



The Struggle for Inner Peace

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LESSON 10: HELP FOR A HARD JOURNEY

Once you have accepted responsibility for your life, you will be tempted to backtrack, to lay the blame for your ups and downs, your troubles and defeats at someone else's door. But don't become discouraged here—or misled. Temptation is something you hold in common with all people. And it too is something you must meet with whatever resources you have and be responsible for your response to it.

What is temptation? Smiley Blanton, noted psychiatrist, offers a good definition:

Every day of your life, no matter how sheltered you are, you face some choice in which the wrong action is so seductive, so plausible, so pleasurable that it takes a conscious effort of will to reject it. Temptation is universal, as old as the Garden of Eden. Much of your happiness or unhappiness depends on your ability to handle it—instead of letting it handle you ("How to Handle Temptation," *The Reader's Digest*, May 1961, p. 188).

You drive down a highway in a powerful car. The speed signs limit you to 55 miles an hour. But the way is clear; no one is around; you know the car really purrs at 75. The temptation is to step on the gas.

As a Christian, you are committed to give of your income to the Lord, but the furniture is shabby and the sales are on. You are tempted to rationalize withholding your tithe "just this one time."

You have promised to spend the evening with your family. A fellow worker, however, has two tickets to the deciding ball game of a crucial series. He wants you to go with him. You are tempted to go.

SUBTLE SITUATIONS

Temptation does not always appear as a terrible, undesirable evil thing that you won't want to do. You may have little or no problem with something that you aren't interested

in doing. But you may be greatly tempted by something you want to do but know you shouldn't. (Or it could be the reverse—something that you should do but don't want to.)

At the moment of temptation, the thing may seem so right. An impulsive purchase that wrecked the household budget seemed so right at the time. To teach a man a lesson who deserved a knuckle-rapping seemed so right in the passion of emotion. So right—except your heart that tells you "it's right" can be so deceitful.

Mrs. Craig, expecting guests, was cleaning the house when the telephone rang. Some friends were meeting downtown for lunch. They wanted to know if she could join them.

"I'd love to meet you, but you know my husband. He's fussy about the way the house looks for company."

"It's just a quick lunch."

"Well, I don't know." It was a difficult decision. She certainly wanted to join her friends. But should she suit herself or please her husband? She faced temptation.

Mrs. Van Waggoner and her neighbor were golfing. They were about to tee off for the third hole when two men approached the women and asked if they could play through. Mrs. Van Waggoner and her partner readily agreed. But before the men went on, one suggested that the women join them in their game. The women looked at each other. Mrs. Van Waggoner had never faced this situation before. She was quite uneasy about the suggestion, but her neighbor said OK before she could think much about it.

The men proved to be cheerful company—and most attentive. Mrs. Van Waggoner's partner teed up her ball for her, pulled her cart, and helped her improve her iron shots. Perhaps he was a bit too friendly, yet she enjoyed the attention.

After the game the foursome drank iced tea in the clubhouse. As they were about to leave, Mrs. Van Waggoner's partner suggested they have lunch together at a nice little restaurant he knew of. She was tempted—the morning had been so pleasant. To refuse took a definite act of her will, but she did it.

At home, she was upset that she had responded so warmly to this strange man. The morning had been filled with temptation, and she wondered what to tell her husband. She found out—as you probably have—that temptation can pop up in the most unexpected places and in the most unusual ways. It can make you aware of desires that take you by surprise.

The Bible says: "Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death" (James 1:13-16).

The temptations that bother most people are not those that would clearly lead into sin. Not many people struggle hard with the temptation to steal. But the semi-visible testings are something else. It was not perfectly clear that it was wrong for Mrs. Craig to drop her housecleaning to join her friends downtown. Each person has his own personal, private standards that he has chosen to live by; to fall short is to cause himself personal anxiety. If Mrs. Craig has set for herself a goal of getting the house cleaned and then drops the project, it is likely she will not enjoy the luncheon or get the job done either. The Apostle Paul said: "Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves" (Rom. 14:22).

Everyone faces tempting circumstances constantly. While I was writing this book, I was tempted to lay down my pen and attend a professional golf tournament that was playing in town. To take a break might have been all right, but I had committed myself to a deadline for finishing the manuscript. I resisted the temptation every day but one.

It was an exciting tournament. My enjoyment of it, however, was dampened by the fact that I had left an unfinished task behind. I constantly condemned myself for the thing I had allowed.

PREPARING FOR THE TEST

In advance of a temptation, you must make up your mind not to yield to it. Nevertheless, when temptation comes, you must reaffirm your previously made decision, and this will require a definite act of the will.

