

What To Do About Temptation

By Donald F. Miller, C.S.S.R.

Catholic Truth Society of Manila No.pr059 (1959)

ONE OF THE questions you must have asked often, if you want to be a good Christian and to save your soul, is this: Why do I have to experience so many and such great temptations when I sincerely want to obey God's laws and to do what I know to be good? Why cannot I decide once and for all that I want nothing except what God wants for me, and then be free from strong inclinations to do or consent to the opposite?

More specifically, the questions inevitably arise in your mind: Why do I find bad thoughts appealing to me, when I have decided that I want to be pure? Why do I have to resist evil desires, when I have said that I want to desire nothing except what is good? Why am I tempted to love the wrong persons, or to love in the wrong way, or to seek money at the expense of justice, or to be swayed by anger when I know that I should be forgiving and kind and patient? How peaceful life would be if only there were no temptations! If God wants me to win heaven, why does He make a continuous battle out of my effort to do the things that are necessary to deserve it, and which I know to be reasonable and good?

Such questions arise in the minds of all human beings, because all are tempted, now and then, to do something or to consent to something that is contrary to what they know to be the commanded will of God. But especially are they tempted who have fallen into sin, or contracted habits of evil which they now desire with all their heart to overcome. After they have made a good confession, and expressed true sorrow for the past, and made a stalwart resolution to be done with their sins forever, they find themselves powerfully assailed to go back to the sins that brought momentary pleasure or gain before. The ex-drunkard is sorely tempted to take one more drink, which will mean ten or fifteen drinks. The repentant adulterer feels wildly inclined to see his paramour once more. The reforming youthful lovers have to head off constant incentives to indulge in the sinful actions that they knew changed their love into lust in the past. The reader of bad books is tempted to give his curiosity another fling. Why?

Answers to these questions must be a conscious part of the convictions of all true Christians. The answers must include three things:

- 1) an understanding of the reasons for temptations in general;
- 2) a recognition of the different kinds of temptations;
- 3) a knowledge of what can and must be done to keep every temptation from becoming a sin.

POINT 1.

The reasons for temptation in general may be listed in the form of three axioms, that are based on both the nature and destiny of man, and the plan and the will of God. To make yourself ready for and equal to temptation, you must carefully ponder these truths.

1. Temptations constitute both a proof of your freedom of will, and an opportunity for rightly exercising that freedom.

There is no freedom when there is no choice; there is no choice where there are not alternatives offered to the will; there would be no alternatives offered to the will if you never felt an inclination to do something contrary to the will of God.

Every temptation should therefore make you conscious of the glory of your freedom to choose your own path and to decide your own destiny forever. It should make you realize how far above the brute animals you have been created, which have no choice, no alternatives, no freedom, no temptations, but which act according to a predetermined plan imposed on them by God and limited to fulfillment in this world alone.

For the same reason every temptation you experience is one more opportunity of exercising your glorious freedom of will. The essential choice that every human being has to make in life is not between different kinds of food, clothing, amusement, et cetera, but between, on the one hand, God, unseen and therefore unappealing to the senses but known by reason and faith to be the sum of all goodness and the source of all joy, and, on the other hand, passing joys that appeal to the senses but that are known by reason and faith to deprive one of God.

Each time a temptation assails you, therefore, whether to the bodily pleasure of lust, or the material gain of greed, or the gratification of self-esteem, it should be recognized as saying to you: You can have what I offer, or you can have God. You cannot have both. You can see and feel what I offer; you cannot see and feel God. Take your choice.

You were created to make such a choice. It is a choice of time against eternity; it is the visible against the invisible; it is your body against your soul. "What you choose will be yours." If no such choice were ever offered to you, you would not be the image and likeness of God.

2. Temptations are necessary to make the practice of virtue and obedience to God's laws meritorious, that is, deserving of the eternal reward of heaven.

It is true that nobody could actually deserve the beatific vision, which is the essence of heaven. This is a free gift of God, earned for human beings by the suffering of Christ. But Christ has laid down conditions on which any man's being granted the gift must depend, just as if he were "earning" it for himself.

