

Dealing With Temptation in 2016

I think this is the most difficult message in this series. It's about things none of us really want to deal with but we can't be silent because our society is obsessed with these things.

On January 1, 2000 a *Newsweek* article caught people's attention. It said, "In the next century you're going to have better sex than you've ever had before." It went on, "You won't have a single sexual fantasy unfulfilled. But you'll have to be willing to step into the strange new world of virtual reality. All the communication technologies we've ever invented – TV, telephone, movies, the Internet have eventually been used in the service of lust. Tomorrow's technologies will be no different. Fidelity and monogamy will be completely redefined. Is it cheating if you have virtual sex with another person."

It was a complete coincidence but very appropriate that the cover of that *Newsweek* had the headline: "Good grief!"

Today I want to look at the temptations and enticements all around us as we live in a lust-saturated society. It's everywhere. It's used to sell almost everything. The media is built around it. Look at the programs – even what's called "family" programming. We're all constantly taking in faulty, harmful, inaccurate ideas. We live in a pleasure-obsessed, greed-saturated society where we're encouraged to satisfy our cravings – food, entertainment, sexual desire, body image, comfort or just having things the way we like. It's all about us and what we each want.

We're entrapped by our own desires, ensnared by the constant chorus of I have to do what's right for me, I've got to do things my way or I don't want to do it that way because it's not the way I like it. We don't like that attitude in others but in ourselves we only see our rights.

God wants us to think with crystal clarity about this so we can avoid the trap. To do that we have to really think clearly about temptation. In Matthew 26:41 Jesus said, "*Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!*" You can't just drift – you've got to keep alert, think ahead, be prepared, close to God in prayer, focused on God. Temptation is waiting. It's not enough to just WANT to do God's will – you have to stay alert and keep watch - prepared to act against temptation

In James 1:14-15 the Bible says, "*Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.*" It may feel like the world has gotten worse and there's more and more stuff out there to entice you, but temptation doesn't come from the outside – it's born in our own desires. You can't stop having desires, but what matters is how you deal with them when they lure you toward attitudes and actions that eventually lead to consequences that kill our spirit. The Bible tells us in 1 Thessalonians 4:4-7, "*God wants each of you to use his body in the right way by keeping it holy and by respecting it. You should not use it to please your own desires like the people who do not know God. No man should do wrong to his Christian brother in anything. The Lord will punish a person who does. I have told you this before. For God has not called us to live in sin. He has called us to live a holy life.*"

How do you do that? You do it by making four positive choices. Regardless of what happened yesterday, last week, last month or years ago. Regardless of your desires, you can get your act together by making four key, positive choices.

1. I Commit to God's Standard. God has standards and principles that guide us. Obviously our feelings, desires and sexuality are God's idea. For example, God designed people to enjoy life together in the commitment of a marriage vow - committed to each other for life and our desires in marriage can actually increase our spiritual bonding, bringing us together in not just a physical way but also in emotional and spiritual ways. Marriage is far more than just a social arrangement.

When our desires are used the way God intends it's wonderful and beneficial. But when they're not it creates more problems than anything else. I've counseled many people and let me tell you, nothing causes more problems than desires pursued outside God's standard. In God's standard our desires are directed by our commitment.

People say, "I thought God wants me to be happy." God does. And that's why God has boundaries for his children. Can you imagine if, as a parent, I had let my kids do anything they wanted. Let them get up when they wanted, go to bed when they wanted, eat whenever and whatever; play wherever they wanted. A parent who would do that should be charged with child abuse. Parents know more and better than kids. Parents who love children set boundaries - not to punish but to protect.

Well, God's your Heavenly Father. God gave you your life and God also gives limitations, principles and boundaries. If you play by the rules of life, you win. If you ignore them, you lose big time emotionally, relationally, physically, spiritually and eternally. The loss is enormous.

If you were driving down Route 30 and you decided to get off an off-ramp but by mistake you started down an on-ramp, you might see a sign that says, "Wrong Way" or "Do not enter!" How would you feel? Would you resent the sign and say, "That stupid sign! I should be able to drive wherever I want to. I can make my own decisions. I don't need any signs telling me what not to do. I'm an adult; It's my car - I can do whatever I want with my car."

