

# The Truths about Temptation

## Matthew 4:1-2

### Introduction

In Randy Alcorn's book *The Purity Principle*, he gives a riveting account that exposes the truth about temptation. He said,

Eric stormed into my office and flopped into a chair. "I'm really mad at God."

Having grown up in a strong church family, he'd met and married a Christian girl. Now he was the picture of misery.

"Okay . . . so why are you mad at God?"

"Because," he said, "last week I committed adultery."

Long pause. Finally I said, "I can see why God would be mad at you. But why are *you* mad at *God*?"

Eric explained that for several months he'd felt a strong, mutual attraction with a woman at his office. He'd prayed earnestly that God would keep him from immorality.

"Did you ask your wife to pray for you?" I said. "Did you stay away from the woman?"

"Well ... no. We went out for lunch almost every day."

Slowly I started pushing a big book across my desk. Eric watched, uncomprehending, as the book inched closer and closer to the edge. I prayed aloud, "O Lord, please keep this book from falling!"

I kept pushing and praying. God didn't suspend the law of gravity. The book went right over the edge, smacking the floor.

"I'm mad at God," I said to Eric. "I asked Him to keep my book from falling ... but He let me down!"

To this day, I can still hear the sound of that book hitting the floor. It was a picture of Eric's life. Young, gifted, and blessed with a wife and little girl, Eric brimmed with potential.<sup>1</sup>

But Eric faced temptation. He convinced himself it wasn't that bad! He convinced himself he could not help it! He convinced himself that he could get close without falling over the edge! He convinced himself that he could resist if it ever came to that point. Eric was convinced—right up until the moment that he yielded to temptation.

Alcorn asks, "How many of [you] hope God will guard [you] from calamity and misery, while every day [you] make small, seemingly inconsequential immoral choices that inch [you]

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<sup>1</sup> Randy Alcorn, *The Purity Principle: God's Safeguards for Life's Dangerous Trails* (New York: Multnomah Books, 2003), 9–10.

toward bigger immoralities?”<sup>2</sup> Are you making choices right now that are destroying you?

Every day, Christian men and women forfeit future happiness for the sake of temporary sexual stimulation. Like drug addicts, [they] go from fix to fix, trading the contentment of righteous living for the quick hits that always leave [them] empty, craving more.<sup>3</sup>

What temptation are you flirting with at this moment? Is there one that comes to your mind, and you are saying, “I am not *technically* doing anything wrong”? It is the little decisions—the small portions of ground that you willingly surrender, the slight nudging of the Holy Spirit that you ignore. You are giving up little-by-little, all the while thinking you can stop anytime you want. You say, “I will not give any more.” You are wrong! You are deceived! You are making a deal with the devil, and he never keeps his word. He will want more ground.

Eric made this deal. Alcorn continues, “His story didn’t end that day . . . He’s been in prison for years now, repentant but suffering the consequences of inching his life toward the edge until gravity took over.”<sup>4</sup>

**Transition:** I came today to tell you the truth about temptation.

### **1. Temptation often<sup>5</sup> appears after a victory (4:1).**

Eric is not the only person to face temptation. The sinless, risen Son of God also faced temptation. You will see from the graphic in our bulletin that we are in a series of expository messages from Matthew chapters 1–4 on *The King is Coming*.

- In chapter 1, we discover the King’s birth.
- In chapter 2, we discover the King’s worshippers.
- In chapter 3, we discover the King’s herald.
- In chapter 4, we discover the King’s temptation.

Matthew 4:1–3 says, “Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was

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<sup>2</sup> Alcorn, *The Purity Principle*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>5</sup> In this outline I have chosen to use adverbs of frequency (often, always, never) to bring uniformity to the outline.

hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him...”

This was not Jesus’ first encounter with temptation or evil. Jesus faced many smaller temptations. The tempter came to Jesus in every phase in life.

- As a child, He faced the temptation to lie and disobey His parents. Every child has faced this temptation.
- As a teenager, He faced the temptation of being controlled by emotions and having a bad attitude. Every teenager faces this temptation.
- As a single adult young man in His twenties, He faced the temptation of sexual allure. Every young adult faces this temptation.

In this text Jesus is thirty years of age, and He is facing the epitome of temptation. The tempter came—he is still coming.

Jesus had just been baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. John held these crusades in the desert. When Jesus left the baptism, He went further into the desert—further into forbidden landscapes. George Adam Smith described Jesus’ desert surroundings this way:

It is an area of yellow sand, of crumbling limestone and of scattered shingle. It is an area of contorted strata, where the ridges run in all directions as if they were warped and twisted. The hills are like dust heaps; the limestone is blistered and peeling; rocks are bare and jagged; often the very ground sounds hollow when a foot or horse’s hoof falls upon it. It glows and shimmers with heat like some vast furnace. It runs right out to the Dead Sea, and then there comes a drop of 1,200 feet, a drop of limestone, flint and marl, through crags and corries and precipices down to the Dead Sea.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus would be more alone here than anywhere else in Palestine. No place is more secluded than this destination. It was here that the tempter came.

