

I. Introduction: Some everyday scenarios for you. Put yourself in these people's shoes... What should they do?

A. Jr. High kid from a Xian family is hanging out under the grandstands with friends at a Friday night football game. One friend looks around carefully and offers him a smoke that does NOT come out of a cigarette package. What should he do?

B. A young adult man recently began seeing a Christian woman that he really likes, & this relationship has definite marriage potential. Meanwhile in the privacy of his apartment he often struggles with the addictive appeal of porn websites ... he hopes that getting married will take care of this "problem". What should he do?

C. A Christian woman has worked hard in her company and just moved up to a good management position, when her supervisor suggests she should use her management influence in unethical ways ... What should she do?

II. We ALL know temptation – It's a universal & timeless issue

A. In one way, this makes it easy for us to relate to these 2 Bible stories today.

1. Every one of us is faced with temptations to bend the rules, to do or say what our better judgment tells us we shouldn't do
 - a) I may not be tempted in MY garden by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but that triple chocolate ice cream with peanut butter cups in the freezer just keeps calling my name every night before bed!
 - b) In another way, however, the Bible stories of temptations often seem hard for us to relate to ...
2. Sometimes biblical temptation stories just appear irrelevant today
 - a) Externally our world today looks SO DIFFERENT from the world that Jesus lived in and the world that Adam & Eve first saw
 - b) The sheer number of temptations before us and the complex, varied forms that they come in could never have been imagined in biblical times

B. Even so, despite all our technological advances, at the most basic & fundamental levels, **the temptations that God-followers face today are no different than they were 2000 years ago or more:**

1. We humans have always been tempted toward greed, misuse of power, manipulation, personal gain at others' expense ...
2. In sum, we are and always have been tempted to turn our backs on the God who created us

III. Brings me back to ask “How do we handle temptations as Christians?”

A. I invite you to close your eyes just for a few moments. Try to recall the most recent temptation you faced ... just this morning or maybe yesterday ...

1. First get that temptation in your mind:
 - a) Was it the unkind word you wanted to say?
 - b) Or maybe the untruth you considered speaking to cover your tracks?
 - c) Or the difficult good deed that would be so easy to walk away from?
2. Now that you're thinking of some concrete temptation, not just temptation in the abstract, open your eyes & answer this question:
3. How do you instinctively respond to temptation? I.e. *When temptation to do something wrong hits you, what's your tendency for dealing with it?*
 - a) Do you laugh it off, hoping to change the subject?
 - b) Do you shut down emotionally, trying to put it out of mind?
 - c) Do you play it cool & deny that you're being tempted?
 - d) Does it consume your thoughts and become an obsession until you either give in to the temptation, or you find a way to resist it?

B. Let me identify 2 very common approaches I've seen & heard over the years in S.S. classes, sermons & magazine articles:

1. Emphasize rules & morality codes
 - a) For some it's returning to the 10 Commandments



- b) Some people use the Bible as a rules book or road map:



They try to find a direct response to every temptation in Scripture

People w/ this approach find a Bible verse to answer every question they have, which may stretch parts of the Bible into answering questions that it wasn't designed to answer

- c) Sometimes this can be helpful in simple temptation situations if the Bible speaks clearly about it, e.g. "You shall not steal"
- d) Unfortunately some of us also have negative experiences with this approach turning into rigid legalism in the face of temptation

2. Another approach: Provide practical strategies to overcome temptation. You might think of this like the rules & protective gear that we heard about with the children

- a) Might mean asking what I call "the guilt question": "*Would God be happy if God saw you doing this?*" (approach that can bring to mind image of a mean, finger-wagging judgmental God)
- b) For an addict in a 12-step group: making a phone call to a sponsor to talk you out of doing the tempting behavior
- c) Recall some selected temptation response Scriptures

James 1:2-3

James 4:7

1 Cor. 10:13

- d) Or might be reminding yourself of 4 simple letters that were popular in churches 20-some years ago: WWJD (*What Would Jesus Do?*)

