

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament

K. Discipleship Challenges

32. Sin and Temptation

A second big challenge for aspiring disciples of Christ is how they will deal with sin and temptation. Failures here can be disastrous in the Christian life. There is, of course, a lot of instruction by Jesus and the apostles on this matter. But there is much wisdom in the Old Testament too.

In previous lectures we looked at the seriousness of sin and the need for a perfect sacrifice to atone for it. But once that problem is addressed, we need to know both about coming back from failures in the Christian life and about growing in our ability to avoid these failures in the first place. As to these failures in the Christian life, everybody has them. And if we're honest, we probably have a pretty good idea of what they are in our own life. Anyone who is at all open to the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God has experienced guilt for things they have done which they ought not have done, or for things not done which ought to have been done—the first are sins of commission; the second are sins of omission.

Such guilt is partly what brought us to Christ for forgiveness in the first place. But once we are in Christ, the Spirit works to further refine and sanctify us. Sometimes that means making us aware of new areas of life that need to be cleaned up and straightened out. God doesn't show us everything all at once; that would be too discouraging. But when his Spirit speaks to our spirits about something that needs changing—whether it's something we didn't even know about before, or something we knew very well was sinful, but did anyway—he expects an obedient response.

The temptation is to deny sin, or try to keep it secret. That began with Adam and Eve. After they had sinned against God, they began to know guilt and shame, and they tried to hide from God. (Ge 3:8) Ever since, it has been our tendency to hide from God. Not that secrecy makes sense of course; no one can fool God. Ps 90:8 says, *You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.* And Isaiah 29:15 agrees, *Woe to those who go to great depths to hide their plans from the LORD, who do their work in darkness and think, "Who sees us? Who will know?"*

God knows, and (Eccl. 12:14 says), *will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.* Besides that, with every sin, and every attempt to cover up or hide it, hearts get harder. The end of such a path seems to be a heart encased in layer upon layer of protective armor so that nothing can get to it. No conscience, no feeling, no mercy, no sorrow. When that happens to a heart, it is no longer human, but robotic, or worse, demonic.

So, whether we have gone against what we already know to be the Lord's will or the Spirit makes us aware of something else in our life that needs to change, God expects us to be honest with him, and to confess our sin and repent of it, understanding (as Prov 28:13 puts it) that *He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.* Indeed, we cannot be disciples of Christ without such honesty and a willingness to do what God requires.

But dealing with sin is not merely about confessing and repenting of it. It's also about preventing it, which, in part, involves learning to deal appropriately with temptations before they ever give rise to sins that need repenting of.

One thing that all of us sinners need to be clear about is that temptation itself is not sin and is not judged by God. Temptation is merely the inclination or solicitation to sin. Mind you, it's not just any inclination. That is, we wouldn't say, "I'm tempted to compliment my neighbor" or "I'm tempted to tithe." We'd see it as temptation only if we were inclined to offer an insult rather than a compliment or to keep all our money for ourselves rather than give it for God's work. Temptation is the inclination or solicitation to sin. It comes from the evil one (Satan) or our own evil desires, and tries to get us to do something contrary to the will of God. Temptation thus always needs to be resisted.

The Old Testament doesn't use the word "temptation" but its characters clearly face choices about whether they will respond in the way God wants them to, or they will go their own way, in opposition to him. In some of these stories the word "test" is used. For example:

- God tested Abraham in the matter of his command to sacrifice Isaac.
- Deuteronomy speaks several times of God's testing of Israel so that he would not only know what was in their hearts, but help them serve him better (Deut. 8:2,16, etc.).
- Once in the Promised Land, God used Israel's pagan neighbors to test them to see whether they would continue to follow the Lord as they had under Moses (Judges 3:1,4).
- Various Psalmists and prophets ask God to test his people to the end that the Lord might not only know their hearts but help them be better servants.

Abraham proved faithful, but too often God's people failed the test, going their own way and subsequently being severely criticized, if not judged, for testing God and trying his patience.