It's ridiculous - the sign isn't there to punish you, it's there for your protection. Yet when God's says, "This is off limits," many people say, "What?! The audacity of God to tell me I can't do that! I'm an adult. It's my life. I can do whatever I want with it." Sure you can. God lets you do that - it's called free will. But you're putting yourself and others in danger.

When you boil it all down, the real issue is, who's smarter, God or me? Who knows more about life, God or me? Anytime we disobey God we're saying, "I know you said not to do this but I'm going to do it anyway," we're saying, "God, I may owe everything to you, but I'm not going to play by the rules you established for my own protection. I'm smarter than you. I'm going to be my own god."

You need a commitment to God's standard.

I have a fireplace in my house. If I use it correctly, I gain warmth and enjoyment from it. But if I don't use it correctly, I can burn the house down. If you take something good, given to us by God and use it in ways God says not to, eventually and inevitably it's going to put you and others in jeopardy. And it's going to leave scars and shame you can't get rid of.

If you want to get your thinking clear, regardless of the past, make a public commitment to God's standard. Say, "Starting today, God, I want to go your way."

When we're single the standard is to wait until we're committed to a life-time vow. If married we need to say to our wife or husband, "Whatever is happening in our relationship, I will always be faithful to you. My commitment isn't based on your response; it's based on God's standard. I want you to know that no matter what happens, no matter how angry we get, I will never be unfaithful to you." There should be no question where you stand. Live by God's standard.

God's standards are different from ours. When we talk about a standard of living we're talking about how much we have but God's talking about how well we live. Our standard of living is about how much we get; God's standard is about how much we give.

Romans 2 says, "*He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers. But he will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth...*" You have decide to live by God's standards - and you DO have to make a decision - because it goes against our inclinations and against our culture.

The second choice to make is, **2. I Control My Thinking.**

If you look at the patterns of life, you find there's a gradual, foreseeable process taking place when we're moving toward sin. You are not totally moral about something one day and then immoral about it the next - no matter how it's portrayed in entertainment programs or books. There's a progression of decisions over a period of time that eventually lead to actions.

The first step toward sinful behavior is to accept sinful thoughts. The battle with temptation begins in the mind and is generally won or lost right there. What you think about will eventually effect how you feel and how you look at the world and that will eventually come out in your behavior.

Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8 "*...brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*" Paul had already warned them against people who live as enemies of Christ - now he wants to put it in the positive and tell them the sorts of things to keep in mind: not negative things, not impure things, not ugly things, but the best of things. He wants them to take responsibility for what they think about.

In Psalm 101:3 the writer says, "*I will refuse to look at anything vile and vulgar.*" Most Americans think of we're much too sophisticated to be governed by something as archaic and simplistic as that. In fact, the media are full of people telling you that you can think whatever you want to think. They even try to tell you it's a good, healthy, thing to fanaticize about people other than the person you're married to.

The Bible clearly tells us that what we think about and what we pay attention to affect our behavior. Christians get caught in the trap of thinking, "It's no big deal. It's just a harmless thought." But our lives are shaped by our thoughts.

We can't control the fact that we're going to be attracted to other people. But what you can choose to control what you do with those feelings of attraction. You can't control the fact that you're going to desire things just because other people have them. But you can choose to control what you do with those desires. You can't control the fact that you're going to want things to be the way YOU like them. But you can choose to control what you do with those feelings.

We watch shows where people meet each other and the next scene they're intimate. We see this over and over and it begins to seem normal. They want something so they do it - they get it. In our society we get into relationships WAY too easily - and end up getting out of them in the same way. People are always looking for the next thing: the next relationship, the next thing to buy, the next thing to do. We live in a constant state of desire.

What I want to tell you is you don't have to live that way. It is not too late to change and call a halt to this.

If we don't, we just continually move on to the next desire. That's how people who would never think of a relationship outside of marriage get to that point - going from one desire to another. That's how people get into buying things to build up their sense of self esteem - going from one desire to another. That's how people get to the point where they don't want to deal with things that aren't just the way they like them or expect them to be - by going from one desire to another.

