



Keeping Desire and Temptation in Their Place

POSTED BY [RICHARD D. PHILLIPS](#)

In the history of theological debate, one of the most important steps towards doctrinal clarity involves getting the terminology right. The ancient church sorted through the Trinitarian debate by clarifying the distinction between "essence" and "person." Likewise, the Reformation haggled over the proper meaning of "righteousness" and "justification."

A similar need has now arisen in 21st century, as Christians respond to the sexual challenges of postmodernity. In this case, the key terms are "desire" and "temptation." We need a clear understanding of these biblical terms in order to address the matter biblically, especially when it comes to heated debates regarding same-sex attraction (SSA). For instance, the question is raised as to whether a same-sex attracted person must mortify his or her desires. Likewise, denominations like the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) have wrestled over whether a person may soundly self-identify as a "gay Christian."

As these matters are debated, the two sides often speak of "desire" and "temptation" in differing ways. When it comes to SSA, we frequently hear, "There is nothing sinful about being tempted." Defenders of an SSA identity assert, "Even Jesus was 'tempted in every way' ([Heb. 4:15](#)), just as we are."

These arguments, however, often involve a category confusion between "desire" and "temptation." A key verse here is [James 1:14](#). The prior verse denies that God is the source of temptation to sin: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'" (Ja. 1:13). James then adds: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire" (Ja. 1:14). A study of "tempted" and "desire" in this verse will help us keep the concepts straight.

The Greek word for temptation is *peirasmos*, or in its verb form *peirazo*. If we consult the standard Greek dictionary, we find that its basic meaning is that of "testing." According to Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich (BAG), *peirazo* means "to make a trial of" or "put to the test." Likewise, a *peirasmos* is a test or trial. Peter uses it to say: "you have been grieved by various trials" (1 [Pet. 1:6](#)). These trials may have various features, including trials that God wills for the blessing of his people (never to incite them into sin, as James insists). The same word is translated "tempted" or "temptation," when the trial involves an inducement to sin. [Matthew 4:1](#) uses a form of *peirazo* to describe Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The key feature of this biblical word for "temptation" is that *it is an event rather than a disposition*. Temptation is something that happens *outside* a person, rather than *inside*.

A proper definition of temptation helps us to understand what it means that Jesus "in every respect has been tempted as we are" ([Heb. 4:15](#)). The writer of Hebrews

was not indicating that Jesus had an inner turmoil over disordered or sinful desires. The reason that Jesus was tempted as we are, "yet without sin" ([Heb. 4:15](#)), is that his desires and affections were perfect and holy. Yet Jesus suffered under temptation in a variety of sinless ways. For instance, his hunger was tormented when Satan tempted him to misuse his divine prerogative ([Mt. 4:3](#)). Likewise, Jesus' patience and his holy will suffered when "the Pharisees and Sadducees came, . . . to test him" ([Mt. 16:1](#)).

To say that Jesus was tempted is *not* to say that he struggled with inward sinful desires. It is certainly a false analogy to posit - as has been done in the SSA debate - an analogy between a person's inward struggle over same-sex attraction (or any other sinful desire, for that matter) and Jesus' struggle with temptation in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' torment over temptation involved what was going to happen *to him* rather than sinful desires *in him*.

James' second key word in [James 1:14](#) is *desire*. He insists that temptation leads to sin when one is "lured and enticed by his own desire." The Greek word here is *epithumia*, which has a standard translation of "desire, longing, or craving" (BAG). While the word can be used in a neutral or even positive sense, its overwhelming use in the New Testament is that of sinful desires and cravings. Whereas *temptation* is an event happening outside us, *desire* is a disposition acting within us. When we find that sinful desire is operating within us - in a fleeting sense or as a settled disposition - the Christian's calling is to repent of desire while seeking the inward cleansing that God provides by his grace ([1 Cor. 6:9-11](#)). James writes that it is desire which conceives and "gives birth to sin" (Ja. 1:15), so sinful desire is the prime target of the inward mortification that is so necessary to a Christian's sanctification.

If we keep *desire* and *temptation* in their proper biblical place, this will help us to focus where James and the rest of the Bible directs our attention. We have, in general, little to no control over temptation - external events that may incite us into sin. Neither do we control our desires, such is the plight of our fallen state! But we do have the means of grace to apply to our sinful desires through faith, trusting God's power and mercy to work inward change in coordination with our active, faith-driven effort. These sinful desires encompass the entire lexicon of the fallen condition, including greed, pride, hatred, and lust. In many cases, these desires are tightly woven into our character in ways that we may not even understand.

How wonderful it is, then, that we are loved by a God of supernatural grace, with power to heal, cleanse, and make holy. For many of us, the grace of mortification will play out slowly and painfully over a long course of life, with many discouragements along the way - those who struggle with same-sex attraction often chronicle this struggle, to which we should respond with loving encouragement in the Lord. But struggle we must, seeking to keep desire in its place - which is to say, in the grave where Jesus died to put an end to sin.

The trouble is not with temptation itself, but with the sinful, disordered desires within, which is why the grace of God commands us:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these

the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth (Col. 3:5-8).

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