

FIGHT

PREPARING FOR TEMPTATION

The power of temptation; it darkens the mind.
—JOHN OWEN, *Of Temptation*

Sin is an antithesis to loving God. To love well, we must hate well—hate our sin. To have peace, we must fight—fight against temptation to sin. We cannot truly love God and sin in the same thought. Many Christians lack joy and peace because they do not fight against temptation with all the powers of their mind. Thus, they cannot say that they love God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, with and all their strength (Mark 12:30). But by the grace of God and His Spirit, the regenerate mind can love God well, hating sin well. But even for the regenerate in this fallen world under the curse, to love God will involve fighting temptation—and this requires the discipline of the mind.

Sin is too late!

Sin is too late! We must realize the magnitude of this principle. The nature of sin is hateful, murderous, a stabbing against God, an assault not of accidental but of intentional actions. To sin is not to foul, it is to lose. To sin is too late if to love is our aim.

HOW DO YOU VIEW SIN?

With an impoverished view of God comes a tolerant view of sin. No one sees their own sin as God does; it is treated altogether as a light thing with very little consequence. Some mock the unseen consequences of sin in the existentialism of the present. So it follows, some men mock hell. But hell is not a fabrication designed to inflate the importance of sin; hell is the consequence of sin in light of God.

It is true that our view of sin suffers from a gross lack of veritable apprehension, but hell will not do. Though it is a very real consequence for the sinner without a Substitute, it is not the answer to our problem. Contemplating hell will not deliver us from the frivolous views of sin found in the hearts of so many—professing Christians included. Why? It is insufficient. If we are to increasingly reform our view of sin, we must look to Christ and Him crucified. Only there will we find the truest view and estimation of sin.

The light in which we ought to see sin is the light of Christ; not man or man's destiny. Christ and Him crucified is greater than both heaven and hell—God is more ultimate than human destiny. Sin is not seen in the right light because we don't have enough God in our sight.

Sin is not seen with the right intensity
because God is not loved with the right intensity.

Sin is emphatically personal; its offense is personal, its consequences will ultimately be personal, and its forgiveness is personal. Such is key to our understanding of sin. God is fervently invested against our sin. It is a matter of intense and thoroughly personal concern.

"EVIL OF EVILS"

As Jeremiah Burroughs has well said, "sin is the evil of evils." Not Satan. Not natural disasters. Not disease. Not death. *Sin—this* is the evil of evils.

In an effort to love God more fully and consistently, it is good for us to meditate on the abhorrent nature of sin. These five aspects of sin's nature are needful to counter our natural tendencies to dilute and diminish the significance of sin's evil.

1. **Sin is evil—being a willful opposition against God**—It is not just the missing of a mark on some moral scale; sin is the exercise of evil. Sin is godless opposition to God.
2. **Sin has no good in it whatsoever**—Some may confuse the nature of sin with God's dealings over it. The only good that can come as a result of sin is owing to the goodness of God's rule over it. Even though sin may be used of God to glorify Himself, sin itself has no good in it at all.
3. **Sin is an offense, first against God**—As David cried out in his confession: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment" (Psalm 51:4).
4. **Sin is a choice**—It is not an affliction, disease, or mere mistake; sin is a choice exercised by the will of the creature in direct and immediate rebellion against his Creator.
5. **Sin is a hating of God in the idolatry of self**—It is the worship of self in place of God. It is a rebellion against God, a despising of God, and therefore a striking against God Himself.

Concerning this last point, Burroughs insightfully writes:

“Sin is striking at the very life of God. ... that they would rather God were not God at all than that they would lose their lusts. ... I say as far as sin prevails in your hearts, could you not wish that God were not so holy as to hate those sins you love, and not so just as to be severe against sin as He is? Is not this in your hearts? ... [do] you love such a sin, that you could wish God did not hate it as much as He does, that he was not as just, holy, and severe against sin as He is, this is to wish in your heart that God was not God at all, that the life and being of God were gone.”

May we see the nature of sin more clearly for the purpose of loving God more dearly.

Preparing for Temptation

Sin is a hateful striking at the God we say we love. If we are to apply our minds to love the Lord our God, we must surely aim at addressing temptation since sin is too late. God calls us to discipline our minds for this purpose. Again, to fail to prepare is to prepare to fail.