Character is forged from encounters with life that tempt you to do wrong. The erring attraction is always present. Paul reminded the Corinthians: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

It is good for people to compare notes with one another. You may feel that no one faces the same temptation you do. The counselor sees this constantly. The counselee struggles to tell of his temptations. At times, he relates, he overcomes them; at times, he fails. In telling his story, he feels that he is revealing something that no one else has ever experienced.

Mr. E., a deacon and sincere Christian, cannot keep his eyes off a woman who recently joined the church.

Mrs. G. is seized with a sudden impulse to slip that nice little knickknack into her purse.

Mrs. H. would like to scratch out her neighbor's eyes because the neighbor won't keep her children out of Mrs. H.'s yard.

The person who thinks he is the only one to face a particular kind of temptation is inclined to justify yielding to it.

"You'd make allowances for my mean disposition if you knew what I have to put up with at home," a woman will say, as if there were no other cantankerous husband in the world but her own. And so the story of temptation goes, characterized by these words of Paul: "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way to escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

Taking the way to escape is your choice, and God is always ready to help you make that choice. But you must remember that your decision on whether or not to yield comes in the face of a wrong action that is so seductive, so plausible, so pleasurable that it takes a conscious act of the will to reject it. The desire to do what you want to do, even though it is wrong, is very strong.

Jesus gave us a strange-sounding formula: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24-25). All men are tempted to please only themselves, but the pathway to inner peace is to lose yourself in God's way, to follow Him and do His will at all costs. Inner peace comes to those who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33), to those who "pursue righteousness [and] godliness" (1 Tim. 6:11). To enjoy God's peace, you must "pursue the things which make for peace" (Rom. 14:19).

WHEN TEMPTATION PURSUES YOU

Temptations will pursue you even when you seek to determine in what, or in whom, you will put your faith. If you choose the Bible as your guide, there will be those who will try to divert you from it. But God has His "persuaders" too. If you reject the Bible, there will be those who will challenge your decision and seek to "tempt" you to return to God's Word and the things of the Lord. For example, many churches conduct weekly calling programs persuading people to attend Sunday School in order to study the Bible.

In my early 20s, I went through a period of rejecting the church, the Bible, and anyone who held to them. It was easy to find people who encouraged me in my rejection. I read educators and psychologists who made it quite clear that man was capable of taking care of himself without crutches such as church and the Bible. Scientific research, they said, would save us.

But others, who know me and who had been helped by the church, the Lord, and a study of His Word, were not content to let me rest in this decision. They called on me frequently and exerted great effort to get me to reconsider.

After some years I returned to church and renewed my faith in God and the Bible. During college and graduate school, I purposed in my heart, by faith, to use the Bible as my standard for conduct and for evaluating what I heard or read. The Bible was never

on trial with me, but the book I was reading or the professor's lecture was. Just as my friends in the church were not content to let my rejection go unchallenged, so my fellow students and professors did not let my decision to accept the Bible as my guide go unchallenged.

"How can you possibly explain putting your faith in the Bible and at the same time be a student of psychology?" they would ask. They tempted me greatly. I wanted my friends and professors to respect and like me. But to have their full respect meant to put my faith where theirs was—in the idea that man is in a process of evolution, in the belief that with our own hands we can build a world of peace.

They never let me forget that every man has a right to choose how he will spend his life and that it is not right for one to impose his standards on another. But as I understood it, the kind of life a man will live is not a matter of his own opinion. For everyone will be judged someday, and the standard for judgment is the Bible. Holding to such a view, I stood alone. How great was the temptation to be like the people around me!

There are writers and speakers, some of them ministers and seminary professors, who are not convinced that the Bible is entirely the Word of God. To consider what they say is to court temptation to give up your reliance on the Bible. Something you read, or hear on the radio or in a speech or in a conversation, or see on television, can tempt you to deviate from what you believe. This will be true whatever course you follow. Having chosen a way for yourself, you will be tempted incessantly to turn from it. And tempting you will be people you admire.

Recently, a college student came with a question that troubled him. "Some of the finest people I know are not Christians. They openly spurn the Bible. Yet they seem to be happy and get along well with other people. Some of the leading people in our church are much harder to get along with and do not appear to be as happy as those who are not Christians. If God's way is the only way to peace, then why are these non-Christians peaceful and these Christians not?"

That's a good question. It brings out the point made in the previous chapter, that one's conduct does have an impact on others. This young man's faith was being shaken by the conduct of professing Christians. According to his observations, it did not seem to matter if he did not place his faith in Christ and God's Word.

