

# the sixth step

Continue to resist temptation, looking to God for his strength, wisdom and discernment

## what is temptation?

Temptation is *the invitation to sin* - it is not (of itself) sin. For example, Jesus was tempted by Satan when he was fasting in the desert (Luke 4:1-13) but did not sin - he *resisted* temptation. Temptation is always an appeal to consider doing or thinking something which is contrary to God's will for us. It is an appeal - in whatever form and from whatever source - to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. It invites us to put *self* before God.

Temptation is universal - everyone gets tempted, but it is what we do with temptation that's important. Generally speaking, people only resist temptation when the potential consequences (which may, or may not, include a 'bad conscience') outweigh any advantages they see in yielding to their desires. A simple example: Many people would like more money, and quite a few of them wouldn't care too much if they came by it dishonestly. Yet bank-robbers are not at all common, partly because the possibility of ten years imprisonment usually overrides the attraction of easy money. When the expectation of pleasure or gain outweighs any concern for consequences, people tend to yield to temptation. Oscar Wilde, who famously said "I can resist anything but temptation", gave us an example of this. He proved his point by spending some time in Reading gaol, after indulging in illegal activities.

For the Christian, the stakes are even higher. Temptation is an invitation to damage our relationship with God. Sin, from the very first, has separated people from their heavenly Father. Jesus went to the cross to end that separation - giving his life in payment for our sins - so that we could enjoy the eternal relationship we were always meant to have. We want that relationship to reach its full potential, so we will be looking at practical, achievable ways of dealing with temptation. Successfully dealing with temptation is the key to avoiding sin *and* its consequences. Sin is our enemy - however attractive it may appear - and we need to treat it as such. So let's start by 'getting to know our enemy' - let's look at what sin actually is.

## defining sin

There are numerous definitions of sin. Some come directly from the bible, whilst others are attempts at summarising the whole scriptural perspective of it. The consideration of a few of these concepts (and the thoughts behind them) will give us a good overview of 'our enemy':

### ***Among the definitions of sin are...***

- ***Rebellion against God*** - *To sin is to defy God. It is to oppose his standards - whether those standards are known directly through relationship with him, or indirectly through the conscience he has provided.*

***Idolatry*** - *At the heart of sin is the elevation of 'self' to the position in people's lives that God should occupy. Sin is essentially 'self-worship', where everything, including God, is secondary to a person's lusts, desires and ambitions.*

- ***Sin is anything that Jesus wouldn't do.*** *A good rule of thumb, as far as it goes. If we can't picture Jesus doing it, we shouldn't be doing it either.*

*Temptation, however, begins in the mind - and so does sin. Many sins never get further than the mind - they are sinful thoughts - but it is sin nonetheless. Jesus addressed just one aspect of sinful thought in the Sermon on the Mount. when he said: "You have heard it said, 'Do not commit adultery'. But I tell you that anyone that looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart". (Matthew 5:27-28) Sin is not just 'anything that Jesus wouldn't do', it is also 'anything that Jesus wouldn't think'.*

Sin is rebellion, self-worship and anything Jesus wouldn't do or think. There are other ways of defining sin, but they generally point to one (or more) of these aspects. Sinfulness is also the human condition, people are - quite literally - inherently sinful, because we have inherited **the sinful nature**. This has been the case since people first yielded to temptation, and though Jesus has made it possible for us to be restored to God - we still must deal with that sinful nature. We need to be blameless before our Holy God if we are to enjoy the full fruit of that relationship, now and forever.

The Apostle Paul talked about putting 'to death the misdeeds of the body' and 'crucifying the flesh'. He wrote, *"the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."* (Romans 8:7-8) In the preceding chapter, Paul spoke frankly about his own struggle with the sinful nature. His conflict was the same one we face - his heart was set on God, but his sinful nature demanded that he lived only to satisfy selfish desires. He almost seemed to despair of this situation - *"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* (Romans 7:24) But Paul was a man who knew the answer to that question. He continued - *"Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*

If the business of overcoming sin sounds quite daunting, we should be encouraged by those words of Paul. He knew that when the problem is sin, the solution is God. We will see later exactly how that works in practice - but for now, we need only remember that we have a loving God who, above all, wants us to succeed...and succeed we will, because God himself will provide the power we need to live as we should. It is the usual transaction, with which we should all be familiar by now. Our input is willingness and application - we "do our best, and God will do the rest" This is always the equation for successful Christian living - we do what we can, and God will bless our efforts out of all proportion. But we *have* to do *all* of our little bit...

