

Equipped to respond well to temptation (part one)

Have you ever watched a performance of “*Lady Windermere’s Fan*” by Oscar Wilde? This comedy of manners, written towards the end of the 19th century, is full of quotable quotes. One of the best known, spoken by Lord Darlington to Lady Windermere, is “*I can resist everything except temptation.*” This quote has since found its way onto T-shirts, mugs and placemats, suggesting that it has struck a chord with many people. But temptation is not just something that lives on the stage or in the pages of a book about fictional characters. It is a reality that we face from day to day in its various forms. How, then, can we respond well to it?

Temptation is really a form of testing. Sometimes God tests us through trials of various kinds because He wants us to grow in character.¹ But there’s another type of testing that comes, not from God, but from the enemy of our souls, the devil. His main purpose in testing or tempting us is to entice us into sin. He knows how damaging sin is to our fellowship with God and how crippling it can be in our relationships with others. So, while God’s plans in testing us are always good, the devil’s plans are always evil.

I find it a great comfort and encouragement to read in the Bible that Jesus understands what it’s like to be tempted.² This verse tells us that He experienced *every* kind of temptation that assaults us - no exceptions! But the wonderful thing about this is that He never sinned by giving in to any of these temptations. Matthew 4:1-11 gives us some information about three specific ways that the devil tempted Him.

The first recorded temptation was to meet an acceptable need - hunger - in an unacceptable way - by selfishly misusing His divine power. Can you think of any “hungers” in your own life that you’re tempted to satisfy in a wrong way? Perhaps you’re hungering for good exam grades at school and you’ve come up against the temptation to cheat; or you have a hunger for promotion at work and you’re tempted to tell lies to get there; maybe it’s a sexual hunger that you want to satisfy in a way that cuts across God’s guidelines for living. Being tempted isn’t sinful - giving in to the temptation is.

The second recorded temptation was for Jesus to stretch the boundaries of His Father’s protection. Notice the devil misquoted Psalm 91:11-12 by missing out “*in all your ways*” because he knew Jesus’ main focus was to bring all His ways into line with His Father’s will. As long as Jesus remained in that will, He would experience the Father’s protection. Are there areas in your life where you’re knowingly living outside the perfect will of your heavenly Father? Are you tempted to take bits of verses, out of context, and base your lifestyle on that? We can’t assume that we can live however we like and still expect God to protect us.

The third recorded temptation of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel was for Him to have gain without pain - to achieve a kingdom, without having to suffer - by worshipping someone other than the Lord God. Notice that, in His reply, Jesus marries together worship and service. We will end up serving whoever or whatever we worship. That person or thing will become our master. Can you relate? Perhaps you’re thinking you can get a short-cut to happiness, fulfillment or power by worshipping and serving someone or something other than God. If so, allow Jesus’ reply to transform your thinking by bringing it into line with His.

Jesus responded well to the devil’s temptations. How did He do it? By drawing on his supernatural powers? No, He used the same defences that are available to us - the word of God³ and the power of the Holy Spirit⁴. Jesus also prayed a lot. I wonder if one of the things He regularly asked His heavenly Father for was the power to resist temptation. I suspect it was. Let this encourage and strengthen us to respond well to temptation.

¹ James 1:3, 4

² Hebrews 4:15

³ Matthew 4:4,7, 10

⁴ Matthew 4:1