

TWISTED TEMPTATIONS—PART THREE

James 1:13-16

(CSB) "No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God,' since God is not tempted by evil, and He himself doesn't tempt anyone.¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire.¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters."

INTRODUCTION

Did you know some people are very clever about giving in to temptation while excusing themselves of any guilt for setting aside God's will? Here are a few humorous examples. Kevin and Ryan, ages 5 and 3, were waiting for breakfast one Saturday morning. As their mother made pancakes, the boys began loudly arguing over who would get the first one off the griddle. Their mom saw an opportunity for a moral lesson. "If Jesus were sitting here," she told them, "He would say, 'Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.'" Kevin immediately turned to his younger brother and said, "Okay, Ryan, you be Jesus!" A little girl was given two dollars by her father. He told her she could do anything she wanted with one dollar. The other dollar was to be given to God on Sunday at church. She agreed. She then asked to go to the candy store. With visions of all she could buy with her dollar, she happily skipped along, clutching the two dollars in her hand. But then she tripped and fell, and the wind blew one of her dollars into a storm drain. Picking herself up, the little girl looked at the dollar still in her hand and then at the storm drain. "Well Lord," she said, "There goes Your dollar." A minister was pulled over by a traffic cop for speeding. He apologized and identified himself as a minister. As the officer was about to write the ticket, the minister quoted **Matthew 5:7** to him, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." The cop handed him the ticket and added **Jesus'** words to the woman caught in adultery, "Go, and sin no more" (**John 8:11**).

Christian researcher George Barna has assessed America's changing religious beliefs and behavior for 30+ years. Would it surprise you to learn that as recently as four years ago, nearly two-thirds of adults, 63%, professed to have made a commitment to **Jesus** as their Savior that's still relevant in their lives today? Another Barna survey from 2015 found 80% of American adults—spanning every age group, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and political ideology—are concerned for the nation's moral condition; even 75% of Generation-Xers and 74% of Millennials. But "Much less widespread," according to this survey, "is consensus on morality itself.... [A] majority of American adults (57%)" now think, "Whatever is right for your life or works best for you, is the only truth you know." This means a majority of Americans now reject any source of moral values that apply to everyone, such as the Bible. They think most anything is "moral" if it seems good for them, regardless if nearly everyone else condemns their actions as "immoral."

Barna released a study in January of 2013, *Temptations and America's Favorite Sins*, based on online interviews of 1,021 adults carefully selected from all 50 states, using data from the 2010 U. S. Census, to fairly represent the three primary ethnic groups within the U.S. that comprise at least 10% of our current population—white, black, and Hispanic. They fall into four adult generational groups: Millennials (now age 20-34), Generation X (age 35-53), Baby Boomers (age 54-72), and Elders (now age 73+). Thus, the current beliefs of typical Americans today about various temptations are fairly represented by this survey.

The more serious the temptations are, the fewer admit to them. A full 55% admit to "Eating too much"; just 11% admit to "Abusing alcohol or drugs" and 9% to "Doing something sexually inappropriate with someone." Men and women struggle nearly as often, on average, with some sins, like: "Procrastinating or putting things off" (60%); "Spending too much time on the media" (43%); "Being lazy or not working as hard as you should" (41%); "Lying or cheating" (11%), and "Expressing anger or 'going off' on someone by text or email" (11%). The biggest gaps between men and women are "Viewing pornography or sexually inappropriate material online" (M-28%, W-8%), and "Worrying or being anxious" (M-50%, W-68%).

There's also a generation gap. Millennials engage in sexually inappropriate activity with others, abuse alcohol or drugs, lie, cheat, gossip, view pornography, and envy at much higher rates than other adults. Boomers are 33%-50% less likely to yield to these temptations as often as Millennials. Elders are 75-80% less likely to commit these sins. The one sin of which Millennials are the least guilty of is eating too much!

But the most striking and alarming finding of this study is that just 1% of American adults now believe what the Bible teaches: giving in to temptation can be influenced by a "sinful nature." This number is probably much higher. Professed evangelical Christians still comprise over 25% of our adult population and would certainly admit to a "sinful nature." But we're taught as evangelicals we cannot *excuse* our sins by blaming it on our "sinful nature." Still, it's quite alarming most adults today now think of our "sinful" impulses as part of the "normal" responses of human nature to the ups and downs of life. If they do things they later regret, it's mostly due to what it cost them personally; not because they did anything morally "wrong." A man driving 100 mph in a 45 mph zone lost control, flipped his car on a sharp curve, and critically injured himself. Did he blame himself? No. He blamed the Department of Transportation for not making the degree of banking on the curve great enough to keep him on the road at 100 mph! Many today accept their weaknesses for particular temptation without consciousness of wrongdoing. This explains why 59% today say they don't do anything specific to resist temptation when it confronts them, and half have no explanation for why they fall into sin. Understandably, 50% of older Americans—Elders and Baby Boomers—still seek to resist temptation as morally and sinfully wrong, reflecting the Biblical values with which they were raised. This percentage is even higher among practicing Catholics and Protestants. Yet, just a third of Millennials and 40% of Generation-Xers attempt to resist temptation for truly moral reasons.