### more about sin

God's law is not like the law of this country, or any country. God doesn't have different categories of law-breaking and sin. There is not a scale of punishment which goes up or down depending on the offence. Sin against God (and in reality, *all* sin is against God) always attracts the same penalty, whatever form it takes - "the wages of sin is death". Nobody need be in any doubt about what to expect from rebellion against their creator - it has one universally applied tariff, which is clearly stated in the bible. Equally clear, though, is the fact that "the gift of God is eternal life". Every sin that is repented of in the name of Christ will be forgiven. There is, however, one unforgivable sin. I mention it only because people sometimes wonder if they have committed it. The answer is always no - they haven't committed the unforgivable sin. If they had, they wouldn't wonder, they would know. They would know because they would have blasphemed (spoken evil about) the Holy Spirit of God, who is life itself to the Christian. They would presumably remember doing something as wicked and foolish as that. They would also be likely to notice the fact that they were not in a relationship with God. Jesus mentions "blaspheming the Holy Spirit" in Matthew 12, perhaps as warning to the Pharisees - who were accusing him of using the power of Satan. The good news from that encounter is that it prompted Jesus to declare (verse 30) that *every other sin*

and blasphemy *will* be forgiven (verse 30).

### the biblical view

The bible gives us many lists of sins. We will look at just one of them - here, Jesus was explaining that sin is a problem of the heart. He says this: "*For from within, out of men's hearts, comes evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.*" (Mark 7:21-22)

These things, like those on other lists, clearly fit in with our definitions of sin. They are all manifestations of rebellion against God; they are all idolatry of 'self', because selfish desires and actions have become more important than God, and Jesus would not do - or think - any of them. Sometimes, though, sin can be quite *subtle* - and we need to be able to identify such sin, because it is just as damaging to our relationship with God. Take *arrogance* (pride) for example. Often, it is easy to spot - though if we spot it in other people, we should be careful not to 'judge' them, as that would also be sin! Boasting and bragging are obvious enough, but what about smug self-satisfaction? A trap that some Christians fall into is pride in their ministry. Some even get to the point where ministry almost becomes an idol - they spend all their time on it, neglecting the God who gave it to them in the first place. But God gives us the privilege of service, and also the gifts, talents and abilities to carry it out. Everything we have - and everything we are - comes from him, so we have nothing to be arrogant about.

*Murder* may be something we would never do, but in Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus tells us that God will judge the murderer *and* the person who is angry with his brother. Murder and anger are just different manifestations of the same sin - hate and judgement of another human being. *Deceit*, too, has various forms, ranging from outright lying to creating a false impression by not giving all the facts. However subtle, it is still deceit - it is still deliberately misleading someone.

There are subtle shades of every sin, just as there are subtle shades of temptation. Sometimes, though, sin is anything *but* subtle. It can rage out of control, even in the lives of people who have put their faith in Christ. This happens because sin is often *addictive*. It can take over a person's life to the extent that it seems to be part of their personality. Habitual bad-temper, habitual gossiping, greed and judgmental attitudes are among the many manifestations of addictive sin. There are, too, more obvious forms, where a person is addicted to mood altering chemicals - for example, alcohol and heroin. Such problems are rightly diagnosed as medical conditions, but they are also problems that can be successfully addressed within a relationship with God. In fact, there are some who believe that these addictions can *only* be broken when there is spiritual change.

Sin, in whatever form it takes, is *avoidable*. We have a good overall picture of what it is and the damage it does, but now we need to know how to prevent it happening. We will also need to deal with any persistent or addictive sin - if we have such a problem. Our success at prevention and 'cure' depends on what we do about *temptation*. If we deal with it decisively, we will not be hampered by sin as we go forward with God.

### resisting temptation - the key to defeating sin

Sin never happens by itself - it is the outcome of a *decision*. The decision to yield to temptation (consciously *or* subconsciously taken) *is* the cause of sinful actions. This process is described for us in the book of James: "...*but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.*" (James 1:14-15) The relationship

between temptation and sin couldn't be clearer. If we overcome the one, we will not suffer the consequences of the other. But let's first see if we *can* overcome temptations - perhaps there are some that are just too strong for us... - *"No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."* (1Corinthians 10:13)

No temptation is 'irresistible', even if it might seem so at the time. We have the word of God on that. Furthermore, he promises to provide *a way out* when we are tempted. Our primary defence against temptation is our relationship with *him*. The ability (and desire) to resist depends largely on maintaining our walk with our creator. He is our **strength**.

