

How to Successfully Resist Temptation

by Patrick Swayne

“Look out the window,” a father instructs his son. “You see that young man down there? He’s about to commit a terrible sin.” The son looked at his father quizzically. “How do you know that he’s going to sin?” The father looked down at his son, “I know he’s going to sin because of where he’s headed.”

Many today might be tempted to accuse the father in this story of being judgmental. How can someone presume to know what someone else is going to do? However, before making this accusation ourselves, we would do well to ponder the fact that this conversation occurs in the Bible almost word for word.

My goal for this article is to examine the idea of resisting temptation. We’ll eventually get to the answer you’re expecting – namely, the need to respond to temptation the way Jesus did in the wilderness. However, before we get there, let’s discuss the importance of putting ourselves into positions not to face temptation in the first place.

The Connection Between a Path and a Destination

- Proverbs 1-9 is distinct from the rest of the book of Proverbs in that it contains advice from a father to his son (with occasional interjections by lady Wisdom). When I read this portion of Scripture, I not only try to gain advice as a parent, I try to see what I can learn from my heavenly Father. One lesson that stands out time and time again is that my Father wants to be my teacher rather than to leave that job to experience. He wants to keep me far from sin, not merely rescue me out of sin.
- In one of the fatherly speeches that make up the bulk of this section of Scripture, the father of the text describes looking out a window and seeing “a young man devoid of understanding” (Proverbs 7:7). The text says that the father arrived at this appraisal of the young man through perception – it says, “I perceived.” Perception typically implies seeing more than what’s presented at face value, so what did the father see to make him pass this judgment?
- The father shares two pieces of evidence that he noticed: 1) He saw the young man “passing along the street near her corner” and noticed “he took the path to her house” (v. 8); 2) He saw that he did so “in the twilight, in the evening, in the black and dark night” (v. 9). In short, he perceived that the young man lacked understanding because he didn’t know when it was, where he was, or where he was going. The text confirms the father’s appraisal; what follows is that the young man is seduced (v. 21). It ends up costing him “his life” (v. 23).
- What does the father want his son to learn from all of this? He says, “Do not let your heart turn aside to her ways, Do not stray into her paths” (Proverbs 7:25).

Notice the emphasis on “ways” and paths,” and the fact that the son is called to guard his “heart” and not merely his body. The goal of the father is not merely for his son to avoid sexual sin; it is to avoid the path that leads to sin. This father – and our heavenly Father – understands the surest way to avoid a destination is to stay off the road that leads there.

The advice of the father of this text mirrors some very important New Testament commands. Paul tells us to “make no provision for the flesh” (Romans 13:14). The flesh is Paul’s way of describing a life of “darkness... revelry... drunkenness... lewdness and lust... strife and envy” (v. 12-13). Paul says we need put “on the armor of light” (v. 12) and “the Lord Jesus Christ”; doing this demands that we not even give the life that opposes light and Christ an opportunity to take root in our lives. This requires us to be “awake” (v. 11), and, as Paul instructs elsewhere, to “walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise” (Ephesians 5:15).

Unlike the young man “void of understanding” (Proverbs 7:7), Christians must know when it is (“redeeming the time” – Ephesians 5:16), where we are, and where we are going. However, God clearly calls us to more than awareness.

Choosing What Is Excellent

Possibly my least favorite question is, “Where does the Bible say that _____ is wrong?” (To be fair, I also equally despise its twin, “Where does the Bible say that I have to _____?”) This question can be asked legitimately by someone searching the Scriptures (Acts 17:11), but more often than not it is asked by someone who is trying to defend questionable behavior by showing that said behavior exists outside of the realm of what God has forbidden.

It might surprise you to hear me say this, but this is a very legalistic way of looking at the Bible. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day attempted to determine the exact boundaries of the word of God so that they could do exactly what was required, no more and no less (unless of course the “more” was something that they valued by way of tradition). They precisely tithed mint, anise, and cumin, but failed to realize that in the process of merely keeping commandments they were setting aside “justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23). Jesus commends their obedience (“These you ought to have done”), but said they shouldn’t have left “the others undone.”

The Hebrews author calls an understanding of “repentance from dead works” (i.e. turning our mind away from what is sinful) an elementary principle, a foundation (Hebrews 6:1). His encouragement to us is to move beyond what is elementary and to “go on to perfection,” to strive for maturity. Maturity is not interested in simply avoiding what is wrong; it is interested in pursuing all that is right and ensuring faithfulness in that process.

Paul called this aspect of maturity “excellence.” He strove for excellence personally (Philippians 3:8, 14), prayed for others to be able to discern what is excellent (1:10), and encouraged Christians everywhere to reflect on what is excellent (4:8 ESV).

Hinging on our ability to “discern” (1:9 ESV) and “approve what is excellent” is being “pure and blameless for the Day of Christ” (1:10 ESV).

People who are actively seeking excellence don’t care about what is right and wrong, not because they aren’t important but because they’re so basic, so elementary. People who seek excellence want to know instead what is eternally best. When presented with borderline behavior and an action that is guaranteed to be right, a person pursuing excellence will always choose the latter.

If you’ll remember, my goal in this article is to discuss how to successfully resist temptation. If you’ve been following my line of reasoning, you probably realize the point I’m trying to make: the surest strategy to overcome temptation is to avoid it in the first place. This demands that we identify not only what is wrong but the path that leads to what is wrong. It demands further that we avoid that path not merely by walking the boundaries of God’s commands, but by pursuing what is excellent and therefore eternally best. Satan loves it when people peer over the edge of the cliff spiritually speaking, but he hates it when people stay as far away from the edge as they possibly can.

When Temptation Finds You...

I’d love for the above preventative prescription for the plague of temptation to be a panacea. The fact is that even when we pursue excellence with our whole hearts, we will be tempted. Tribulation is the lot of those who live in this world (John 16:33). Jesus lived to do the will of the Father (John 4:34; 5:19; 9:3), and yet He was tempted (Mark 1:13; Hebrews 4:15).

We often run to the account of Jesus in the wilderness to find God’s prescription for overcoming temptation when we face it. However, sometimes we do so secretly believing that Jesus overcame temptation simply because He was God. I’ll be the first to admit that a full understanding of “God... manifested in the flesh” (1 Timothy 3:16) is beyond me. What I do know though is what the Bible says: Jesus was in the form of man (Philippians 2:7-8) and while He was in that form He was “like his brothers in every respect” (Hebrews 2:17 ESV). I might not know the “mystery of godliness” (1 Timothy 3:16), but I know what “every” means. When Jesus was tempted, He was tempted like you or me. When He overcame temptation, He did so in a way that you or I can emulate.

By all means “flee” from temptation (1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22). Do so by avoiding the paths that lead to sin as well as the sins themselves. Do so by pursuing excellence. However, before temptation comes – and it will come – fill your heart with the word of God like Jesus did so you can identify temptations as He did and respond to them by saying, “It is written.” “Your Word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You” (Psalm 119:11).