The phrase came from an 1896 book by Charles Sheldon called In His Steps, in which the main character, when facing difficult choices kept asking, "What would Jesus do?" ... a good question

The problem is that Jesus did not talk about issues like stem cell research & global warming ... Jesus did not have the internet

Ie. WWJD can be good, but it can also be too simplistic

IV. I suggest a slightly different approach today for handling temptation

A. I have in mind an approach that bears a little resemblance to WWJD, but it goes deeper & is more personal

1. Rather than focusing on having pat answers for temptation, or on exactly what phrase or person to call on ...
2. Suggest we examine WHO God created us to be ... I'll call this a "Xian identity" approach to dealing with temptation

B. 1st look at Jesus & how he handled temptations

1. Need to remember these were representative or symbolic temptations Jesus faced ...
 - a) I don't believe that somehow for 30 years Jesus was miraculously spared all human temptations until this moment after his baptism

I believe at this point of story, Jesus already knew the temptation to use people for personal gain, or to tell an untruth, or to see his own needs as more important than those of his heavenly father.

In Matt. 4 this is the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after being baptized & hearing heavenly words "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased."
 - b) These temptations of Jesus matter because they reveal Jesus' character & they reveal what kind of mission he was on as God's Messiah
2. Jesus was not tempted with stereotypical "sinful" things
 - a) Turning stones into bread ... the miraculous rescue from falling ... the power over the whole world – each of these could have been used to grow Jesus' new ministry and gather thousands for the kingdom of God
 - b) The tempter showed Jesus some possibly good or easy ways to draw people's attention toward God
 - c) Problem was ... these methods contradicted the very kingdom of God that Jesus was proclaiming
3. All of these offers from Satan amount to one fundamental temptation for Jesus: to abandon his mission ...
 - a) To forsake his call from God ...
 - b) to be a different kind of Messiah than God sent him to be
4. The strength Jesus had against temptation clearly came from God, but also from his own sense of identity:
5. Jesus knew who he was and what he was about, so he didn't let anything draw him away from that central identity in God

C. Now examine the temptation story of Adam & Eve

1. What was their fundamental sin? Pride? Perhaps so ... But I wonder if it was really identity insecurity?

2. Adam & Eve were confused re. their place & their role in God's creation ... didn't understand their limits as creatures, nor their dependence on God

- a) It's when they sought to step out of that dependent role, that trouble came ...
- b) The temptation for Adam & Eve was to know good & evil for themselves ... to take on God-like characteristics
- c) The trouble came because they didn't recognize their own place ...

3. They did not know who they really were, but instead tried to be something they were not meant to be

V. Are we so different?

A. What's really happening when we Xians give in to temptation?

1. Behind all the pride or stubbornness, we're fundamentally confused & insecure people

2. We don't know who we are ... & we don't recognize our own limits ...

- a) When we need friends around us constantly to tell us we're OK ... **We don't know who we are.**
- b) When we let advertisers convince us we're not fulfilled until we buy this product or that service ... **We don't know who we are.**
- c) When the beating drums of war & patriotism all around tell us our American identity is more important than our Xian citizenship ... when we fail to challenge that message ... **We don't know who we are.**

3. Whether we're conscious of it or not, I maintain that **giving in to temptation, at the core, means we're trying to be people that God doesn't want us to be.**

B. Let me describe a "Christian identity" approach to dealing with temptation

1. It actually starts when you're not even thinking about temptation

- a) When things are going well for you, before you're in the middle of a tempting situation, occasionally ask yourself a few very basic questions:

"Who am I in God's eyes?

What's God's ultimate call to me?

What's the bigger purpose God has for me?"

