



What Is The Difference Between Temptation And Sin?

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What is the difference between temptation and sin? There are many who experience guilt over the fact that they have been tempted – even when they have not done anything to violate the will of God. Furthermore, if temptation is the same as sin, there is no use resisting temptation. So, does the Bible make any kind of distinction between a temptation and a sin? Let's investigate.

The “Process” Of Sin

We can learn a great deal about temptation and sin from James 1:12-15. Let's take a few moments to consider this passage – and then we will explore some differences between temptation and sin more thoroughly. James says, “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one 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.”

First, James says that the man who “endures temptation” is blessed and will receive the crown of life that has been promised by the Lord. So, it is possible to be tempted but still have God's approval. This is certainly not the case with sin. For instance, later in the passage, James plainly states that “death” is the end result of sin – not a crown of life! Therefore, James is making a clear distinction between temptation and sin.

Second, James says that temptation is not the result of God's work. “I am tempted by God” is a statement that no person can accurately make. This is because God is entirely holy (separated from everything that is evil). He cannot be tempted by evil – and He cannot tempt others to do what is evil. James 1:16-17 demonstrates that every good and perfect gift is from God. Rather than God, it is Satan who is responsible for temptation (more on Satan later).

Third, James says that temptation occurs whenever an individual is drawn away by his/her own desires and enticed. Satan uses your own physical desires to try to lure you away from God. He presents you with opportunities to please your own physical desires – and violate God’s laws. It is at this point when you are enticed by the opportunity to violate God’s laws that you are tempted. “Temptation” (by definition) is a trial/test between doing what is right and doing what is wrong. During a temptation, you are enticed to do wrong.

Fourth, James says that sin is the result whenever the desire conceives. A desire “conceives” when you choose to satisfy your desire rather than being obedient to God. This is sin. It is the violation of God’s law. Thus, in order for sin to occur, you must put a physical desire above being obedient to God’s commandments.

Fifth, James says that the end result of sin is that it “brings forth death.” This is spiritual death. Spiritual death is a separation from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). It happens at the moment you choose to commit sin. Then, if an individual dies in sin, he/she will be eternally separated from God by being sentenced to eternity in Hell fire (the second death, Revelation 21:8).

This is a brief overview of the “process” of sin. Already you can plainly observe that temptation and sin are not the same. Temptation can be overcome and the individual can have spiritual life. However, sin results in spiritual death. Now, having these fundamental truths in our minds, let’s go a little deeper to understand these differences.

Temptation Is The Enticement To Do Wrong

Temptation is the tool the devil (Satan) uses to try to lure you away from God. Matthew 4:3 says that the “tempter” came to Jesus. Clearly, the one who accomplished these temptations was identified as being Satan (see Matthew 4:5, 8, 10). And, when you read this passage, you discover that Satan was doing exactly what James described regarding temptation. He was appealing to Jesus’ physical desires in order to entice Him. On this occasion, he presented Jesus with three opportunities to do wrong.

We will come back to Matthew 4 and the temptations of Jesus a bit later. For now, let’s continue to see how the Bible presents temptation – by looking at some examples of temptation. First, consider the first temptation we can read about in the Bible. In Genesis 3, Satan (who took the form of a serpent on this occasion) went to Eve and tried to entice her in a physical desire. God had commanded her (as well as Adam) not to eat of or touch the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He promised that they would die in the day they ate of it. Yet, the devil said, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4-5). At this point, Eve was presented with the opportunity to do wrong and was enticed by her physical desire. She saw that the tree was “good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make her wise” (Genesis 3:6).

Second, in Genesis 4, Cain and Abel both made sacrifices to God. However, God only respected the offering that was made by Abel. This made Cain angry. Then, consider what God told Cain in verse 7. “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” He was tempted. Sin was “at the door.” He hadn’t yet committed sin. But, he had been presented with the opportunity.

Third, Genesis 39 records the story of Joseph during his time as head of Potiphar’s house. At this time, Potiphar’s wife desired to convince Joseph to commit adultery with her. She tried to entice Joseph, saying, “Lie with me” (verse 7). Verse 10 says, “So it was, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he did not heed her, to lie with her or to be with her.” Joseph was presented with the opportunity to do wrong on a daily basis. At one point, she even grabbed Joseph’s garment, saying, “Lie with me” (verse 12).

While there are many other examples we could consider regarding temptation, these three examples from the book of Genesis are sufficient to help us understand the nature of temptation. One of the things you should be impressed with at this point in our study is the fact that temptation can be resisted! Go back and consider each one of these three examples. None of them were put into a position in which they could not choose to do what was right. They were simply being lured into doing what was wrong when Satan appealed to them through their physical desires.

The Scriptures are clear that it is possible to resist temptation. Recall that James 1:12 referenced the one who “endures temptation.” Later, James 4:7 instructs, “Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Regarding the desires (particularly in young men) to commit sexual sins, Paul instructed Timothy to “Fee...youthful lusts” (2 Timothy 2:22).

And, 1 Corinthians 10:13 makes it abundantly clear that God provides a way of escape (a way to do what is right) to be victorious over every temptation. “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 of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

Temptation is very clearly not the same as sin! If temptation was equal to sin, it would not matter whether you found the way of escape. You would already be guilty of sin and deserve spiritual death. Furthermore, if temptation was equal to sin, Jesus sinned! Recall (from Matthew 4:1-11) that the Scriptures record three temptations of Jesus. Yet, He did not allow His desires to conceive! Instead, He chose to do the will of God. In fact, this is how Jesus *always* responded to temptation. Therefore, Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was “in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Jesus was tempted. But, Jesus did not sin!

Sin Is Actually Doing Wrong

Temptation results in an internal struggle between good and evil. Paul describes this conflict in Romans 7:21-25. “I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to

do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.”

In Galatians 5:17, Paul said, “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.” Every person who has ever reached an age of moral accountability has experienced this conflict – and has lost at least one of these battles. Romans 3:23 says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The temptation presented the opportunity to commit sin. Yet, it is whenever an individual gives in to the temptation and violates God’s law, he/she actually commits sin.

This is because sin (by Biblical definition) is acting against or contrary to God’s law. For instance, 1 John 3:4 says, “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.” 1 John 5:17 says, “All unrighteousness is sin.” And, James 4:17 says, “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.”

Now, briefly consider the three examples we studied from Genesis again. Eve was tempted to take of the forbidden fruit. Yet, she had not committed sin until “she took of its fruit and ate” (Genesis 3:6). Cain was told that sin was at the door and desired him – but that he needed to rule over it. Yet, when Cain “rose up against Abel his brother and killed him,” he committed sin (Genesis 4:8). Finally, Joseph was tempted to commit adultery with Potiphar’s wife. Yet, Joseph asked, “How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” – and fled from her when she took hold of his garment (Genesis 39:9, 12). Therefore, even though Joseph was tempted on this occasion, he did not commit sin.

Conclusion

The Bible makes a clear distinction between temptation and sin. Temptation is the enticement to do evil. Sin is actually doing the evil. Therefore, you must be diligent in overcoming Satan’s temptations by finding and taking the way of escape God provides! If you do not, you too will experience spiritual death.

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