

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

By [Rev. Joel Kletzing](#)

CHAPTER TEN (Cont.)

Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It by John Owen

The Biblical text upon which this work is based is Matthew 26:41 – “Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation.” One reason temptation is ordained as a part of God’s plan (even though He Himself does not tempt – that is done by Satan, the world or our own selves) is to expose what is in believers, whether they are related to grace or corruption. Further, temptation creates a stage on which God can show Himself. His preventing grace can protect one from sinning. The power of an antidote is demonstrated only when venom is at work. So the strength of temptation brings to light the strength of grace.¹

Jesus directed two means for preventing temptation – watch and pray. Watch means to be on guard. Specifically, the prayer here is requesting to be kept from temptation. This reliance on God admits personal inability to trust or to keep one’s own heart.² Secret sins invade and corrupt the heart, sins such as neglecting communion with God or sensual thoughts. Owen observed that neglecting the Sabbath and both public and private spiritual duties has directed some toward open profaneness and dissolute behavior. Temptation darkens the mind, so a person loses right judgment as the imagination is diverted away from what is healthy to some object that ensnares and incites the affections to run wild. It curves the mind in on itself and removes consciousness of God’s presence, leaving it void both of the fear of God and of godly love.³

Lust that is not ruthlessly cut off becomes gangrenous for the soul, resulting in death. The inherent goal of temptation is to dishonor God and ruin souls through defiled consciences, loss of peace, anemic obedience and obscuring the perception of God’s face.⁴

¹ John Owen, “Of Temptation: The Nature and Power of It,” *Overcoming Sin & Temptation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 153-155.

² *Ibid.*, 164ff.

³ *Ibid.*, 175-176, 179.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

Besides neglecting private prayer or worship on the Sabbath, Owen also sees cold, negligent, unengaged, formal worship as deadly to the soul. Such a style of religion would not fulfill Christ's command to watch and pray which carries an urgency within it.⁵

A young man who enjoys evil company eventually comes to love the evil that crowd practices. One cannot be said to fear sin if he does not fear temptation. "He hates not the fruit who delights in the root."⁶

It is not within a believer's power to preserve herself from temptation. Thus it is fitting to ask in prayer to be kept from it, seeking wisdom and the power of God to preserve and keep. The beginnings of temptation are normally imperceptible. This fact warrants a constant committing of oneself to God's care, praying according to what God has promised and for grace to submit to His commands.⁷

To develop proficiency in watchfulness, the conditions for temptation to develop should be noted. For example, Proverbs 1:32 reads, "The prosperity of fools destroys them." Owen explains that it hardens them in their way and incites them to hate instruction. Also, a season of great spiritual enjoyment often is occasion for Satan to maliciously prey on weak hearts and introduce great temptation. Likewise, a season of self-confidence becomes fertile soil for temptation as it did for Peter who boasted to the Lord that he would never abandon Him. First Corinthians 10:12 counsels that he who thinks he stands should take heed so that he does not fall.⁸

Watching the heart involves being well acquainted with one's own spirit, disposition, familiar lusts and weaknesses and then noting well the occasions that could ensnare and avoiding them. One who is not skilled in knowing himself will be deceived all the more easily.⁹ Both law and Gospel must be held in the forefront of our minds so that the threats of judgement may be heeded and the overwhelming promises of blessing through Christ embraced.¹⁰

An alarming element of temptation which calls for greater watchfulness is that usually one only discovers the enemy after receiving a wound from him. Realize that Satan is out not only to incite sin but to destroy any interest in the Gospel. Once one realizes he is entangled with temptation, the best course of action is to fervently plead with God for rescue. Offer prayers based on God's promises that He is faithful and will not allow temptation beyond what one is able to bear. He will always make a way of escape. He can use affliction to mortify sinful desires.

⁵ Ibid., 191-192.

⁶ Ibid., 193.

⁷ Ibid., 194-195.

⁸ Ibid., 197-200.

⁹ Ibid., 201-202.

¹⁰ Ibid., 204.

He can use providence to remove fuel from the fire of temptation. He can subdue Satan and cause him to cease his attack. He can supply grace so that the believer is no longer given over to a temptation's pull. He can grant hope. He can make a person a conqueror by His power.¹¹ When the understanding is full of light and the affections are flooded with love and holiness, then a subject is fenced and fortified against sin.¹²

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¹¹ Ibid., 205-207.

¹² Ibid., 213.