

Today we're talking about **Praying for Protection**. Jesus said in Matthew 6:13, "*Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.*" In the original language the definition of "tempt" is to entice or to solicit somebody to sin or to fall away. There's always temptation out there at some level. There are a million temptations that we struggle with.

The Bible tells us that temptation is at work in our lives in two very different ways. One is the "big picture" scenario. *Star Wars* on steroids. Big! The major characters are huge. There's God over here, wanting your best, and wanting to love you and protect you and guide you. Then the bad guy over here named Satan is tempting and he wants to destroy us. Then we're somewhere in the middle of this big cosmic battle which God wins, by the way. I read the rest of the Bible. God wins in the end. But we're kind of stuck here being tempted to go one way but wanting to follow God another way.

Then there is the running theme in scripture and in Jesus' teaching. We have a tempter inside of us. We are our own worst enemy, we have a spirit of rebellion that leads us into temptation.

There's some good news about this. Being tempted and struggling with temptation is a sign of life. Life means that there is a struggle within where part of you really wants to follow God. You really want to be in His path and His ways, to know Him deeper and get more connected to Him. And the other part of us pulls us the other way toward the darkness. Like a seed or plant that wants to grow up and it's struggling to break out. I believe temptation is a sign of life. In fact, I believe that people who don't struggle are in worse shape than those of us who are struggling. Because there's death inside. If there's no life there's no struggle.

Some of us have given in so much to temptation that there's no life because there's no struggle any more. We have to be pulled out and rescued. Guess who the rescuer is. It's what God does.

If that's the case then, those of us who live in some sort of reality understand that we have a temptation problem. And we struggle with it. We try to solve it our way. That's our first solution. Then we finally give up and do it God's way.

Our human solution to temptation is this: Stop it. It's bad. Don't do that. This is what we do. We say, "This is bad thing and I'll stop it." If you don't think you're in that crowd... yo-yo diet. That's a "stop it" thing. Or, New Year's Resolution. You write down, "I will never 'blank' again." Then three days later you're "blank"ing. Or the 3x5 on the mirror. "Everyday I will 'blank'." And after three days you're not blanking any more. You fill in the blank. That's the "just-stop-it mentality". It sounds so easy but it doesn't work. It's an unbiblical view of sin and temptation.

Let me give you some really bad news. This will get you a little depressed but that's ok. You've got to have a Friday crucifixion before you can have a Sunday resurrection. Here's the bad news about "just-stop-it" if you're having a temptation problem:

1. Temptation strikes us at our weakest point. Temptations don't play fair. They don't hit you when you're strong and ready to go. Temptation hits you when you're hurt, under stress. When you have a relationship problem that is really bugging you, or an emptiness inside your heart that can't be filled. When you've got financial problems, medical problems, family problems. Then the temptations start really coming at you and cut you off at the knees.

2. The second part why it doesn't work has to do with the law. The law which says "don't-do-it" is a good thing but it arouses sinful passions in us. Romans 7:5: "*Our sinful passions were aroused by the law.*" Let me give you an example. You go out on date night for the evening, and you tell the kids "We'll be gone for a while. Whatever you do don't eat the cookies on the top shelf." You can see the light coming on in the kids' heads. Before you said that they're thinking, "I think I'll have an apple." But not any more! There's cookies on the top shelf.

That's how we are. If the law says "You can't do this." What do we want to do? Do it! "You can't have that apple in the tree." That's what I want to have. So the law arouses sinful passions. You have to realize you can't live and obey the law. You've got to go to Jesus. You've got to go to a place of grace where the law doesn't control you any more. The law is a tutor to lead us to Jesus.

3. Willpower is overrated. I'm sure all you willpower freaks are discouraged by this but willpower is an overrated concept. It's ok. But it doesn't sanctify you and it doesn't save you from temptation. If willpower could work we would all be attending the Church of Self Help today. But you know where we are. We're at the church of a blood stained cross for those who cannot help themselves. That's why Jesus came – because willpower failed.

Jesus talked about it in Luke 19:10, "*The Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost.*" The word "save" in the Greek means to restore to wholeness and to rebuild, to recreate. Our problem isn't the temptation thing. Our problem is much more profound. Without Jesus we're lost. So willpower doesn't bring us out of that.

That's the depressing news. You can't do it. What's the good news? God has a path. God has a way. "*Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil.*" You're tired of trying harder. You're tired of self discipline not working. These four things are what God says. I was tempted to talk about ten things but I resisted the temptation.

1) We all need to connect to God as our source of grace. Big picture: the goal of our life is not to stop doing bad things. That's kind of a shallow goal. When you're 97 and asked, "How was your life?" *Pretty good. I didn't do a lot of bad things.* So what? The goal of life is to live. The goal of life is to find God and be filled with Him and go out and do something and have great relationships and do some meaningful things. That's what life is. It's not the absence of all the bad things. So we need a source to go to and preserve us. And that is God and His grace. He's our life line.