Everything in the Gospels makes it clear that heaven is to be won only by a struggle. The eight beatitudes point out the battlefields on which you must struggle, and therefore the sources of your temptations: between greed and poverty of spirit; between meekness and anger; between uncleanness and cleanness, et cetera. The reward for victory in the struggle of the higher against the lower is always heaven.

There would be no struggle if there were no temptations; there would be no merit or value in detachment or meekness or cleanness, if there were no inclinations to greed and anger and lust. The reward is great enough to make one want to pay the full price, small though it actually is, of resisting ten thousand temptations in a short lifetime.

3. Temptations are often a providentially arranged test of the sincerity of your sorrow for past sins, as well as a cross that you can carry to atone for those sins.

Invariably the loser in some human contest of skill or strength asks for another chance to show what he can do. This natural instinct is always given a chance to express itself in the spiritual realm, in favor of those who have fallen into and repented of sin. God seems to say to them, as He forgives

the past, “You shall be given ample opportunity to prove the sincerity of your sorrow, for you will be tempted to the same sins again and again.”

Moreover, such temptations are a cross to be carried in company with Christ Who carried the greatest cross to atone for sins. It is a miserable experience to be tempted; it is annoying, humiliating, disquieting and sometimes disgusting.

There is great value in calmly accepting these unpleasant features of temptation, without succumbing to sin, because they balance the pleasure or gain that were attained through sin in the past.

By-products of thus accepting temptations as a second chance of victory after failure in the past and as a means of atonement for past sins, are humility and charity toward others. It is difficult to be humble, and therefore constantly dependent on prayer for God’s help, unless your potential weakness is revealed through temptations. And you will find an unfailing source of sympathy and understanding and kindness toward other sinners in the glimpses of possible sins that you might commit that are always given by your temptations.

Point 2.

It is important to be mindful, however, that these thoughts of temptation as glorious opportunities and fruitful experiences apply only to temptations that cannot be avoided, or that arise out of inescapable circumstances in your daily life. A distinction must therefore be made between temptations that are more properly called voluntary occasions of sin, and those that arise without any choice of the will.

Examples of voluntary occasions of sin are the following: if a man has frequently become drunk in a certain tavern, or in any tavern, the tavern itself is an occasion of sin. He may not go back to the tavern and then talk about being tempted. Going to the tavern is a sin in itself. The time for this man to face the temptation is when the idea comes to him of merely going to the tavern.

The same is true of a married man or woman who has fallen into adultery with someone. For such a one, there is nothing glorious and fruitful in facing temptation after seeking out the company of the same partner in sin. It is a serious sin merely to seek that company. The temptation that must be resisted is the very inclination to call on that person, even though the individual deceive himself into thinking that he can continue the companionship and not fall into sin.

There are, however, temptations that arise out of the necessary circumstances of one’s life, or from the common weakness that all human beings have inherited with original sin. These are the temptations to bad thoughts, evil desires, impatience and anger, lying and cheating, sloth and omission, that are the lot of all men. Add to them the special temptations of former drunkards to go back to drinking (moderately, they say), of the impure to give in to themselves again, of adulterers to go back to their companions in sin, of the detractor to continue to repeat the stories of the sins of others, and it becomes clear that everybody in the world has a job to do in wrestling with temptation.

Point 3.

Let us say, in this final and most important part of this explanation, that you have now decided that you do want to overcome every temptation to evil that presents itself to you. How do you go about

building up this determination into a plan that can unfailingly succeed? Your plan must contain these elements.

First, you need motives sufficiently strong to keep you keyed up to the struggles that will be necessary. These motives must be a combination of many things: the desires to avoid hell, to gain heaven, to love God, to remain a friend of Christ, to atone for past sin, to give good example to others, to avoid giving scandal. To such motives may be added (though they can never supplant the former) such natural motives as desires to escape remorse, loss of reputation, loss of money, loss of health, loss of peace in your family, et cetera.