### the power of relationship

The closer we walk with God, the easier we will find it to resist temptation. It's really a simple equation: The more we value something, the less inclined we will be to separate ourselves from it. As we increasingly become people of prayer and worship, we find that many temptations lose their appeal. We want, above all, to experience God in our lives, and the fleeting pleasures of sin seem less attractive when compared with all he has for us. Prayer and worship - the building blocks of our relationship - serve as our first line of defence against sin. Jesus himself told his first disciples to *"Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."* (Luke 22:46)

If prayer and worship give us general protection, they are also powerful weapons against *specific* temptations. Our God wants us to succeed, and we can bring temptations to him in prayer - confident that he will provide "a way out" .... if we really want it. Often, that "way out" may be through worship - it's difficult to contemplate sin *and* be in God's presence at the same time!

The bible also has a role to play - Christ himself used scripture to deal with temptation. Aside from telling us about God's nature, his requirements of us, and our rights as his children - the bible identifies all the main manifestations of sin and temptation. We can use it to remind ourselves of God's perspective of sin, his standards and his promises to those who are faithful.

### "Live by the Spirit"

Our relationship with God gives us **strength** to resist temptation, and it is underpinned by prayer, worship and knowledge of the bible. But a vital part of that relationship - and of our ability to overcome the sinful nature - is the Holy Spirit, who dwells within every Christian. As the bible says, *"Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."* (Galatians 5:16.)

That fifth chapter of Galatians goes on to describe the "acts of the sinful nature", and their consequences. It contrasts these with the Christlike qualities of those who live according to the Spirit - the "fruit of the Spirit". To "live by the Spirit" is simply to follow his leading - to submit our will to his. It is to let him direct the course of our lives, secure in the knowledge that he is transforming us into the people we want - and need - to be.

Among the many things the Holy Spirit provides for us is **wisdom** and **discernment**, particularly over matters of temptation and sin. As we have already considered, not every sin is as obvious as murder or adultery, and the Spirit will help us identify the more subtle temptations. *"The heart is deceitful above all things"*, (Jeremiah 17:9), - *but we don't have to rely on our hearts, we have the Spirit to lead us.*

## playing our part

We have the Spirit to lead us, but we need to allow him - and invite him - to do it. We also have a part to play, though, in resisting temptation and defeating sin. It is time to consider *our* small contribution to this process - our modest but essential input into the victory God has for us. Let's look at one of things we can do: If we are persistently being tempted - or even if we have a sin with which we struggle - we can *tell another Christian*. What does that achieve? Actually, it achieves rather a lot. Sharing our problem with a mature Christian gives us these advantages:

1. We have someone to support us in prayer
2. We may benefit from their advice/counselling.
3. We have someone to encourage us as we tackle the problem
4. Sin does not thrive 'in the light' - it thrives in 'secrecy'.

We are halfway there when we 'confess' a problem - it means we are serious about resolving it. Of course, we may find it embarrassing - some sins are - so we need to seek God's leading about *who* to share such matters with. But whatever the temptation, we can take consolation in the fact that it isn't unique to us - "*No temptation has seized you except that which is common to man*" (1 Corinthians 10:13a). Also, sin is never really secret anyway. God *always* knows. That is something else we can do - remind ourselves of this fact. Whatever we do (or think) we do it in front of God...always.

## don't even think about it...a simple and effective strategy

Sharing our problems with another Christian can be very beneficial, but let's now turn to our **primary** contribution to resisting temptation. If we get this right, we will not often have a problem to share - and we won't be forever seeking God's forgiveness for habitual sin. Our primary contribution in resisting temptation is simply this: **We refuse to entertain it!**

Temptation (of itself) is seldom very powerful, at least to begin with - "*he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.*" (1 Corinthians 10:13b) The trouble is, *any* temptation can overcome *any* person - if they entertain it. **The power of temptation increases in direct proportion to a person's willingness to consider it.** People who give thought to indulging in sin will find it increasingly irresistible. Not only that, but - much sooner rather than later - they will have committed the sin in their hearts, anyway. They *struggle* against temptation, they *reason* with themselves...and they *fail*.

They fail because they allow the thought to take root. They consider it, they dwell on it - they entertain it... and having given it houseroom, having nurtured it until it's become far bigger and stronger, they then try to resist it, and find that they can't. In all probability, they have already crossed the line into sin well before they physically act on the temptation.