I've done a fair amount of counseling with people who've had affairs and they almost always say the same thing - "it just happened". But actually they let it happen by letting themselves drift from desire to desire. Don't do it. God can give anyone the strength to walk away. I've had to be in on postmortems for churches and they say the same sorts of things - everyone wanted things the way they wanted them. Everyone said we needed to do something, but everyone wanted it their own way - the way they like it and we just got fewer and fewer. They let the church die by drifting from issue to issue; desire to desire.

The greatest temptation for so many of us, is just wanting to have things the way WE like them. The problem with that temptation is we're never satisfied. Even if everyone else adjusts to what we want in one area, we just go on to the next thing that isn't the way we like it best.

That's one reason that complaining is so rampant in many churches - and make no mistake about it, complaining is against God's standards. Philippians 2:13-14 says "...*God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing.*"

The thing is, whatever we think and whatever we want, we're really great at rationalizing our actions. We're all pros at coming up with creative reasons to justify what we're doing. It's OK that we're grumbling, when the Bible says not to. We can be so creative in telling ourselves why it's ok to have done whatever it is we do.

The Bible says this is the way we are. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "*The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?*" We say things to ourselves to rationalize what we want, what we say, what we think, what we do - particularly when we're doing something we know is wrong, "But I was tired... I couldn't help it... I wasn't thinking clearly... I've been feeling depressed... I've been under a lot of stress... Things just didn't turn out the way I thought they were going to... That's not the way we used to do it... If he was or she was meeting my needs, talking to me, paying attention, I wouldn't have done it..."

When you rationalize something, just pull that word apart - rational lies - what you're usually giving yourself are *rational lies*. And the cost is way too high.

The third thing to do is **3. I Curtail My Opportunities**. I have to limit, restrain, reduce my chances for misconduct. The first part of this is to just acknowledge that you're vulnerable. 1 Corinthians 10:12 says, "*If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall.*" The Living Bible version of that is, "*Be careful. If you're thinking, 'I would never behave like that.' Let this be a warning to you for you too may fall into sin.*" Given the right opportunity and circumstance, anybody can commit just about any sin. If you don't think you're vulnerable, you're letting pride prevent you from putting necessary safeguards on your heart and on your lifestyle.

Start looking honestly at your lifestyle and seeing what situations could leave you more open to sin than you may have realized. What are you watching on TV that may affect your thinking? What are you doing that may give you too easy an opportunity to sin? What attitudes are you allowing yourself to have that place your own desires above God's standards or other people's needs? Who are you listening to that's tempting you to have a negative attitude?

If you listen to people who are saying the wrong things, grumbling, putting their own desires first, whatever, you'll find your own standards lessening. You'll begin to find things acceptable that you wouldn't if you were hanging out with people with real standards. Hang out with people who have loose sexual morals and you'll begin to find that acceptable. Hang around people who complain and you'll begin to be grumpy and think it's OK to be a complainer yourself. Hang around people who are disrespectful of others or say racist things you'll begin to think that's acceptable. Be careful of the friends you choose.

Monitor your media intake. Some people have garbage disposals in their kitchen but all of us have garbage dispensers called televisions, smart phones, tablets and computers. We have free access to garbage all the time. Limit your viewing, set filters, don't make it easy to import immorality into your home.

Decide to live a life above reproach. Ephesians 5:3 says, *"Let there be no sexual immorality, impurity, or greed among you. Such sins have no place among God's people.."* People who aren't believers, who don't call themselves or consider themselves Christian, can do just about anything and nobody says very much. But if someone who claims to have a relationship with God does something wrong, the world judges them. You think that's not fair. Shouldn't we be held to the same standards?

No. The Bible says that people who call on the name of Jesus Christ are to live lives of such purity that there shouldn't even be a hint of immorality about our lives.

The fourth thing is, **4. I Concentrate on Consequences.** Keep in mind the consequences of ignoring God, the consequences of having things your way, the consequences of sin. Focus on consequences - good and bad. If you want a good antidote to the lure of temptation, stop and think, "What will I be giving up if I give in to this?" Think of the consequences. When you're tempted you don't think clearly. The moment's impulse, desire, whatever can cause you to forget what you're going to be giving up.

