13; Isa. 55:7). Therefore, a man who purposely wallows in sinful lists ought not to pray “lead us not into temptation” until he repents and first says “forgive us our trespasses.” This point does not mean that a believer who is backsliding cannot ask God to help him stop his behavior and repent. He certainly can. Such a person, however, is already willingly in sin. He has already entered temptation and sin’s grasp. Obviously, the man who prays “lead us not into temptation” while he drives to a night club to get drunk and watch nude women dance is a hypocrite. Such hypocritical prayers are common in the antinomian mainline denominations and the ritualistic, sacramentalist denominations. God has made it clear, however, that He will not heed the prayers of hypocrites. We must go to the throne of grace with repentant hearts and a sincere confession of sins.

Fourth, we are to keep on praying for deliverance from temptation. The commands to watch and pray are both in the present continuous tense and therefore indicate that prayer ought to be the habitual practice of believers.

Jesus condemned vain repetition which is often found in dead, ritualistic churches. He also condemned the prayers of the Pharisees who prayed long, hard, elaborate prayers to show off (Mk. 12:40). He did, however, commend praying often (throughout the day) for personal godliness. Praying often is also emphasized in the epistles. “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving...” (Col. 4:2). “And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to the end with all perseverance and supplication of the saints” (Eph. 6:17-18). “To call upon God is the chief exercise of faith and hope; and it is in this way that we obtain from God every blessing.”<sup>8</sup> “The prayers which Paul would have the Christian warrior use are not merely those of the closet and of stated seasons, but also those habitual and occasional aspirations and outgoings of the heart after God, which a constant sense of his nearness and a constant sense of our necessity must produce.”<sup>9</sup>

Fifth, we are to pray trusting in the promises of God. Jehovah has given us many promises of His assistance and deliverance (see Ps. 37:28; 121:3, 7-8; Jer. 32:40; Jn. 6:39; 10:27-29; 17:11; Rom. 14:4; 16:6; 1 Cor. 10:13; 2 Cor. 9:8; Eph. 5:25; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:12; 4:18; Heb 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:4-5; Jude 1; 24, etc). We need to learn these passages; meditate on them; rest upon them and bring them up in

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 340.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1856]), 288-289.

our prayers to God. These promises are there for our benefit, to strengthen our faith and hope. Paul reminds us that God is faithful so that our faith and confidence will reside in Him. “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). Hodge writes: “He has promised to preserve his people, and therefore his fidelity is concerned in not allowing them to be unduly tempted. Here, as in 1,9, and everywhere else in Scripture, the security of believers is referred neither to the strength of the principle of grace infused into them by regeneration, not to their own firmness, but to the fidelity of God.”<sup>10</sup> Jehovah loves us infinitely more than even a good mother loves her little child. Therefore, we have every reason to trust in Him and his precious promises of love toward us.

## Conclusion

The Christian life is a battle for holiness, for growth in grace. We will be confronted with temptations from the world, the flesh and the devil. Therefore, we must continually and diligently watch and pray. We must watch out for common temptations as well as the unexpected extraordinary ones. We must know ourselves, our own weaknesses and apply specific biblical principles to each situation. We must never place ourselves in areas of temptation. Most important of all, we must look to Christ the author and finisher of our faith and pray often to Him who is able to keep us from falling.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1857, 58] 1978), 182.