The most common coping tool among the 41% of Americans who still seek to avoid giving in to temptation (including practicing Catholics and Protestants who still seek to resist sins from which **Jesus** wants to save us) is prayer and asking God for strength (18%). Other coping tools include using reason to weigh the options (12%), choosing to just say "no" (10%), or simply avoiding the situation altogether (10%; which as we shall see, is a great coping tool!). Just 3% recall or read Bible verses to help them resist.

If we as professed followers of Christ invent ways to excuse giving in to behavior the Bible condemns, are we guilty of contributing to the low awareness of Biblical morality in our society today? The majority of Americans now think along these lines: "Everyone has sinful tendencies. This is normal. 'Sin' is not something 'morally wrong.' 'Sin' is just 'behavior that harms us personally or socially.'" The best coping tool is adjusting to our sinful weaknesses, like a limp caused by a bad leg. If all else fails, prayer or Bible reading may help keep temptation from ruining us." Does this sound like moral maturity or immaturity? Misconceptions about sin and temptation flow from the self-centered and morally confused worldview of children. Adult confusion or ignorance of Biblical moral teaching is not as amusing as a child's confusion about the Bible. A mother taught her three-year-old The Model Prayer. For several evenings at bedtime, the child repeated this prayer after the mother. One night, the child was ready to solo. The mother listened with pride to the carefully spoken words, until the child prayed, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us some e-mail." In another home, a father read Bible stories to his young son. One night, he read the story of how God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their frequent and disgusting sins. When he read, "The man named Lot was warned to take his wife and flee out of the city, but his wife looked back and was turned to salt," his son asked in all seriousness, "What happened to the flea?"

Three Fateful Responses to Temptation have been presented: Underestimating the Enemy (Satan and his schemes to ruin us), Overestimating Ourselves (*our* ability to handle temptation or Satan), and Miscalculating God (claiming moral failures stem from God's unloving or negligent actions toward us or others). We fall into this last trap by "wrongly estimating" who God is, what He gives us, or His priceless wisdom to guide us safely and successfully through life. One night, a young man found a pack of cigarettes lying unopened on the ground near his car. Weeks before, at age 21, he'd given his heart to **Jesus** as Savior and

Lord. **Jesus** immediately set him free from addictions to drugs and alcohol. But he still struggled with his smoking habit, so his first thought was to keep them and smoke them. "After all," he could have told himself, "God knew how terribly addicted to smoking I've been for years. Why would He allow me to be tempted by something I crave?" But he felt prompted to do something else. He picked them up, crushed the pack, and threw them into a dumpster. At that moment, he heard God speak to his heart that if he'd continue to treat temptation and sin in this same manner, God would use him in a great and powerful way. God grew him into the evangelist known today as Steve Hill. On Father's Day, 1995, through Steve Hill's prayers and preaching, God's Spirit sparked what became the Brownsville Revival in Pensacola, FL. A reported 4 million people from 150 countries attended the nightly services he continued for five years. Countless people embraced **Jesus Christ** and many reported deliverance from drug and alcohol addictions.

Today, we will consider three Faithful Responses to Temptation; three ways to demonstrate our desire to be true to our precious Savior. Many Americans have closed their hearts and stopped their ears to the guidance God offers us to protect us from the traps of temptation. By being here this morning, you're saying you desire the benefit of God's wisdom. You don't want to fall for Satan's lies. You want to escape the dangers and deceptions of sin. You can avoid missing out upon the quality of life God created you for if you will do three things about temptation: Flee When You Can, (have) Faith When You Can't Flee, and show Fidelity (to the Lord) All You Can.

I. FLEE WHEN YOU CAN

"What happened to the flee?" God may want to ask us today. Is God's main command about temptation to "fight" it or to "flee" it? We must fight to escape sin's clutches if we are overcome by a particular evil. But when we encounter temptations to stray from moral values that keep us in close fellowship with God, does He urge us to go down the wrong path far enough to learn for ourselves this temptation is not what it's cracked up to be? No. Does God urge us to try out a temptation to prove how invincible we are to the lure of this sin? No. God's command is "flee" temptation, as in (NIV), "Flee immorality" (**I Corinthians 6:18**); "flee" "the love of money" (**I Timothy 6:10-11**); and "flee the evil desires of youth" (**II Timothy 2:22**). God knows, "Temptation usually comes in through a door that has been deliberately left open," as humorist Arnold Glasow (1905-98) quipped. The further we stay from temptation's door, when possible, the further we stay from sin. The Message aptly paraphrases God's advice in **I Corinthians 10:12**: "Don't be so naive and self-confident. You're not exempt. You could fall flat on your face as easily as anyone else." We're all such a "work in progress" of being transformed from malformed attitudes and actions into the likeness of **Jesus'** character that we fall flat on our face often enough without looking for extra opportunities to do so!