So, what's the problem? The problem is often (strangely enough) that they are in a struggle *at all*. Temptation needs to be dealt with when it first arrives - to be strangled at birth, not struggled with. Otherwise, it can quickly grow into a monster. *People who struggle with temptation generally do so because they still consider the sin to be an option.* One of the best defences against the desires of the sinful nature is a categoric refusal to even think about them. It is that simple. Whatever we are tempted to do, we need to be saying to ourselves **"That is not an option"**

"That is not an option". We refuse to even consider the sin. We don't dwell on it, we don't

imagine how pleasurable it might be - *we don't even think about how difficult it is to resist!* We rule it out immediately. We dismiss the thought any and every time it comes to us - it is *not* an option. A little self-discipline applied straight away is much easier than a protracted struggle. It is much more effective, too, as the longer we struggle the harder it becomes to avoid sin.

Sometimes, Christians are painfully aware of an habitual temptation in their lives - a specific area of personal weakness that just doesn't seem to go away. Our "that is not an option" technique is ideal in such circumstances, but there is even more that can be done to make resisting a particular sin a lot easier than it otherwise would be. The temptation can be dealt with, to some extent, *in advance*.

### the "covenant" - preparing our defences in advance

A covenant is just a technical term for a binding agreement. Ancient Israel was in a covenant relationship with God and, more recently, we have each entered into a similar relationship - Christianity is often referred to as "The New Covenant". Here, though, we are going to look at a less formal use of the expression, which appears in Job - "*I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl.*" (Job 31:1) Job, that great man of faith, took the "not an option" method a stage further. He ruled out a problem *before* it occurred. We don't know if Job had a recurring issue with lust - or whether he just wanted to make sure it never became an issue - but his remedy was something we can all use in areas of potential difficulty. His "covenant" was with his eyes, but we can make ours with God himself, if we have a similar area in our own lives. In effect, we can take a stand against a particular temptation before it is upon us again - by declaring to our heavenly Father our determination to reject it, and asking for his help to make our commitment into a reality. By doing this, when temptation comes we are already prepared - we have **already** established *in our hearts* and *before God* that it is "not an option".

Finally, on the subject of what we can do to resist temptation, we can use our common sense. We can avoid situations where temptation is likely to occur. So, for example, if we have a problem with alcohol, we don't sit around in bars; if it is pornography, we don't flick through the television channels which show pornography - if it is gossip, we don't listen to it from others. Let's sum up this session...

#### Putting it all together

**1. Temptation is an invitation to sin - to put 'self' before God.** It is an appeal to gratify the desires of the sinful nature, at the expense of our relationship with our heavenly Father.

**2. Sin is rebellion against God.** It is also idolatry, and anything that Jesus wouldn't do...or think. Sin separates people from God, and unrepented sin makes separation permanent. Through Christ's sacrifice, God has paid the price himself for our sins - through the Spirit and the Word, he has provided us with practical means to avoid returning to the sinful lifestyle.

**3. No temptation need be too strong for us.** "He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." If we resist temptation, we will not be troubled by sin - or its consequences. Our primary defence is an on-going, deepening relationship with God, characterised by prayer, worship and bible-study. In that relationship, God is our strength. We have the Holy Spirit, who provides leading, wisdom and discernment - so vital, particularly when we are dealing with subtle temptations. The bible is very clear on the power of the Spirit to help us - "Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." (Galatians 5:16)

**4. We have a part to play.** Aside from everything God directly provides for us within our relationship with him, there are practical steps we can take to overcome temptation and sin:

We can seek support, encouragement and prayer from a trusted Christian brother or sister; we can use the “not an option” method to strangle temptation at birth - remembering that temptation grows in power in direct proportion to our willingness to consider it - and we can address problem areas in advance, by making such issues the subject of a “covenant” between ourselves and God. We should also do our best to avoid risky situations where temptation is likely to occur.

As in every other area of our Christian walk, God has provided everything we need for success. He wants us to enjoy the life he has for us, and that doesn't include being defeated by temptation and sin. Perhaps we have already dealt with one temptation today - the temptation to believe that resisting sin is too difficult, too demanding. To believe that is to think we have to do it on our own, when in reality our input is almost token. Our heavenly Father, who is both Almighty *and* passionate about his children, wants us to overcome....and we will, in his strength.

For this session there are *two* prayers of commitment for those who want to act upon the ideas we have been considering. The first is general, being a commitment to apply our principles to temptation and sin. The second is a “covenant” prayer for Christians who know they have specific problem areas.:

#### A prayer of commitment

Heavenly Father,

I thank you that Jesus went to the cross to pay the price of my sins. I want to have the quality of relationship with you that his sacrifice made possible. I commit myself today to resisting temptation, and avoiding the sin that would damage that precious relationship. I thank you for your provision which will enable me to do this - your Holy Spirit, your Word, and the support of other Christians. I thank you for your strength, wisdom and discernment that will give me the victory, and I commit myself to doing my part - refusing to consider temptations, and avoiding situations I know to be potentially dangerous.