His observations were correct, but you can become confused by observing others. The Bible says: "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

As a counselor, I see many people who are woefully unhappy individuals but who never give any outward indication of it. A man's outward behavior does not always give a measure of what is going on inside him. God "makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). We should be careful

about making judgments based on the success or lack of success of others. Paul said: "Let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way" (Rom. 14:13).

WHOM WILL YOU TRUST?

Where will you place your faith? In the conduct of a man? In the words or writings of some individual? Or in God and His Word? You must make this choice alone and then face the ceaseless temptations to change your choice.

Remember the definition offered earlier: You face a choice in which the wrong action is so seductive, so plausible, so pleasurable that it takes a conscious act of will to reject it. In the college student's case, when questions arose about the conduct of Christians and their adjustment to life, it seemed reasonable to turn away from the Bible and to take the viewpoint followed by those who appeared happier. This young man had to make his choice.

Now it is our privilege to "tempt" you with our viewpoint. It is that we have found, and have helped others find, that the Bible is your sure guide to peace.

We have discovered that the man who violates biblical principles will be unhappy, whether he appears to be or not, just as the man who disobeys the rules of health will be sick, whether he looks it or not. We say this by faith. But we say it by experience too. The unhappy, tense, anxious, miserable person who comes to a counselor for help is usually knowingly or unknowingly violating some biblical principle.

How do you approach the God who can give you inner peace? "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). Also, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

You must approach God by faith. You must trust Him fully, with your mind set on Him and His ways. "You [God] will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You. Trust in the Lord forever, for in Jehovah, the Lord, is everlasting strength" (Isa. 26:3-4).

As you trust God, He will give you assurance that you are on the right path. But trials, troubles, conflicts, other viewpoints, unexpected failures on your part and on the part of people you admire, will challenge your evidence and throw you back on faith alone. A combination of faith and temptation will make your choice of the Bible as your guide a difficult one to maintain.

THE CHALLENGE AND THE REWARD

Let me "tempt" you to make a one-year test of studying and applying to your life what you find in the Bible. To study, to ponder, to test what the Bible says takes time. After all, a student who chooses a psychology career spends four years just getting his bachelor's degree. At that point, he is only a beginner in the field. It also takes time to test the guidance the Bible offers to those who trust God, its author.

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2). This verse implies knowledge of God's Word and love for and obedience to that knowledge. We do not propose a simple, easy approach to inner peace. It is a struggle, with a starting point based on simple faith, with many temptations along the way to draw you aside, on a pathway that today is rejected by many serious, dedicated, sincere people.

The reward is still there for those who take God's way, in spite of the difficulties. And there is help along the route. Prayer is the gateway to getting this help from God.

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

Entertain no worry, but under all circumstances let your petitions be made known before God by prayer and pleading along with thanksgiving. So will the peace of God, that surpasses all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:6-7, MLB).

Jesus said, "If you shall ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). And He followed this with these words: "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

If you want your prayers for help answered, become familiar with the commands of God in the Bible. Verbalize your longings before God, then wait to see what He will do. If you have asked according to *His* will (that is, if you have prayed with the desire that His will may be done), you will have what you asked for. It is yours if it fits into God's plan. And remember that His ways are not necessarily your ways (Isa. 55:8-9). But also, His ways are not grievous or burdensome (1 John 5:3).

Your challenge is to accept the Bible as your guide and to obey God's commands fully. If you do, you will find that the Bible is a mirror in which you see yourself as you really are. And when you see yourself, what you do is *still* up to you. You can correct what ought to be corrected. But you will be tempted to look away and forget what you saw (James 1:23-25). And in looking away you will soon become absorbed in counter-attractions that will not let you return for a second look.

But if by faith you go God's way, you will find inner peace along the way as well as at the end of the road. "He who wants to enjoy life and see happy days must keep his tongue from speaking evil and his lips from uttering deceit. He must turn away from wrong and do right; he must search for peace and keep after it. For the Lord's eyes are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their prayer, but the Lord's face is set against those who practice evil" (1 Peter 3:10-12, MLB).

Questions for Review

1. In your own words, what is temptation?
2. Character is forged from encounters with life that tempt you to do wrong. What must you do to prepare?
3. All men are tempted to please only themselves, but the pathway to inner peace is to _____.
4. Everyone will be judged someday, and the standard for judgment is _____.
5. The author has challenged you to make a one-year test of studying and applying to your life what you find in the Bible. What steps can you take to get started on this?

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