The thought of temptation all too often hides in the shadows of sin and its consequences. Temptation rarely fares prominent in our thinking about spiritual life, sanctification, and love to God. Yet, in the exceedingly small economy of words that our Lord chose in order to teach us how to pray, He said, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13). Understanding the importance of temptation is important to Christ. Yet it is quite common for us to overlook the importance of understanding temptation. We tend to focus more on sin and its effects. But that is like strategizing on how to win by only focusing on what losing looks like. The more excellent strategy is to discipline the mind to prepare for temptations—this is where the real battle is fought and won.

TEMPTATION IS NOT SIN

Temptation is not sin. Sin and temptation are not the same, and the confusion of their distinction can be the cause of significant frustration and discouragement in all attempts to love God. It is our response to temptation—not the temptation itself—that exercises our hearts and eventually defines our character.

Jesus was tempted.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:14–18).

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrew 4:15).

Jesus was tempted, but Jesus never sinned. He now avails Himself to help us when tempted.

TEMPTATION IS DANGEROUS

The Greek word for temptation (*peirasmos*) communicates the idea of testing or trying someone with the intent that they would commit evil, utterly fail, or be ruined. Temptation is any condition, persuasion, allurements, enticement, attraction, solicitation, inducement, invitation, entreaty, request, pressure, charm, or deceit, that by whatever means has a force or efficacy to seduce or draw the mind and heart away from God. John Owen describes temptation as:

that from any thing whatever, within us or without us, hath advantage to hinder in duty, or to provoke unto or in any way to occasion sin, that is a temptation, and so to be looked on. Be it business, employment, course of life, company, affections, nature, or corrupt design, relations, delights, name, reputation, esteem, abilities, parts or excellencies of body or mind, place, dignity, art, — so far as they further or occasion the promotion of the ends before mentioned, they are all of them no less truly temptations than the most violent solicitations of Satan or allurements of the world, and that soul lies at the brink of ruin who discerns it not.¹

TEMPTATION IS EXPECTED

Life in this fallen world will never be completely free from temptation. We should not expect it.

Martin Luther once described evil thoughts as birds flying over our heads. His point was that we cannot prevent them from flying. But if we allow them to build nests on our heads, for that we are responsible! In his own words, “Temptations, of course, cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.” In a similar way, Richard Baxter writes, “polluted fantasy, and ungoverned thoughts are the nest where all iniquity is hatched, and the instruments that bring it forth into act.”²

¹ John Owen, *Works* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 6:96.

² Baxter, 12:384.

TEMPTATION IS SPIRITUAL

A healthy mind involves much more than natural factors. The war waged against the mind sometimes involves spiritual realities. It is said that to be forewarned is to be forearmed. This too is a function of the discipline of the mind.

Temptation sometimes come from satanic assault (Matthew 4:1-11; 6:13; Luke 4:1-13). This calls for serious and supernatural protection. For this reason, we are told to “put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11). It is our responsibility to be informed and not ignorant about these things: “so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (2 Corinthians 2:11).

This too is why Peter uses two different Greek words, both referring to the mind, when he writes, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). This is all part of “preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded” (1 Peter 1:13).

We must remember that we are not immune to these dangers. Our Lord rebuked Peter, denouncing Satan’s tempting enticement by pointing Peter’s use of his mind: “But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man’” (Matthew 16:23).

Though Satan is a tempter, we must be ready to recognize that our giving into temptation is not Satan’s fault—it’s ours. Moreover, Satan is not the only one who tempts us. Regardless of the source, we are responsible to be prepared. So, for example, being enticed sexually may instantaneously arouse a lustful thought; our rejection of it is our responsibility. It is our “heart” or mind that must not give into the temptation: “Let not your heart turn aside to her ways; do not stray into her paths” (Proverbs 7:25).

TEMPTATION CAN BE DEFEATED

- **1 Corinthians 10:12–13** - Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. [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.

TEMPTATION IS DEFEATED IN THE MIND

- **2 Corinthians 10:3–5** - For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. [4] For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. [5] We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,

MEANS OF CHANGE

TEST YOUR PLEASURES

How does love see sin? A quick test is to ask yourself if your sorrow and pain over sin could be expressed by an unbelieving heart. Does our disgust over sin derive from our love of God or our hatred of consequences? An unbelieving heart hates consequences. Sin, not consequences, should repulse our minds. Consequences are designed to help us gain a proper view of sin, not the other way around.