In each test, to repeat myself, God's purpose was that his people would pass his test and thereby find their faith in God refined and strengthened. At the same time, although the Old Testament is not nearly as overt about this as the New Testament, the desire of God's opposer—Satan—was that God's people fail the tests and subvert God's redemptive plans. Satan's opposition is mostly implied, but becomes clear at a couple points besides the story of the serpent's temptation in the Garden of Eden.

- 1 Chron. 21:1—"Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel."
- Job's afflictions were brought on by Satan in an attempt to prove that his faithful service to God would cease as soon he stopped receiving God's blessings.
- Zechariah (ch. 3) sees a vision of the Lord's high priest—Joshua—being accused by Satan, apparently for the filthy clothes (sin) he wears. But the Lord then rebukes Satan and clothes his high priest in fine garments as a symbol of things to come, as the Lord says, "I will remove the sin of this land in a single day." (v. 9)

With the understanding that every temptation we face is part of the cosmic conflict between God and Satan—God rooting for our success in withstanding temptation and becoming ever more fully conformed to his purposes, and Satan, rooting that we succumb to temptation and thereby contribute to his purposes—we see all the more that withstanding Satan's temptations is an essential part of Christian discipleship.

One of the first things to know, if we are to be successful in this, is the difference between trying and training. At the best of times, everyone who sincerely wants to be a good disciple of Christ, tries to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. But trying is usually not enough. So maybe we should just try harder, right? But that may not be enough either. It certainly isn't in the matter of qualifying for an Olympic sport. No matter how hard most of us try, we'll never succeed in that. But some of us might, if we train for it rather than just try, because correct training increases whatever ability you have.

Too many people rely only on “trying” when they come up against temptations. Trouble is, temptations reduce one’s will to try, and even if the will remains strong, it will not be strong enough in some circumstances. We need training, to which we have access because God has given us his Word and Spirit.

The biblical Psalms and Proverbs are full of admonitions to treasure the Word of God and live by it. And this is reinforced by many other direct commands found in Scripture, and stories which illustrate both the value of obeying the word of God and the problems that result from ignoring or disobeying it.

Solomon, who was reputed to be the wisest man of his world, knew the importance of paying attention to God’s instructions and making him the center of one’s life. That’s why he called the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom and knowledge, and gave us these verses from Prov. 3:5-6. memorized by so many of us already as children: “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*”

Solomon was just repeating a familiar theme of previous Scripture, some of which applied directly to himself as Israel’s king, e.g. this instruction from Deut 17:18-20 to each future kings of Israel: “*When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.*”

To sum it up: If you get trained in living life God’s way, then you’ll do well. And the implied alternative: If you don’t, you won’t.

Solomon apparently didn’t follow this advice throughout his life, for he was eventually judged by God for his failure to lead God’s people in uncompromising service to the Lord. We don’t know how much attention Solomon paid to God’s word, but other factors in his spiritual decline were the distractions that accompanied his position—his many possessions and his multiple foreign wives, each of whom worshiped a different god, with the result (1 Ki 11:4) that Solomon’s *heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.* The failure was not in the quality of Solomon’s training materials and opportunities; it was in his increasing neglect of them.

It’s obvious, isn’t it, that one of the best things we can do to help us withstand temptations, is to keep first things first through training, and not let the blessings and perks of life become more important than the One from whom all blessings flow. Don’t let your heart be diverted from the source of your life. And a couple things that particularly help in that, besides attending to God’s word, are avoiding temptation when possible, and taking advantage of the help of others.

Proverbs 7 depicts the succumbing to sexual temptation of a young man without sense. It might be hard for a young man—even one with good sense—to withstand such temptations. But the part that especially marks this young man as one without sense is his visit to the district in which he could expect to be tempted. There are enough temptations for would-be disciples without them visiting the places where they are sure to find them.

The advice of Prov. 5:8 is therefore good for more than sexual temptations. "Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house." Andrew Kuyvenhoven gives similar advice In his study of the Heidelberg Catechism (p. 309), "It's utterly sensible to avoid reading pornography and seeing dirty movies, and it's wise to handle alcohol and money with great care, knowing that many have perished by these means. We know that having much leisure time and nothing to do are open invitations for a visit from the tempter."

