

Introduction: Landscape Wars

I became a first-time homeowner last year. Although I love it, two things became apparent very quickly: it's hard work and expensive. Nevertheless, owning my own home has rejuvenated my passion for landscaping. So much that I want two jobs in heaven, the head parking lot greeter, and head landscaper. For me, beautifying a property and giving it curb appeal, is both relaxing and recreative.

However, a few weeks after we moved in, we got new neighbors. They are great, but the husband shares a similar passion for landscaping that I do. We are both "Type A" personalities, so it is on, very on. If he does something, I am dutybound to retaliate, I mean, respond. I do something, he springs into action. This landscape war has been raging on for five months now with no truce in sight. However, any objective outsider would easily conclude that I'm winning, even dominating. The reason, he has kids, and young ones at that! Plus, I live by the axiom, "See a weed, pull a weed" because if you don't, you'll lose the landscape war in a jiffy because nothing destroys beautiful landscaping more than weeds.

Perfection?

I wish that when we became Christ followers, we were instantaneously made perfect. However, the reality is, we are not. Thus, we go through a process called sanctification, i.e., being made holy like Christ. To help us with this endeavor, God has given us his indwelling Spirit, Written Word, and Church. The fact that we need to be sanctified means there are areas where we aren't holy or Christ-like. The Bible describes these places as "fallings," "failings," and "frailties" (weaknesses). Now to be clear, when we are "born again" (John 3:3) the Holy Spirit resides in

us and breaks the power of sin in our lives. Therefore, we are no longer slaves to sin. However, we still suffer temptations and just like the weeds that pop-up to destroy the beauty of landscaping, temptations can destroy the beauty of Christianity. No one appreciates this fact more than the devil. He laces our fallings, failings, and frailties with temptations. Before we see how to practically overcome these, let's look at the nature of temptation itself.

Nature of Temptation (Personal Illustrations)

All temptation comes from doubt in God's promises for two things: provision and joy. For instance, this year marks my 32nd year in ministry and I can truthfully say that I have never had serious temptations in three areas: (1) adultery, (2) embezzlement, and (3) pornography. Why? Because when I married Lisa, God had supremely met my love need far more than I ever imagined, and I continue to be happy in her. When it comes to money, sure, it's nicer to have more than less, but I never have believed money to be the source of happiness. Regarding pornography. Without a doubt, it is the greatest temptation to men, inside and outside the church. Although ubiquitous and alluring...scintillating and titillating, I have never gotten sucked into it. Not because I am "holier than thou" but because of four prominent factors:

- (1) Sexually objectifying people is dehumanizing and burns a hole in one's soul.**
- (2) Over the years, I have seen too many friends and colleagues lose their families, careers, and ministries over porn and I never want to suffer that fate.**
- (3) Fantasies never satisfy but will only distort and often destroy, normal relationships.**
- (4) My wife would kill me.**

So, these pop-up temptations have not gained traction in my soul. However, I do confess that I am certainly tempted by other things, especially sports equipment. Whenever I see the newest

aero bike, workout apparatus, or golf driver, my eyes water, heart palpitates, and neurons ignite. Then, I want to sell my wife for a herd of turtles or rob banks. I kid. I think (lol). So, the devil continually tempts us in the areas we least trust God for provision and joy. And because our faith is imperfect, we will never be free of temptation, not on this side of eternity.

Ramifications of Sin

Before we look at practical ways to resist and overcome temptation as a way of fighting the “Good fight of faith” (I Timothy 6:12), let me point out that temptation itself is not sin. In fact, we might be honored when we are tempted because the devil wants to take us down before we can do damage to his kingdom. Jesus was constantly tempted, most notably in the wilderness where the devil encouraged him to turn stone into bread, jump off the temple, and worship him in exchange for the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:1-11). But Jesus resisted and never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). Giving into temptation, however, is the sin of temptation. I emphasize this truth because I know many wonderful Christ followers who perpetually feel guilty because of tempting thoughts. I tell them, “Congratulations!” “Welcome to the Christian race!” Furthermore, if we fall into temptation, we can be forgiven if we ask for it with “godly sorrow” (I Corinthians 7:10). However, let me add this sobering thought: although heaven will forgive us, earth probably will not. Forgiveness does not remove the consequences of our sin. Undoubtedly the “poster child” for this reality is King David. After his torrid affair with Bathsheba, David, asked for and got God’s forgiveness. Nevertheless, his kingdom, family, and personal life began on a downward moral trajectory. I wish men like Liberty University’s Jerry Falwell jr., Hillsong’s Carl Lentz, Willow Creek’s Bill Hybels, along with Ravi Zacharia, Jimmy Swaggart, and Bakker, would have learned this lesson before yielding to their temptations.

Verbal Temptations

The moral sins get all the attention, but chances are most of us aren't strongly tempted by these, perhaps, if only for the lack of energy. We are more likely to be tempted by verbal sins. These may seem minor but can be as destructive, if not more so. Billy Joel used to sing, "It's no big sin to put your two cents in." Well, it certainly can be if our two cents include slander and gossip which Chuck Swindoll once labeled, "The Church's favorite indoor game." I believe, verbal character assignation, verbal negativity, lack of verbal veracity, and harmful things said in anger, are the biggest temptations we face every day.

Conclusion

Whatever our temptations, verbal or otherwise, here are five practical ways to overcome them.

Yank Out Tempting Thoughts. Listen to James 1:13-15:

13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

This passage speaks to the origination, progression, and ramification of sin. Where does it all start? With evil desires. Where do these come from? Our thoughts. The moment a tempting thought pops into your brain, don't dwell on it or nurture it. Yank it out immediately much like I do whenever I see a weed in my yard. Don't let temptation destroy your thoughts the way weeds destroy your yard.

Know the Word of God. God's Word is our best weapon, (sword) against temptation. Jesus quoted it for that very reason and is why the Psalmist said, "Your word, Lord I have placed in my heart so that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11).

Beware of your logistics. By this I mean, steer clear of tempting places. If you struggle with say lust, then visits to strip clubs or questionable websites is hardly wise. Neither is being alone with some of the opposite sex who is not your spouse. Sometimes common sense keeps the devil at bay and our temptations in check. Maybe I need to slowdown my visits to the local bike shop?

Call in the Calvary. If you feel the devil breathing down your back and weakening your resolve, don't hesitate to call a brother or sister in Christ for support.

Bank on God's Faithfulness. Listen to I Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to people. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

If you want to cultivate a beautiful Christian life, continually "weed out" your temptations by mastering these five things.