

Temptation

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. ~ 1 Corinthians 10:13

TEMPTATION has a long history. It goes all the way back to our first parents, Adam and Eve. They were the first human beings to be tempted (see Gn 3:1-6). Had they resisted the serpent's temptation, they would have remained innocent. However, they chose to follow the words of the serpent rather than the Word of God. By giving in to the temptation, they fell into sin.

Temptation is Not Sin

This highlights a very important distinction between temptation and sin. All human beings are faced with temptations to do evil. However, as long as we refuse to give in to the temptation, there is no sin. It is only when we say "yes" to the temptation and commit the evil, that we sin.

Temptation is basically an enticement to do evil of some kind. Holy Scripture says, *"each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire"* (Jas 1:14). Temptations, however, are never from God: *"Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one"* (Jas 1:13).

Why Does God Allow Temptation?

Why does God allow us to be tempted? He allows us to be tempted to give us the opportunity to show our faithfulness and love for him and to test us. This testing is for our own benefit. It shows us the truth about ourselves, and it helps us to grow in virtue.

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Simon the Cyrenian, by Ferréol Bonnemaïson, 1766-1826, after a painting by Raphael

It can be easy to consider ourselves full of patience and love whenever things are going well. But as soon as we are confronted with situations that require patience and love, we may discover the reality: I'm not as patient and loving as I thought. We will only discover how patient, loving, honest, just, chaste, faithful, compassionate, etc., we really are by being confronted with the choice of doing the opposite. As gold is tested in fire, so must our moral character be tested (see Sir 2:1-6; 1 Pt 1:6-7). As we say "no" to the various temptations that come our way, we will grow in love and virtue.

God is always with us and if we ask, he will

give us the grace that we need to resist temptations. If we do surrender to temptation, let us be quick to repent, turn away from the sin, and trust in God's mercy. Fully human as well as fully God, Jesus allowed himself to be tempted, though he never sinned. He thus undid Adam's failure to resist temptation. Since he has experienced temptation, he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb 4:15). *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"* (Heb 4:16).

The Spiritual Battle

The reality of temptation highlights an extremely important aspect to life on planet earth — *we are in*

the midst of a spiritual battle. The Christian life takes this fact very seriously and calls us to do whatever is necessary to remain faithful to God's commands. But where do temptations come from? There are basically three sources of temptation. They come from what Scripture calls "the flesh," the world, and the devil. They lure and entice us to give in to evil and disobey God — if we allow it.

The Flesh

The "flesh" is a term used in Holy Scripture to refer to our fallen human nature. In other words, that lower part of us that tends toward selfishness and is attracted to sin. (The technical term for this tendency toward sin is "concupiscence.") Growing in the Christian life involves mastering the flesh and learning to let the Holy Spirit lead us in our lives. St. Paul says, "[W]alk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh" (Gal 5:16-17).

The practice of self-denial is important for dealing with temptations. It has two primary purposes. First, it helps us to master our flesh. By saying no to its demands and desires, we learn to exercise self-control. There are many forms of self-denial. We don't have to do anything complicated. Simple acts of self-denial done consistently can be quite effective. Fasting, prayer and almsgiving are traditional forms of self-denial.

The particular form of self-denial is not the point. The point is that we do simple acts of self-denial out of love for God and the desire to grow in Christian holiness. As Jesus said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24).

Second, self-denial helps us to practice true Christian love. Why? Because Christian love is loving to the point of self-sacrifice. Christian love is the love of Jesus, who lays down his life for the good of others (Jn 10:7-18; Jn 15:13). In order to love as Jesus loves, we must master ourselves. This will enable us to give more of our love to God and our neighbor. True love is a great defense against temptation, be-

cause love helps us to obey God's commands.

The Devil

St. Paul tells us that our battle is not against "flesh and blood" (other people) but against the "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Of course, for the Christian the devil's enslaving power has been broken by Jesus Christ (see 1 Jn 3:8). But we must expect that our faith will be tested by the various temptations that the devil has to offer. If even Christ allowed himself to be tempted, we should expect it as well.

So who, exactly, is the devil? He is a fallen angel and is the leader of all the other fallen angels. Because he is an angel, he is very intelligent. But because he rejected God, he became completely evil. He is given many titles in Holy Scripture. Each one reveals something about who and what he is. Jesus said that the devil is a "liar and the father of lies" (Jn 8:44). He is also called "the tempter" (Mt 4:3) and the "adversary" who "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Pt 5:8).

A brief look at human history reveals that he is very effective at temptation. Deception is always part of his temptations. The most effective deceptions are the ones mixed with half-truths. The devil always tries to make his suggestions attractive so that people will fall for them. This is why Holy Scripture says that he "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14) or, in other words, as something good. He "dangles" things in front of us that appear good, but in reality will lead to our death.

The World

The third source of temptation we will consider is "the world." It is important to understand what this term means, because the same word has three different meanings in Holy Scripture. The context of the passage tells us which meaning is being used. The first meaning of "the world" simply refers to creation in general — the universe, the earth and all its inhabitants, etc. All of God's creation is good (see Gn 1:31). The second meaning of the world refers to humanity: "For God so loved the world that he gave his

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*The Temptation of Christ, by Ary Scheffer,
1795-1858*

only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). The third meaning of "the world" refers to everything about human life and society that is in any way opposed to God.

It is in this meaning that the world can be a source of temptation. *"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If any one loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world"* (1 Jn 2:15-16; see also Jas 4:4). The voice of the world calls us to turn our backs on God, and to set our hearts on things like impurity, wealth, power, fame, etc. We must resist these voices and seek first the Kingdom of God (see Mt 6:33), praying *"O Lord, Father and Ruler of my life, do not abandon me to their counsel, and let me not fall because of them!"* (Sir 23:1).

From Temptation to Sin

The steps of how one goes from being tempted to actually committing sin can be listed as follows:

1) Sin is suggested to the soul by the flesh, the devil, or the world.

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2) One listens to the suggestion and "toys" with it instead of immediately rejecting it.

3) One delights in the suggestion or yields to sin's attraction.

4) One falls into sin and commits the sin in thought, word, or deed.

Resisting Temptation

We can learn a lot about resisting temptation from Jesus. Throughout his ministry, he was constantly praying. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus admonished his disciples: *"Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Mk 14:38). Before he confronted the devil in the wilderness, he fasted. And during the devil's assaults, Jesus quoted Holy Scripture to him! Satan hates the Word of God. The Word of God is our greatest weapon against the temptations and schemes of the devil (see 1 Jn 2:14). We must fill our minds with God's Word. If we do this, the Holy Spirit will remind us of passages when we need them.

We must also avoid the near occasion of sin. This refers to any situation that is likely to lead us into sin. That is, we don't want to make the devil's work easier. As well, it is important to seek out Christian fellowship for support and encouragement. Finally, if one has been fully initiated into the Church, one must frequent the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist.

The Christian life is a spiritual battle. As long as we are on this earth, we must be vigilant in resisting the influences of the world, the flesh, and the devil. God has given us every help we need to be victorious. Let us look to the example of Jesus. To resist temptation, we must pray, fill our minds with God's Word, and deny ourselves. And if we fall, let us run quickly to our merciful God, for *"if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 Jn 1:9).

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