

Death to Temptation

Temptation is an enticement to sin with a false promise of reward. (See Gen. 3:4,5). But because temptation actually seeks to destroy us, Jesus teaches us that we must destroy it. We all know how powerful temptation can be, but we often forget how destructive it is. In Vol. VI of “The Works of John Owen”, he taught that falling into temptation defiles our consciences, disquiets our peace, weakens our obedience, and clouds our vision of God. Ultimately, as Jesus teaches in this text, falling into temptation can lead to hell itself.

Mark 9:42-50

⁴² “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ ⁴⁹ For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

1. We must kill temptation communally. (9:42)

Jesus begins with our communal obligation, our responsibility to His “little ones.” We are all responsible for guarding our entire fellowship and protecting them from falling into various temptations. This is a huge job!

Notice the sense of urgency that Jesus attaches to this duty! (Note the parallel idea in Mt. 5:19)

2. We must kill temptation personally. (9:43-48)

To kill temptation, we must deal effectively with three adversaries: Satan, the world order, and our fallen nature (“the flesh”). We can see in James 1:14,15 how these adversaries interact: Satan’s scheme is to wed our lusts with the allurements of this world, giving birth to sin and death. The ultimate conclusion of sin’s work is eternal damnation. (cf. I Cor. 6:9-11) Not a pretty sight. Jesus’ methodology is obviously a radical one of cutting things out of our lives, which will be painful to us in the short run, but a great blessing to us and others in the long run. Here’s how we fight the battle:

A. We must learn to stand against the devil. (Cf. I Peter 5:8,9; Ephesians 10-18)

Note how Jesus resisted him by the Word of God in the wilderness, and notice that Jesus didn’t flee Satan. Satan fled Jesus. So it is with us, when we deploy the Sword of the Spirit.

B. We must learn to flee the temptations of this world. (Cf. I Corinthians 10:13,14)

Compare David’s experience in II Samuel 11 with Joseph’s in Gen. 39.

C. We must learn to subdue the flesh. “In our flesh there is no good thing,” say the Scriptures, so we fight our flesh by:

1. contemplating Christ’s love for us at the cross
2. asking the Spirit to help us
3. keeping company with the saints who encourage us

3. We must kill temptation continually. (9:49,50)

There is a scholarly debate about exactly what Jesus means here, but probably He is teaching us that everyone is going to be “salted” with difficulties (“fire”), but that, for the believer, the fire we face (our persecutions) enables us to live a “salty lifestyle” that eventually blesses us and others. The key for us, then, is to continue to be spiritual salt, which comes from decisively, radically, and sacrificially resisting temptation.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some ways in which we can more effectively fight temptation communally?
2. If sin is so destructive, why is it so alluring?
3. What methods have helped you the most in resisting destructive temptations?
4. How does the biblical view of dealing with temptation differ from the views of your non-Christian friends?
5. How do our successes in resisting temptation make us more useful to other believers?

Going Deeper

1. Of the methods of fighting temptation in this lesson, which are most important to your life right now?
2. Write out strategies for dealing with the two temptations that are most difficult for you to manage.