Do you know when he came? Right after a huge victory. Jesus had just been baptized. John the Baptist had paved the road. This was the beginning of His public rescue mission for sinners. This is a high mark, a “mountaintop experience,” a big victory—and then temptation came.

You see, temptation often appears after a victory. The greatest victory is often followed by the greatest test.

- That is why people fall into terrible sins right after they get a new job, buy a new house,

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<sup>6</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 73.

or come into some money.

- That is why the summer time is the most dangerous time of the year. People wait and wait and wait for it to come, and then, when it comes, they relax. They put down their guard, they take it easy, and they fall into temptation.
- That is why more people backslide on vacation than when they have a steady routine set.

You need to be aware of the victories in your life and remain as watchful as an owl because temptation often comes after a victory. This is not the only time temptation comes, but it is one of them. Most scholars say that the tenses of the verbs prove that Jesus was tempted the entire forty days, followed by the chief onslaught of temptation at the end.

You should take a spiritual inventory of your life this morning. You should evaluate what times in life you are most susceptible to temptation. Be on guard, be vigilant, be on the look out, take watch, be attentive. Your adversary, the devil, is waiting for you to have a mountaintop experience, and when you do he will pounce on you when you have let your guard down.

You will have times in life when you have worked hard, and you are begging for a break. Just when you could not go any farther, you will get one, and that is when Satan will come. He will come along as you are nonchalantly walking, and he will begin to walk with you, bumping you here and there. You might think it is accidental contact, but it is not. He is actually determining what paths you are taking. He is cleverly directing your steps. Like a sheep to the slaughter, he is leading you. Without even knowing it, you are on a slaughterhouse drive.

I read this week about a highly functioning autistic scientist named Temple Grandin. She discovered through years of research how to track what scares or stresses livestock. Russell Moore describes the situation this way:

It turns out that the beef industry was willing to pay for this information, and not entirely due to their humanitarian goals. High stress levels in animals can release hormones that could downgrade the quality of the meat.

Some of the largest corporations in the world hired this scientist to visit their meat plants with a checklist. She said her secret was the insight that novelty distresses cows. A slaughterhouse, then, in order to keep the cattle relaxed, should remove anything from the sight of the animals that isn't completely familiar . . . .

Workers shouldn't yell at the cows, she said, and they should never ever use cattle prods, because they are counterproductive and unneeded. If you just keep the cows contented and comfortable, they'll go wherever they're led. Don't surprise them, don't unnerve them, and above all, don't hurt them (well, at least until you slit their throats at the end).

Along the way, this scientist devised a new technology that has revolutionized the

ways of the big slaughter operations. In this system the cows aren't prodded off the truck but are led, in silence, onto a ramp. They go through a "squeeze chute," a gentle pressure device that mimics a mother's nuzzling touch. The cattle continue down the ramp onto a smoothly curving path. There are no sudden turns.<sup>7</sup>

She designed the path that the cows travel to have gentle curves in it so the cows would feel the sensation that they were going back to where they just came from. These cows just kept following the cow in front of them.

As they mosey along the path, they don't even notice when their hooves are no longer touching the ground. A conveyor belt slowly lifts them gently upward, and then, in the twinkling of an eye, a blunt instrument levels a surgical strike right between their eyes. They're transitioned from livestock to meat, and they're never aware enough to be alarmed by any of it. The pioneer of this technology commends it to the slaughterhouses and affectionately gives it a nickname. She calls it "the stairway to heaven."<sup>8</sup>

You see, temptation will come into your life gradually, not sudden or randomly. These cattle were comfortable. They were relaxed. They were not prodded with the daily grind of mundane actions. They were coddled to death. Are you on the verge of wrecking your life and do not even know it?

"Yes, Kyle, I am. God's Spirit has shown me I am on my way to a spiritual slaughterhouse. What can I do? How can I fight these urges?"

One way we can fight to bring our urges under His Lordship is to ask a question posed by Russell Moore:

Imagine you could do anything, you could make anything, you could make it happen exactly as you wish, and could then go back and reverse time so that it had never happened—no consequences for your life, your work, your family, or Judgment Day. What would it be? Whatever comes to mind might be a pretty good insight into where it is your desires are being farmed.<sup>9</sup>

**Transition:** Here is the truth about temptation: it often appears after a victory. Secondly . . .

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<sup>7</sup> Russell D. Moore, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 25–26.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 26. Chapter 2 is entitled "Slaughterhouse Drive." It is subtitled, "Why You're on the Verge of Wrecking Your Life (Especially If You Don't Know It)."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 49.

## 2. Temptation always comes from Satanic influences (verses 1–2).

I want to answer two questions today: Could Jesus actually be tempted to sin? And, who really tempted Jesus to sin?