Second, you need to use the natural means that are at your command to help you turn from or to resist temptations. One powerful natural means to resist temptation is that of distraction. When the thought of some sinful pleasure comes to your mind, very often you can distract yourself from it by thinking of something pleasurable but not sinful, of amusements and activities, of hopes and ambitions, even of past accomplishments and successes, that will then occupy the mind to the exclusion of the bad thoughts. Remember that, in the case of temptations to bad thoughts or desires, if the honest effort is made to distract the mind to some other topic, the thoughts do not become sinful even though the effort is not wholly successful.

Another natural means that can be used to resist temptation successfully is action. If at all possible, get busy doing something when you are tempted by evil thoughts and desires. Or if you are tempted to do something bad, busy yourself doing something good. Play the piano, pound a typewriter, take a walk, get to work on a hobby — anything that will keep you engaged and preoccupied in an innocent way. Young people on dates can escape and turn aside many temptations by keeping themselves occupied in innocent ways.

Third, you need to use the supernatural means God has placed at your disposal for overcoming temptation. It should never be forgotten that every temptation to sin is essentially an invitation to choose between God as the unseen source of all joy, and some temporary but appealing pleasure that deprives you of God. For that reason the approach of temptation in thought, desire, feeling, or inclination to do something sinful, should invariably bring into your consciousness the thought of God. It is against Him that the temptation invites you to declare; it is by declaring yourself for Him and with Him that you resist and overcome the temptation. That is why the supernatural means of prayer is the ideal means of resisting and overcoming all temptations, but especially all those that cannot be avoided or escaped in any other way. Prayer in the form of an act of love of God, or of a petition for God's help or for the intercession of God's Mother, or of acceptance of the temptation in atonement for past sins and for the sins of others, is always a declaration for God and against sin; it always brings God's infallible grace and help; and it is always a consoling assurance afterward that the temptation was resisted and could not have been a sin.

Indeed, to the other helpful and consoling thoughts here given about temptation, this may be added as the most wonderful and fruitful of all: Every temptation should be an invitation to think about God, to choose God, to love God, to pray to God, to want to be with God. Since we have been created for God, and, as Saint Augustine says, can never rest until we rest in God, temptations should be considered the greatest of all blessings if we have succeeded habitually in making them occasions for turning our hearts to God.

Point 4.

To all the above it may be wise to add a few practical principles concerning temptation that need to be kept in mind, especially by those who are inclined to be scrupulous.

1. The mere fact that you are tempted to sin never makes you guilty of sin. Some people think that, if a bad thought has appeared in their mind, or a bad picture in their imagination, they have already been guilty of sin. If the thought or image is resisted, there is no sin; only if it is accepted, dwelt on and deliberately continued with the consciousness that it is evil, does it constitute a sin.
2. The vileness of a temptation has nothing to do with the question of your guilt or innocence. Some people think that, if a bad thought is especially vile or sacrilegious, that fact makes them the more guilty of sin. No matter how terrible the temptation may be, it is no sin if it is resisted. Neither does it make any difference if the temptation comes in church, or at Mass or Communion, so long as it is calmly resisted.
3. Resisting a temptation does not prevent or stop an evil thing from appealing to your lower nature. Some people think that because they cannot escape a sense of attraction for some pleasure that is sinful, they must be guilty of sin. It must be remembered that the lower nature, that is, the bodily appetites and passions, of human beings are blindly attracted to what is pleasurable, without discrimination as to whether the enjoyment would be good or evil. It is only the higher nature, that is, mind and will, that can judge whether an attractive thing is good or evil, and must turn from it or resist it if it is evil.
4. If you are in doubt whether you resisted an evil temptation sufficiently to keep it from being a sin, you may usually take it for granted that you did not commit a serious sin. You cannot be in doubt unless you offered some resistance to a temptation; and if there was resistance, without deliberately voluntary evil actions, there was not the full consent of the will that alone can make you guilty of a mortal sin.

(Thanks to the Saint Louis Province, Redemptorist Fathers.)