In the name of Jesus...Amen

Those of us who know we have a particular ‘weakness’ - something which is a recurring problem - may like to use the following prayer, if we are ready to deal with the situation. But we can all spend a few moments in silent prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to draw our thoughts to anything we might need to bring into a covenant prayer...

#### A prayer of covenant

Heavenly Father,

I come before you now to renounce and reject... I am sorry that I have let this become a problem, and that I have allowed it to come between us. From now on,.. has no part in my life. I agree with you that it is wrong, and I commit myself - in your presence - to live without it. I will no longer entertain the temptation or commit the sin. From now on, I will make full use of your provision and strength, and will add to that all of my resources, so that this problem never defeats me again. I thank you for your grace, love and mercy,

In Jesus' name... Amen

The sixth step says we will:

**Continue to resist temptation, looking to God for His strength, wisdom and discernment**

As we do that, we will draw increasingly close to Father God - and more fully enjoy the life he has for us. There may well come a time when we look back and wonder what we ever saw in some of the sins that once seemed so attractive!

**comments and questions for the group meeting**

**the journal...continued**

**Morning Prayer**

Before doing anything else, a short time of prayer containing the following elements: Thanks to God for who He is, what Jesus has done, and for His love and provision (including the new day). Commit the day to Him, asking for His protection and presence.

**Through the day**

Involve God in your daily life, seeking His guidance in situations as they arise, and endeavour to respond to people as you believe Jesus would.

**In the evening**

Set aside a little time, every evening, to pray, complete your journal and consider the readings. Prayer should include thanksgiving, repentance, prayer for others and for yourself - particularly that God's perfect will should be completely fulfilled in your life. Pray for each member of your group (by name). Matters arising through the day, personal situations or difficulties should also be brought before God. Invite the Holy Spirit to guide you in your prayers, and be open to His leading.

## Day One

### The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

### You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

### Bible Reading - Luke 4:1-13

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

**Something to think about...** *Temptation is always an appeal to consider doing or thinking something which is contrary to God's will for us. It is an appeal - in whatever form and from whatever source - to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. It is an invitation to damage our relationship with God.*

## Day Two

### The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

### You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

### Bible Reading - James 1:13 - 15

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

**Something to think about...***Sin is anything that Jesus wouldn't do...or think!*

## Day Three

### The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

### You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

### Bible Reading - 1 Corinthians 10:13

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

**Something to think about...***If we resist temptation, we will not be troubled by sin - or its consequences. Our primary defence is an on-going, deepening relationship with God.*

## Day Four

### The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

### You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

### Bible Reading - Romans 8:1-17

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

**Something to think about...** *Temptation needs to be dealt with when it first arrives - to be strangled at birth, not struggled with. Otherwise, it can quickly grow into a monster. People who struggle with temptation generally do so because they still consider the sin to be an option.*

## Day Five

### The Main Event

What event during the day stands out in your mind, and why?

What do you think/feel about that 'event'?

Were you able to involve God in what was happening?

How did your relationship with God affect your reaction to this event?

Did you respond as you think Jesus would have, in a similar situation?

Is there anything, on reflection, you might have done differently?

### You and God

Have you spoken to God at times through the day?

Have you been aware of His presence with you?

In what way has being a Christian made a difference to your day?

### Bible Reading - Galatians 5:16-26

What do you think/feel when you read these words?

Something to think about...*We can address known problem areas in advance, by making such issues the subject of a "covenant" between ourselves and God. That way, temptation can't take root - because it won't ever be considered. It is met with the automatic 'no' response which has already been prepared for its arrival!*

## Day Six - The weekly review

In your relationship with God, what has been the highlight of the week?

What have you found most challenging or difficult?

Have you been aware of God's care for you this week?

Has God intervened in your life - answers to prayer etc.?

Have you been able to pray consistently throughout the week?

Can you think of any areas in your relationship with God that could be improved and, if so, how are you going to tackle them?

In times of trouble or temptation, how easy is it for you to seek the help of

a) God

b) other Christians?

What has been the most encouraging aspect of this past week?

*The 'weekly review' is intended to bring our relationship with God into focus, and perhaps give us a little encouragement. Though it is for 'our eyes only', we can share aspects of it in the group - if we feel it might be beneficial to ourselves or others.*

### PREPARATION FOR THE SEVENTH SESSION

Please prepare for the seventh session by *prayerfully* reading the next chapter, noting down any comments or questions that you'd like to bring up in the group