Hollywood romanticizes and glamorizes immorality. James Bond goes from bed to bed, people say all kinds of nasty things, people do things just because they want to, no matter what the morality is and they don't show the downside.

The truth is nothing hurts your spirit, emotions, relationships, your future, your memories like moral failure. The sense of loss to everyone involved is enormous. So many people have said to me as a pastor, "Rob, if only I could turn back the clock. What was I thinking."

Why am I talking about this today? Proverbs 4:23 says, *"Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life"* The Complete Jewish Bible version of that - a literal translation of the Hebrew - puts that verse this way: *"Above everything else, guard your heart; for it is the source of life's consequences"* These things make a difference and have consequences. Why am I talking about this today? Because I care about this congregation and because I know how much all of this can ruin things for you and for us all. God says, "Don't do it."

If you're a single adult or teenager and desire a relationship so much that you're ready to almost do anything with someone for some comfort and intimacy. Don't do it.

If you're married and nothing's happened at this point but you've gotten to the point where you've thought about what COULD happen. Don't even think it. Don't do it.

If you're hanging around people who are a negative influence, who constantly complain, who use improper language, who are less than moral, who say things that demean or belittle people, who say things or that are racist - don't hang around them - Don't do it.

If you're hanging on to doing things the way you like them, and complaining when people do things some way that doesn't work as well for you or isn't the way you've always done it. Don't be that way - Don't do it.

If you're drifting from desire to desire - thinking the next thing you get or you do will finally be the thing that makes you happy - it won't. Don't live that way - Don't do it.

Remember the story of Esau in the Bible? Esau gave up his family inheritance for a bowl of food. Because of his momentary hunger he gave up what was rightfully his and exchanged his life's inheritance for momentary satisfaction.

God will never change God's standard. Greed, in all its forms, is always wrong. Bringing down other people is wrong, gossiping is always wrong, complaining is against the plain words of the Bible and against God's will. Premarital sex is unacceptable to God. It always has been. It always will be. All the opinion polls in the world aren't going to change that. Living together unmarried is unacceptable to God. Adultery - let's not be nice and call

it an affair - is unacceptable to God. Always has been, always will be. Any sexual act that's outside of a husband wife in marriage is wrong.

If you're feeling like you're OK because you haven't done what YOU think are the big things, get off your high horse. So if you have fallen or stumbled in ANY of these areas, you've in the right place. You're hanging out with a bunch of people who've blown it too. Right now you're sitting with a whole bunch of sinners. No one's batted 1000. Everyone's sinned. That's why we all need a Savior. The good news is regardless of what happened yesterday or last week or last month or ten years ago, you can start over. You can have forgiveness, healing and relief from memories. God's waiting. I want to close today with the four steps to get there.

1. First you Repent. To repent means to change your mind and agree with God. You quit making excuses and rationalizations and stop saying, "I made a mistake." It's not a mistake. You stop saying, "Yes, but..." God said don't do it and you did it anyway. Call it what it is. Disobedience. Say, "God, I'm sorry. You're right and I'm wrong." Then immediately do whatever it takes to come back to God.

2. Receive Forgiveness. God is waiting to forgive, cleanse and restore you. You can be released from past shame, guilt and regrets. You can be forgiven and then you can learn to forgive yourself. Let me tell you why that's good. When we carry unresolved guilt; unforgiven things in your life, your body keeps score even if you act like it's ok. You weren't wired to go opposite of God's way. God made you to go God's way. Even if there were no heaven, it would be wonderful becoming a believer just to have a clear conscious and forgiveness and joy and peace where there used to be shame and regret.

3. Refocus and Replace. Turn away from the things you know you shouldn't be doing or watching or filling your mind with. Make a commitment to living right. You say, "That sounds good but I don't think I can do it. I'm not strong enough." Then you do number four.

4. Request Help Daily. Commit to Jesus and ask him to help you manage these powerful drives and desires in your life. God has given us a wonderful promise. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "*The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure.*" Let's begin praying about that now.