

## I. Introduction: Some temptation stories (*What should they do?*)

**A. Jr. High kid from Xian family** is under the grandstands with friends at a Friday football game. One friend offers him a smoke that does NOT come out of a cigarette package ...

**B. A young adult man longs to find a Christian woman for a relationship that would have marriage potential ...** meanwhile in the privacy of his apartment he struggles with the appeal of porn websites ...

**C. A Christian woman has just moved up to a management level position in her company,** when her supervisor suggests she use her management influence in unethical ways with her employees ...

## II. Temptation is a universal & timeless issue

### A. Externally our world does not look much like the world that Jesus lived in or that Adam & Eve first saw

1. The sheer number of temptations in front of us in today's world and the forms that they come in all around us are so much more complex than what people faced in biblical times
2. And yet the most fundamental temptations that God-followers face are no different today than they were 2000 years ago or more:
  - a) temptations toward greed, power, influence, personal gain at others' expense, and basically toward abandoning God.
  - b) So many shades of gray we see today ... not all choices are clear-cut
3. How do we handle temptations as Christians?

### B. I can identify at least 2 common approaches I've seen & heard in S.S. classes, sermons & magazine articles:

1. Emphasize rules & morality codes
  - a) Need to return to 10 Commandments
  - b) Use the Bible as a rules book or a road map:
 

basically finding a direct response to every temptation in Scripture

People w/ this approach find a Bible verse to answer every question they have, even stretching parts of the Bible into answers to questions that they weren't written to answer in the 1<sup>st</sup> place
  - c) Sometimes this can be helpful in simple temptation situations if the Bible speaks clearly about it, e.g. "You shall not steal"

d) Unfortunately some of us have some negative experiences with this approach turning into rigid legalism in the face of temptation

## 2. Another approach: Provide practical strategies to overcome temptation

a) Might mean asking the guilt question: *“Would God be happy if God saw you doing this?”* (approach that can bring to mind image of a mean, finger-wagging judgmental God)

b) For an addict in a 12-step group: making a phone call to a sponsor to talk you out of doing the tempting behavior

c) Or might be reminding yourself of 4 simple letters that were popular in churches 15 or 20 years ago: WWJD (*What Would Jesus Do?*)

How many of you have or remember seeing T-shirts or bracelets with WWJD on them? {PPT image}



The phrase came from an 1896 book by Charles Sheldon called In His Steps, in which the main character, when facing difficult choices and challenging social situations kept asking, “What would Jesus do?”

The problem is that Jesus did not talk about issues like stem cell research & global warming ... Jesus did not have the internet

Ie. WWJD can be good, but it’s not always enough ... can be too simplistic

## III. Suggest a slightly different approach today for handling temptation

## **A. Have in mind an approach that bears a little resemblance to WWJD, but it goes deeper & is more personal**

1. Rather than focusing on having pat answers for temptation, or on exactly what phrase or person to call on ...
2. Suggest we examine WHO God created us to be ... I'll call this a "Xian identity" approach to dealing with temptation

## **B. 1<sup>st</sup> look at Jesus & how he handled temptations**

1. Need to remember these were representative or symbolic temptations Jesus faced ...
  - a) I don't believe that somehow for 30 years Jesus was miraculously spared all human temptations until this moment after his baptism (I believe at this point of story, Jesus already knew the temptations to use people for personal gain, or to tell an untruth, or to see his own needs as more important than those of his heavenly father.)
  - b) In Matt. 4 this is very beginning of Jesus' ministry, right after being baptized & hearing heavenly words "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well-pleased."
  - c) These temptations matter because they reveal Jesus' character & they reveal what kind of mission he'll be on as God's Messiah
2. Jesus was not tempted with obviously "sinful" things.
  - a) The stones into bread, the miraculous rescue from falling, the power over the whole world ... each of these could have been used to grow Jesus' new ministry and gather thousands for the kingdom of God
  - b) The tempter showed Jesus some possibly good or easy ways to draw people's attention toward God
  - c) Problem was ... these methods contradicted the very kingdom of God that Jesus was proclaiming
3. All of these offers from Satan amount to one fundamental temptation for Jesus: to abandon his mission ...
  - a) To forsake his call from God ...
  - b) to be a different kind of Messiah than God sent him to be
4. The strength Jesus had in face of temptation clearly came from God, but it also came from his own sense of identity: Jesus knew who he was and what he was about, so he didn't let anything draw him away from that central identity in God

## **C. Now examine the temptation story of Adam & Eve**

1. What was their fundamental sin? Pride? Perhaps so ... But I wonder if it was really identity insecurity?
2. Adam & Eve were confused re. their place & their role in God's creation ... didn't understand their limits as creatures, nor their dependence on God
  - a) It's when they sought to step out of that dependent role that trouble came ...
  - b) The temptation for Adam & Eve was to know good & evil for themselves ... to define themselves separately from God
3. Trouble came because they didn't recognize their own place ... they did not know who they really were, but tried to be something they were not meant to be

