

TEMPTATIONS IN THE MINISTRY

Virgil Warren, PhD

Temptations appeal to two basic aspects of our nature—physical and social. Temptation addresses legitimate physical drives in an effort to get us to fulfill them in illegitimate ways either in excess or in the wrong way. In the social dimension, temptations come through evil example, social pressure, social reinforcement, even misunderstood good example. Temptations also play on our ignorance, taking advantage of what we do not know, misreading God's invisibility of God as absence so as to remove that curb our impulses, and turning our viewpoint of consciousness into selfishness.

Temptations do not come because matters are out of control but because God allows them to happen. They are not something he allows in order to destroy us, but to let us grow in ways we would not grow without the challenge of opposition. We cannot blame God or other people for them; they are something we have to take personal responsibility for.

Our special life settings provide different physical and social temptations and affect the intensity each one has. Ministry is simply a specialized setting in which temptations come just as they do in any walk of life. What we know generally about handling temptations applies likewise to this calling; and it is especially important that we succeed in dealing with them because our failures have negative impact, not only on us, our spouses, and our children, but also on the congregation we serve and the Christ we represent.

I. The Process of Temptation (James 1:12-15)

Temptation comes from us as well as to us; that is, there is a *subjective component* as well as an objective one. Much of what temptation is we bring to the temptation situation. Beauty and lust are in the eyes of the beholder. It is not just what is there; it is also how you look at it.

Temptation gets worse the more you yield to it. Playing to the flesh is subject to *the law of diminishing returns*. Yielding to it increases the power of many temptations. Instead of increasing the satisfaction, it increases the desire.

Temptation occurs in the interaction of all aspects of ourselves and our associations. It is subject to *the law of interdependency*. When we yield to one kind of temptation, it increases the tendency to yield to other kinds of temptations.

Temptation exchanges the welfare of everyone for the welfare of myself. It exchanges the eternal for the temporary and immediate. It exchanges the intangible for the tangible. Temptation tries to get us to settle for less.

II. Fundamental Techniques for Dealing with Temptation

Prevention is the primary formula for successfully handling temptation. Deal with the problem ahead of time and deal with it before you get into its “force field.” First, (1) build strength. You can do that by practicing the spiritual exercises: prayer (Matthew 26:41; 6:13;

Luke 11:4), Bible reading for conviction and devotion, fasting for desensitizing bodily drives, meditation, communion (“practicing the presence,” Hebrews 4:16), fellowship (Hebrews 10:24-25). Second, (2) substitute alternatives. Meet bodily drives in acceptable ways and keep busy. Third, (3) practice avoidance. You can either remove yourself or remove the temptation. Put some space between you and the source of enticement. Stay away from people that have a reputation for causing difficulties, and stay away from situations you cannot handle or function in ethically. In doing this you are using space and time to control the impact of temptation.

III. Application to Ministry

Remember who you are. All Christians wear the name of Christ and therefore degrade him when they sin. When ministers sin, however, they do even more damage because of their higher profile in the church and community. In Egypt Joseph remembered who he was in dealing with the propositioning that came from Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:7-23). Keep your concentration on helping other people more than on satisfying yourself. As disciplining children helps parents themselves “grow up” so also disciplining other people reminds us not to yield to sin; we do not want to see the lives of the people we love messed up.

Consider the consequences. Doing any action tends toward its recurrence. (a) Yielding to sin in this instance makes it harder to resist the temptation to do it the next time. It adds the pull of past failure on the power of present lure (Hebrews 4:10) so that temptation returns sooner, easier, and more forcefully. (b) Sin hardens the heart (Hebrews 3:13). (c) Destroys the people we care about, and in the process we lose the respect of our own children, our spouses, other family members, and the church people.

Once you mess up significantly in ministry, you have pretty well eliminated any future involvement in it. That is true even if you repent of it, but you cannot even count on being able to repent. People cannot (and should not) take the chance of having that happen again even in another location. It is not only curious but sad to hear ministers trying to rationalize their failures, blame someone else for them, or excuse their sins because someone else has also sinned even though the other person's sin not only does not justify theirs but was not as bad as theirs.

III. Specific Situations

General principles can keep you from getting into difficulty. It is just a matter of using some sense in your work. Nevertheless it is well to point be apprised of the “hot spots.” There are two types of temptations that need to be dealt with successfully. The first is appeal to the flesh, exemplified by A-D below; the second is appeal to ego, involved in E. Men in ministry have to give careful attention to situations that involve those of the opposite sex. In American culture today they is so much promiscuity that social stigma no longer provides adequate restraint. Self-restraint alone has to suffice.

A. Counseling situations. People who come for counseling are often weak and vulnerable people. That is the reason they need counseling. The right combination of counselor strength and counselee weakness is not hard to come by. It may not be a bad idea to keep the door open if there is no one else around the building, even though that might not be as conducive to the privacy requisite for a counselee's sense of security.

B. Calling situations. Preachers have to use judgment and wisdom when it comes to entering the houses of single women or the homes of married women when their husbands are not there. The normal advice is to take your wife with you in such circumstances, especially you do not know the person or if there is some question about her reputation. As soon as there are any signs that the meeting is turning in the wrong direction, you need to bring things to a close and leave. If you do go in, stay only five minutes. That may keep the person from getting any ideas and it will also tell the neighbors that not amiss has gone on. It is probably best to talk through the door or sit on the porch; at least leave the door open in the summer time even though you do not stay but a couple minutes.