To hate the painful consequences of sin has nothing to do with loving God. We are acting in unbelief when we merely despise the penalties of sin. Only by faith can sin be loathed as sin.

Sin is spiritual insanity. It is the dysfunction of the mind in an act of unbelief; momentary disregard and rebellion against God. It is the heart devaluing God and valuing something God hates. In this moment of insanity, the mind is either overruled by passion or thinks it knows better than God.

In an ancient fable, there was a man who possessed the power to turn whatever he touched into gold. History and experience shows us that the mind of man is more prone to characteristically turn everything into impurity. Otherwise innocent words and expressions are quickly turned into subjects of immoral entertainment. The expression common in our day is: “His mind is in the gutter.” But in Christ, we are to live more like the man in the ancient fable. We should work at turning everything our minds touch into spiritual gold.

A. W. Pink writes,

When the new nature is healthy and vigorous, sin is exceedingly sinful to the saint, because he then has a clear and forcible apprehension of its malignity and contrariety to God, and that maintains in him a holy indignation against it. While the mind is engaged in considering the awful price which was paid for the remission of our sins, a detestation of evil is stirred up in the heart, and that is attended with strict watchings, for the renewed soul cannot countenance that which was the procuring cause of his Savior’s death. Such an

exercise of grace has been obstructed if sin now appears less heinous and there is less care in maintaining a watch against it.³

PREPARE FOR YOUR HOUR OF TESTING

A. W. Tozer has well said, “It is doubtful whether any sin is ever committed until it first incubates in the thoughts long enough to stir the feelings and predispose the will toward it favorably. ... All our acts are born out of our minds and will be what the mind is at last.”⁴

J. C. Ryle writes, “Trifling with the first thoughts of sin,—making light of evil ideas when first offered to our hearts,—allowing Satan to talk to us, and flatter us, and put bad notions into our hearts,—all this may seem a small matter to many. It is precisely at this point that the road to ruin often begins.”⁵ Elsewhere he says, “He must look on his heart as a barrel of gunpowder, and be cautious not to handle one spark of temptation more than he can help.”⁶

AVOID ALL OBJECTS OF TEMPTATION

Richard Baxter helps us when he writes, “Can you expect that the drunkard should rule his thoughts, whilst he is in the alehouse or tavern, and seeth the drink? Or that the glutton should rule his thoughts, while the pleasing dish is in his sight? Or that the lustful person should keep chaste his thoughts, in the presence of his enamouring toy? Or that the wrathful person rule his thoughts, among contentious, passionate words? Or that the proud person rule his thoughts, in the midst of honour or applause? Away with this fuel: fly from this infectious air if you would be safe.”⁷

With the mind we are to choke out the weeds of temptation. As Charles Spurgeon said so well:

We have all heard of weeds choking the wheat; if we were wise we should learn from our enemy, and endeavor to choke the weeds by the wheat. Preoccupation of mind is a great safeguard from temptation. Fill a bushel with corn, and you will keep out the chaff: have the heart stored with holy things, and the vanities of the world will not so readily obtain a lodging-place.

Herein is wisdom in the training of children. Plant the mind early with the truths of God's word, and error and folly will, in a measure, be forestalled. The false will soon spring up if we do not early occupy the mind with the true. He who said that he did not wish to prejudice his boy's mind by teaching him to pray, soon discovered that the devil was not so

³ A. W. Pink, *Spiritual Growth* (Albany, OR: AGES Library, 2000), 195.

⁴ A. W. Tozer and Ron Eggert, *The Tozer Topical Reader* (Camp Hill, PA: WingSpread, 1998), 2:236.

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on John*, vol. 3 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1880), 31.

⁶ Ryle, 81.

⁷ Baxter, 174.

scrupulous, for his boy soon learned to swear. It is well to prejudice a field in favor of wheat at the first opportunity.

In the matter of amusements for the young, it is much better to provide than to prohibit. If we find the lads and lasses interesting employments they will not be so hungry after the gayeties and ensnarements of this wicked world. If we are afraid that the children will eat unwholesome food abroad, let us as much as possible take the edge from their appetites by keeping a good table at home.⁸

⁸ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Illustrations and Meditations: Flowers from a Puritan's Garden* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1883), 29.