Of course, temptation cannot always be avoided. Even so, when unexpected temptation arises, it is sometimes possible to run away from it. King David certainly would have done well to do this when he inadvertently saw Bathsheba bathing. He might have been better prepared for an appropriate response if, as Job had done, he had previously made a covenant with his eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman (Job 31:1). But, even in the moment he could have done what Joseph did, when cornered by Potiphar's wife—RUN.

Running is often the most effective way of escape simply because it involves dealing immediately with the temptation instead of savoring it, as we often do. As Martin Luther used to say, "You can't stop birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from building a nest in your hair."

It can be embarrassing I suppose to admit to yourself or others that you have to run away from something, that it's such a monster in your life that you can't deal with it. So what? Run if you have to. We tell children that if some stranger tries to pick them up, to do an anti-social thing, and scream bloody murder and bite and run. That's not such nice behavior, but nice behavior is not what's called for in emergencies. Deal with temptation by doing what's necessary. Put distance between yourself and temptation when possible.

The other help I mentioned previously was taking advantage of the counsel of others. The prophets, priests, and kings of Old Testament times were especially accountable to God not only for their own conduct, but for helping God's people remain faithful to him. What God told Ezekiel about his responsibility in this applied to all the prophets, priests, and kings in God's kingdom. He told him (paraphrase of Ezek 8:37), "If you do not give them my warnings, I'll hold you responsible for their blood."

But other scriptures imply the responsibility of God's ordinary citizens too. Prov 27:17 comments on the value of a friend for encouragement and correction: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." And here are a few other passages that are more direct about the need for God's people to help each other stay faithful.

- Lev. 19:16 says, "Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life." But v. 17 makes clear that this includes failing to rebuke him when you should, when it says: "Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt."
- Proverbs 27:5 says, "Better is open rebuke than hidden love."
- Proverbs 28:23 says, "Whoever rebukes a person will in the end gain favor rather than the one who has a flattering tongue."

These responsibilities for mutual accountability are enhanced in the new covenant community, especially since all who are now "in Christ" are vested with the responsibilities previously reserved for Old Testament prophets, priests, and kings. (Recall the end of that earlier lecture on God's Firstborn.) So, if you want to help yourself and other brothers and sisters stand strong against temptation, cultivate one or more accountability relationships.

Finally, dealing with temptation is more than a matter of recognizing, and avoiding or rejecting sin; it's a matter of cultivating the virtues that God wants to characterize our lives. One section of "Longing for a Better County" deals with the wisdom Proverbs offers on the so-called seven deadly sins and their corresponding virtues.

These are sins to whose temptations it seems we are particularly vulnerable.

- Pride – excessive belief in one's own abilities, that interferes with the individual's recognition of the grace of God. The opposite of pride, and the virtue to be cultivated, is humility.
- Envy – resentment of the status, abilities, or situation of others. The opposite of envy, and the virtue to be cultivated, is love, which wants the best for others.
- Gluttony – going beyond natural limits to consume something to excess, whether food or entertainment, etc. The opposite of gluttony, and the virtue to be cultivated, is temperance, respecting limits.
- Lust – the self-destructive drive for pleasure, out of proportion to its worth. The opposite of lust, and the virtue to be cultivated, is self-control.
- Anger – sometimes violent impatience with the faults of others. The opposite of anger, and the virtue to be cultivated, is kindness.
- Greed – obsession with material things, with getting your fair share or more. The opposite of greed, and the virtue to be cultivated, is generosity.
- Sloth – Physical and/or spiritual laziness. The opposite of sloth, and the virtue to be cultivated, is zeal or eagerness.

I mention these sins and their corresponding virtues because they may help you understand where you might be vulnerable to Satan's deceit or to self-deceit, and what you need to work on in resisting their lure. The major factor in success here is reliance on God and his Word and Spirit. If you try to resist the devil's temptations without coming close to God and cultivating the fruit of his Spirit, you won't have the strength you need.

But with God's training, and the application of the Bible's practical teachings on dealing with Satan's temptations, we can make progress. Remember that God himself never tempts us; he allows temptations to test and refine our faith, but does not send them. And he always provides a way of escape. As the apostle Paul put it (1 Cor 10:13): *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

God will help us meet this challenge to biblical discipleship.