C. Working situations. There are usually some female personnel involved in official or unofficial ministry of the church, particularly in larger congregations: musicians, secretarial workers, and staff members. In this day of increased female ministry on the paid staff, the problem is exacerbated. The constant interaction that occurs in ongoing ministry can take its toll. Ministers sometimes have marriage circumstances that are not totally ideal, which sets them up all the more for moral failure. In addition, they are often more educated and skilled than their spouses because their wives have had to drop out of college themselves in order to put their husbands through Bible college and seminary. Other female ministry personnel may come across as being more on a par with the minister than his own wife does, and before long feelings start developing that should never have gotten started.

The relative privacy of the church building and the constant interaction in the work with those of the opposite sex have provided more sad cases of ministerial unfaithfulness than we want to think about. For this reason deliberate efforts need to offset these tendencies. The secretary's work area should be in a different room from the minister's, for example. His door should be open whenever a lady comes in the office; that creates a psychological sense of visibility even if there is no one is around. Ministers do not take their secretaries out to lunch, or frequent public places with just one other female.

D. Home situations. Occasionally ministry families have a burden for young people who come from unfortunate backgrounds. As a minister you have to think of more than that young person. You need to consider your spouse's viewpoint because she will be accepting perhaps an even larger role in helping that young person than you will. In foster parenting and adopting, you must consider the negative impact it may have on your children. They may feel intruded on, but more serious is the risk that the young person may influence them into things they would not otherwise have encountered. All this turns out finally to affect the image of your ministry in the community. You may have to forgo expressing some benevolence because of what your prior commitment to ministry calls for. You may have to content yourself with encouraging other people to provide as they can for these less fortunate kids.

Of special concern is foster-parenting older girls. There are cases where well-intentioned efforts to help have backfired on the minister's reputation. Girls with unknown or questionable backgrounds may themselves claim things you are not in a good position to refute. Even more likely is the spiteful claim of biological parents that you have molested their daughter. Even if the church itself is confident in your integrity, the community may not be so easily able to believe your innocence, and legal processes can make it nearly impossible for you to exonerate yourself. So do not get yourself into situations that "let you good be evil spoken of." Besides, you may get "sucked into" you never believed would be possible.

E. Public success. Sometimes public success "goes to a person's head" and preachers fall under the temptation to misread that success as greatness. They confuse the power of the gospel with the power of their own personalities. All kinds of destructive processes are set in motion when this happens: unwillingness to listen to other people's suggestions or warnings, the tendency to get drawn into unwholesome relationship with admirers of the opposite sex, willingness to be brazen against others in the name of boldness, insensitivity to other people's feelings and preferences, sliding over into making authoritative pronouncements on more and more matters in which they are less and less prepared, and the like.

F. Ministry relationships. Curiously jealousy is a rather frequent fault among ministers. As with the previous item, it is born of pride and becomes manifest in the face of other ministers' success. If one preacher in a certain area were made president of the North American Christian Convention when the convention met in that part of the country, other preachers from the area might get jealous or feel put down and slighted. That problem is perhaps the reason presidents for the convention are often chosen from another part of the country from when the convention meets even though logically it would be easier to appoint one from the vicinity where the meeting is to be located.

In the case of multiple-staff ministries the same problem often comes up in the form of clashes between associate and senior ministers. Perhaps the senior minister is too possessive of the pulpit and rarely lets any of the other ministers speak to the congregation for fear that his pre-eminence might be compromised. Perhaps he manipulates things around so that he implicitly takes credit for successes that actually come from other staff members' efforts.

A person wonders how much the brotherhood-wide doctrinal arguments, though real as far as issues are concerned, are fueled by a competitive mentality that is as much concerned to gain psychological ascendancy as doctrinal accuracy. The tone of the writings and sermons dealing with these matters would suggest that there is a personal agenda woven into the doctrinal one. In effect all these kinds of failures comes from making other people's success a temptation to find fault, compete, act "put out."

IV. Reputation in the Ministry

Temptation in ministry relates to the even bigger issue of your reputation as a minister. Even if you have not had a moral failure, do not put yourself in situations that look

bad or in circumstances that make it hard to tell whether something is amiss. Keep all your dealings and your relations “above board.” Obviously you cannot protect yourself against all eventualities. Something will come up sooner or later that could be misinterpreted, and it is over and done with before you even realize that something could be made of it. At times like these you have to count on getting the benefit of the doubt, and people will do so on the basis of a previous pattern of trustworthiness. However, if you record is “ambiguous,” they will have less to go on. Besides the majority of people who are willing to “cut you some slack,” there are a few who are just looking for a reason to discredit you. If your pattern of life is questionable, they will “jump on it” and probably succeed at getting other people to join them in questioning your character.

It does no good to say, “Don’t you trust me?” If they do not come right out and say, “No!” they can make this legitimate point: “I want to trust you, but honestly you cannot ask me to trust you when you give me no basis for doing so. Worse yet, in your behavior you have some previous ambiguities that make us question this case. After all, we have to consider the welfare of this church and the kingdom more than the welfare of one person in it, especially one who is sufficiently concerned about his reputation to make reasonable provisions for keeping it above reproach.” Asking to be trusted without making efforts to earn trustworthiness is an attempt to shift responsibility from yourself to the other person. It amounts to an excuse to live as you please, and other people will wonder whether it is a cover-up for your own guilt.