In today's text, James is telling us our main enemy when faced with temptation is not the evil *outside* of our heart (Satan, a wicked world) but the evil *inside* of our heart. "No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God,' since God is not tempted by evil, and He himself doesn't tempt anyone."¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire.¹⁵ Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death.¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters." John Piper, pastor of the Bethlehem Baptist Church of Minneapolis, MN, writes that any sin (lust for example) "gets its power by persuading me to believe that I will be more happy if I follow it. The power of all temptation is the prospect that it will make me happier." Is this true? Yes, but only temporarily; never lastingly or satisfyingly. Someone told me of the euphoria, of never feeling better or more alive, by taking a certain drug. But his inevitable crash landing with reality, between times of his drug-induced "high," finally taught him this drug was really destroying him. Each time we step outside of God's will, we are stepping away from the lasting, satisfying happiness only God can give us.

But sin blinds us into thinking someone else, anyone, is at least partly to blame for our poor choices or the harm we suffer for our decisions. When God confronted Adam and Eve about giving in to the temptation of eating from the tree He made off limits to them, to test their devotion to Him as God, how did Adam

react? **Genesis 3:12** (NCV) records he told the Lord, "You gave this woman to me and she gave me fruit from the tree, so I ate it." What was he really telling God? "It's not my fault this happened. It's Eve's fault, and it's Your fault, too, God, for giving her to me." Eve responded, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (**Genesis 3:14**). In other words, Eve claimed, "I was tricked into sinning; I didn't know what I was doing."

God could have tested Adam and Eve's devotion and obedience to Him in other ways. He instructed them in **Genesis 2:15** (NASB) "to cultivate . . . and keep" the Garden of Eden ("to care for it and work it," NCV). God could have evaluated if they were slack in honoring His command. But God knows we resent being told *not to do* something more than *to do* something. So He gave them a "Don't do this" order as the main test of their devotion to Him. This did not sit well with Eve. If you knew there was a pit within a few miles of where you lived, from which toxic gas continuously spewed that could kill you instantly, wouldn't you want to avoid getting anywhere near its lethal location? Why did Eve go anywhere near the forbidden tree God warned could destroy her and Adam, as the Bible records her doing? She had every reason to trust what God told her of this tree's dangers and to avoid it like the plague. Before Eve listened to Satan and ate of the forbidden tree, she walked right up to temptation's door. An entry in the *Our Daily Bread* devotional states, "To avoid being tempted by forbidden fruit, stay away from the Devil's orchard."

God's command about the forbidden tree is a "trial" **James 1:2** (CSB) describes: a "test" God-designed "to prove or improve our abilities" and "to develop our character": "Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you experience various trials." In **James 1:13-16**, "tempt" is the verb form of the noun "trial" in **James 1:2**. If we respond to a God-designed "trial" with love and loyalty to the Lord, we pass the "test" and are transformed more into our Savior's likeness. By responding with distrust or disloyalty, we fail the "test" and are transformed more into Satan's likeness. What causes a "trial" God intends to bless us to sour into a "temptation" that curses us? How we choose to respond to it; no one else is to blame.

"No one undergoing a trial should say, 'I am being tempted by God,'" James remind us, "since God is not tempted by evil, and He himself doesn't tempt anyone." God has no capacity to act improperly toward us. If we ever believe God is guilty of evil or negligence toward us, this evil exists only in our own minds. "[E]ach person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire." The Greek word for "evil desire" ("lust," NASB) refers to "any selfish, intense longing for something that violates healthy morality." Greek words for "drawn away" and "enticed" were commonly used in the 1st century to refer to fishing and hunting. James sought to impress this image upon our minds: "Our own improper desires provide the baited hooks that lure us with the promise of a few morsels of pleasure, so that we are caught like a fish or trapped like an animal to our ruin." "Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters."

CONCLUSION

We must wait until next week to complete our study of three Faithful Responses to Temptation: Flee When You Can, (have) Faith When You Can't Flee, and show Fidelity (to the Lord) All You Can. If we take nothing else with us from today's sermon, it should be that "Flee" is based upon a Greek word meaning "escape" or "take flight." "Flee" does not mean "you can safely risk doom if you're just sightseeing" ("just checking out the sin"). Curiosity can kill Christians as well as cats.

Victoria Falls, in south-central Africa, is one of the Seven Wonders of the Natural World. Water over a mile wide tumbles the staggering depth of 354! Its African name means, "the Smoke that Thunders." Its thundering mists can be heard and seen at great distances. These mists impair visibility, which can make viewing the Falls dangerous. Well-marked, wisely placed trails provide the best viewing locations while keeping visitors a safe distance away. But a man once confessed to Reader's Digest: "While I was walking the path that skirts the gorge into which the Zambezi River tumbles, I noticed a sign on the rim but could

not make it out. Not wanting to miss whatever it might be [pointing out], I slithered and slid through the mud out to the very brink, only to read the message: 'Danger! Crumbling Edge!'"