- b) Ask & pray these questions periodically & keep coming back to them when you read Bible passages, read them always with these questions in mind ...
maybe your SS class or small group could focus a discussion

sometime just on these

2. Now, the answers that come to you for these Qs may not always be crystal clear, but after reflection, usually some basic ideas will start to emerge for you, perhaps sounding something like this:

- a) God's purpose for me is: *Making faithfulness to Jesus Christ my #1 priority ... OR Being a person committed to prayer ... OR being a person grounded in God's Word*"
- b) Perhaps your identity in Christ is *Being the best witness I can be for Christ in my job ... OR Managing God's resources & glorifying God.*
- c) I encourage you to write that brief statement down & carry it with you in your wallet, on your cell phone, or post it somewhere you will see it often. I have a personal mission statement posted in my office in easy sight of my computer.



Once you've given serious thought to who you are in Christ & you've made yourself some reminders of that core identity, you have a new tool to use when temptation strikes you.

C. (Using this Xian identity approach, & finding God in it)

1. Now, this Christian identity approach does not mean WWJD or 10 Commandments have no value
2. It does mean we are cautious about simplistic Scripture-quoting
 - a) I recognize that Jesus may have been able to quote one-liners from the Old Testament to refute Satan, but Jesus probably internalized the Scriptures far more than most of us do today.
 - b) Today I've outlined an approach we can take in the face of temptation, but I'd like to steer us back to our theme, "Show Us"
3. In some brief references to Psalm 32 today, we heard that God is our hiding place, our refuge from trouble (repeat)

4. Sometimes it's not difficult to recognize our God-hiding place and move beyond the temptation. Hallelujah for when that happens!

VI. But sometimes, in the thick of our temptations, that hiding place is not at all obvious ... & sometimes we're not honestly seeking a hiding place at all!

A. Temptation presents us with constant opportunities to ask ourselves "Who am I?" and "Whose am I?"

1. If in our tempting moments we have the clearness of mind to ask ourselves some identity questions, God's hiding place may well present itself simply by us being reminded of who God calls us to be.
2. But let's be honest to admit that often when temptation is strongest is when we're NOT @ our clearest thinking
 - a) Sometimes we're hungry, exhausted, stressed out or agitated & that's when we're most vulnerable to temptation
 - b) When we're not at our best is often precisely when it's easiest to give in to weakness, or blurt out something thoughtless that we later regret
 - c) Temptation is easier to resist when we're well-fed & well-rested

B. In reality, God is often far from our minds when temptation hits us hardest

1. What happens when you've just been deeply wounded by someone dear to you who humiliated you, or destroyed something you poured yourself into? You get mad! Anger makes you see red!
 - a) Your mind is consumed by figuring out how to get back at them, or at least force them to see what a jerk they were and apologize.
 - b) In that burning moment, you're tempted to retaliate in-kind, or to shout choice words in their face, or to whip off a very nasty text message.
 - c) So in the heat of that moment, are you suddenly interrupting those temptations by asking, "What's God call on my life?" For most of us, the answer is *ARE YOU KIDDING ME?*
2. We're often FAR from having godly thoughts at those times of our greatest temptations
3. Those are the times when it's most important that we've already discovered God's hiding place BEFORE the temptation came ...
 - a) It's crucial that by our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, by our daily and weekly habits we begin to internalize that divine calling
 - b) That's when the time we've spent in church singing hymns & Scripture songs pays off because one of those lyrics pops into mind to help us make the right choice.
 - c) Those are the times when we see the value of Bible memorization as a

resource to draw on when we're tempted

VII. Conclusion

A. Friends, temptation will keep coming your way

1. And regular practices that draw you closer to God, like praying and fasting, will make it more likely that godly thoughts sneak into your awareness
2. Knowing your Bible better is also one good preparation for temptation ... then, when the tempter comes calling you just might, like Jesus, be able to resist it with Scripture that you already know
3. But frantically trying to retrieve a Bible verse here or a slogan out there will not always be enough to overcome temptation.
 - a) When temptation comes, don't worry if you can't remember the 10 Commandments nor recite a standard Bible verse to ward it off.
 - b) And don't get hung up if the WWJD question doesn't settle the issue

B. Instead, in the face of that temptation, ask yourself one of these simple questions, which I will leave for you to reflect on now in this period of silence.

1. Will this tempting choice make me more the person God wants ... or less?
2. Does this represent who I am in Christ?