Notice that Jesus was actually tempted. For years, theologians have debated this issue. Could Jesus actually be tempted with sin?<sup>10</sup> I am not going to add anything new to the discussion, but I would like to address it.

“Kyle, could Jesus have sinned?” The answer is no . . . and yes.

I came across four truths that helped me come to a clearer understanding of this, and it may help you as well.<sup>11</sup>

- **Jesus is fully man.** He was tempted in all points like us, yet without sin. He was 100% human and faced the same battles and struggles that we face. He faced real, genuine temptation.
- **Jesus was fully tempted.** The three temptations that Jesus faced represent categories of temptations that we all face. Every temptation falls under one of these three sub-categories of temptations.
- **Jesus is fully God.**
- **God cannot be tempted.** James 1:13 states that God cannot be tempted with evil.

You must affirm all four truths, but you do not have to fully comprehend how they all work together.

When we read this text, we are brought to another question. Who really tempted Jesus? Who started this war in the wilderness?

The Bible tells us that the Spirit drove (*exballo*; “impelled, cast out”). Daniel Akin says, Mark will use the same word *II* times to describe Jesus casting out demons! This was no accidental encounter, no chance meeting. It was a divine appointment scheduled by the Father and implemented by the Spirit. It is not what we expected to happen after the baptism and the voice from heaven. There is no reception or celebration, but a descent further into the wilderness. The Spirit that *descended* is the same Spirit that drives Him

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<sup>10</sup> The theological terms are *peccability* and *impeccability*.

<sup>11</sup> David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 67.

into the wilderness.<sup>12</sup>

Since the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted, could that mean that the Spirit tempted Him or that God tempted Him? No! The Bible tells us that we should never say God has tempted us to sin (James 1:13).

Do you remember Job in the Bible? This poor guy lived a life I would certainly not want to live. Satan attacked and tempted him directly. God was there. He would not allow Satan to kill Job. He lifted up the hedge of protection around Job and allowed Satan to afflict certain areas of Job's life. God was there the whole time, loving, caring, and concerned for Joseph. This was no game. This was a test—a sanctifying process in Job's life.

What came into Job's life was temptation from Satan's point of view, but a trial from God's point of view. Maybe a verse from Joseph's life will help (Genesis 50:20).

**Transition:** Here is the truth about temptation: it often appears after a victory, it always comes from Satanic influences, and finally . . .

### **3. Temptation never succeeds against the 2nd Adam and the True Israel**

In a very real sense, we see in this passage that Jesus succeeded where man has historically failed. There is a direct parallel between the first Adam and the last Adam (Jesus). 1 Corinthians 15:45 tells us, "Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

- Adam was engaged by Satan; Jesus was engaged by Satan.
- Adam was first tempted to eat food—an apple; Jesus was tempted with food as well—turn rocks into bread.
- Adam yielded to his temptation; Jesus did not.

David Platt writes, "Jesus stepped into the same story that Adam stepped into, but Jesus is able to stand where Adam fell. Jesus is a new man, unlike Adam and unlike all of us in the universal human story who have succumbed to sin."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Akin, "The Baptism and Temptation of the Servant-King: Mark 1:9–13," accessed September 19, 2015, <http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Mark-1.9-13-The-Baptism-and-Temptation-of-the-Servant-Manuscript-kh.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition*, 65.

So there is direct parallel between Adam and Jesus. There is also a direct parallel between Israel and Jesus.

- Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness.
- Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness.<sup>14</sup>

In short, Jesus is the last Adam and the better Israel. He succeeded where we failed.

## **Conclusion**

A pastor once told his congregation, “I learned a great lesson from a dog.” He said, “His master used to put a bit of meat or a biscuit or some kind of food on the ground, and he’d say to the dog, ‘Don’t eat that,’ and the dog would run over and eat it, so he’d hit the dog. And he put another piece of meat on the ground. He’d say, ‘Don’t eat that.’ The dog would go over and eat it, and he hit him again. Well, after a while, the dog got the message: eat meat, get hit. So the dog decided he wouldn’t eat the meat.” But the man telling the story related how that the dog never looked at the meat. The dog evidently felt that if he looked at the meat, the temptation to disobey would be too great, so he looked steadfastly into his master’s face and never took his eyes off him, and thus the temptation never caused a problem.

Now, temptation works like that. As long as we stare at it, as long as we look at the baubles or the bangles that Satan dangles in front of our eyes, as long as we entertain ourselves on that and feed on it, we’re susceptible, obviously. Temptation is a very common problem for all of us; and, perhaps, victory over temptation is not so common. The problem is the same problem the dog had. The problem is that we entertain ourselves by looking at the temptation rather than by staring into the Master’s face.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This could also picture Moses’ 40 days on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:28) and Elijah’s 40 days at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8).

<sup>15</sup> John MacArthur, “How to Overcome Temptation,” recorded December 27, 1970, streaming audio, accessed September 18, 2015, <http://www.gty.org/resources/sermons/1205/how-to-overcome-temptation>.



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