The ultimate temptation is to cut ourselves off from God and do it our way. Isn't that kind of the essence of all temptation? I want this and I want it now. I want it the way I want it. God's way is going to take too long. It's too frustrating. So we get tempted by outside sources and our own hearts to get cut off from God. Now we're away from the flock. We're vulnerable. We're helpless. We're alone. We've been cut off from the source.

So the first thing we need to do is to reconnect. When we begin to go to God and look for His grace and the fact that He's for us and He's on your side and He's not condemning you and you need Him and you want His love and His guidance and His structure, good things start to happen.

2) This sounds so simple. It's so hard but it's so true: FLEE. Flee the temptation. Get out of Dodge! The temptation is bigger and stronger than you are. Flee. Go away. 2 Timothy 2:22 says, "*Flee the evil desires of youth.*" I know people in their eighties that are still fleeing the youthful desires of their youth. It's matter of perspective. We have a weakness, and that's where temptation is going to get us. So run when you're weak. Run to God.

I love the business world because they're realistic about this. The credit card counseling companies – 1-800-GET OUT OF DEBT or whatever. The people bring their credit cards to the counselor. You put the cards on the desk and the counselor cuts them up. He doesn't say, "Here's a few more. Resist them." He cuts them up in front of you and you get depressed and you have to have Prozac! You go through a deep grieving process of being without your credit cards. That's a good thing. Flee.

3) We restore the soul. Temptation is diagnostic. The particular temptation that you're struggling with – immorality, drugs, food, shopping, whatever it is – your temptation is a diagnosis of an area that God wants you to heal in. A particular and specific arena that you're weak in, that you're failing in and that you've got injuries in. God wants to bring you out of that. He's screaming at us through the temptation,

“This is where I want to work with you. This is where I want to help you.” For everybody it’s a different issue. Different temptations mean different things about our character and our soul that need to be restored.

For example: somebody who has a substance problem – drugs or alcohol. They may have an emptiness inside where there’s no love. They can’t receive love, they can’t feel love, they can’t feel the presence of love from God or other people. The substances medicate that. God says, “You’re tempted in that area because you have an empty heart. I want to fill that up.”

Or people with a food problem may feel powerless. They don’t feel like they have any choices. They feel controlled by everybody else, overwhelmed, with no freedom. They can’t say no to anything because they don’t have permission to. But they do have some control over the food. You’re going to be tempted here until you have some sense of your own power. Your own choices. God is saying, “I want to empower you in this.”

Or people with an anger management-rage problem. God may be saying to that person, “You need to learn what vulnerability is. You need to learn how to experience your helplessness. You need to let other people disagree with you without getting offended. You need to realize you can’t control other people to do things your way.”

These are areas of inability. You try and try and try and you fail. Then there are areas that God marks as areas of resistance. Sometimes we are unable. And sometimes we kind of shake our fist at God and say, “I want this.” That’s not a psychological brokenness issue. That’s just rebellion. We’ve got that too. We need to ask God to restore our souls.

4) God says use people Use people to help you with the temptation. You can’t overcome temptation without people in your life. It’s very difficult because often it’s an area we’re embarrassed about and don’t want to admit to somebody. You’ve got to pick your people well. James 5:16 says “*Confess your sins to each other that you may be healed.*” Healed, cured, restored. You’re going to need people, the right kind of people, to help you with the temptation because it’s going to hit.

We need two structures of people. First is your regular friendships, a study group or best friend. People you meet with regularly where you talk about God and you can open your heart up about marriage, career, life. We also need on-call friends. Second is people we can call at 3 am when we don’t like ourselves very much, when life is hard, when we are face to face with our own failures. With on-call friends there is no condemnation, it brings back to you the grace of God. Where’s your regular support?

The idea is: They are Jesus with skin on, ready to talk to you about your temptation. If you fall and can’t get up, they are there for you. Condemnation and judgment are gone. There’s no place for them. Jesus who wants to give you grace. They know that’s what you need.

That’s what works. That’s how God does it. He gives us Himself, He tells us to flee where we’re weak, He tells us to start getting into restoration of whatever we’re dealing with and He brings peace. Those are the magic keys. You’re going to be tempted all the rest of your days. Especially if you’re trying to do some good things. Trying to live God and follow Him. You’re going to be tempted. It’s a sign of life.

Prayer: Father, You have not left us alone in the dark places of our heart where we are the most fragile we ask that we can feel You, we can experience You and we can know You and that You will lead us in all the right ways. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.