#### IV. Are we so different?

##### A. What's really happening when we Xians give in to temptation?

1. Behind all the pride or stubbornness, we're fundamentally confused & insecure people
2. We don't know who we are ... & don't recognize our limits ...
  - a) When we need friends constantly to tell us we're OK ... **We don't know who we are.**
  - b) When we let advertisers convince us we're not fulfilled until we buy this or that ... **We don't know who we are.**
  - c) When the beating drums of war & patriotism around us imply that our identity as Americans is more important than our Xian citizenship, & we fail to challenge that message ... **We don't know who we are.**
3. Whether we're conscious of it or not, I maintain that **giving in to temptation, at the core, means we're trying to be people that God doesn't want us to be.**

##### B. Let me describe a "Christian identity" approach to dealing with temptation

1. It actually starts when you're not even thinking about temptation
  - a) When things are going well for you, before you're in the middle of a tempting situation, start by asking yourself a few very basic questions:

“Who am I in God’s eyes? [PPT pretemptation]

## A Christian identity grounding (Before Temptation Comes)

- Who am I in God’s eyes?
- What’s God’s ultimate call to me?
- What’s the bigger purpose God has for me?

What’s God’s ultimate call to me?

What’s the bigger purpose God has for me?”

b) Ask & pray these questions periodically ... when you read Bible passages, read them always with these questions in mind ... maybe your SS class or small group could focus a discussion sometime just on these

2. Now, the answers that come to you for these Qs may not always be crystal clear, but some basic ideas should start to emerge for you on different levels, perhaps sounding something like this:

a) God’s purpose for me is: *Making faithfulness to Jesus Christ my #1 priority ... OR Being a person committed to prayer ... OR being a person grounded in God’s Word*”

b) Perhaps your identity in Christ is *Being the best witness I can be for Christ in my job ... OR Managing God’s resources & glorifying God.*

c) I encourage you to write that brief statement down & carry it with you in your wallet, on your cell phone, or post it somewhere you will see it often. I have a personal mission statement posted in my office in easy sight of my computer. [PPT: Personal mission statement]

### Personal mission statement

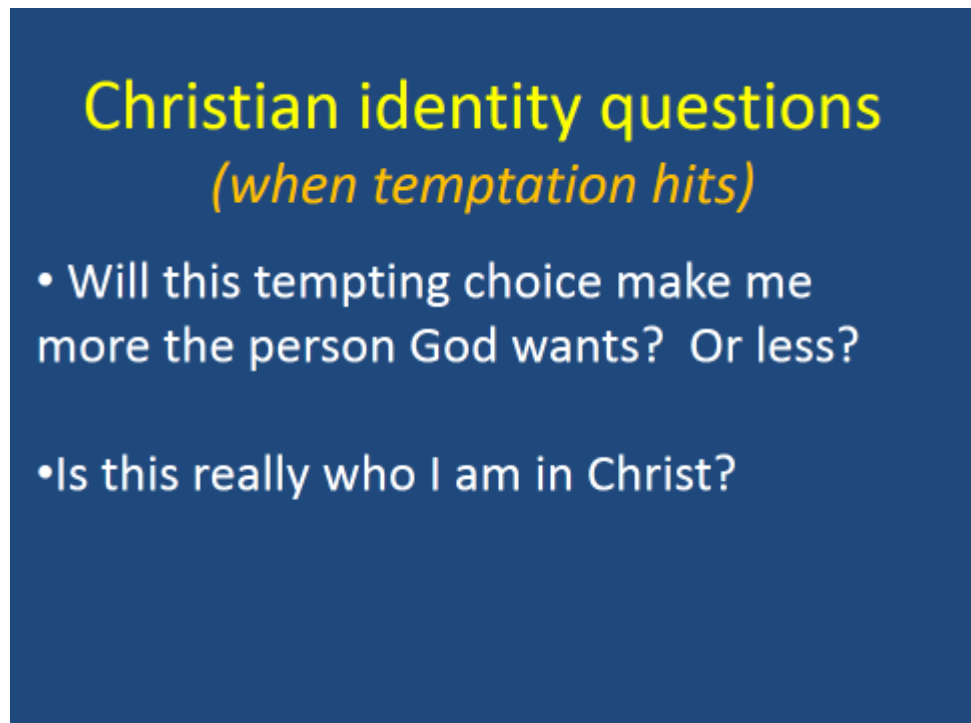
(abbreviated)

*I was created and called primarily to ...  
serve God as part of God’s diverse  
people,  
the church.*

The central issue in all areas of life  
becomes responding faithfully to  
God’s call.

3. Once you've given serious thought to who you are in Christ & you've made yourself some reminders of that core identity, you have a new tool to use when temptation strikes you.

- a) When temptation comes, don't worry if you can't remember the 10 Commandments, nor recite a standard Bible verse to ward off the temptation.
- b) And don't get hung up if the WWJD question doesn't settle the issue
- c) Instead, in the face of that temptation, ask yourself, [PPT temptation Qs]



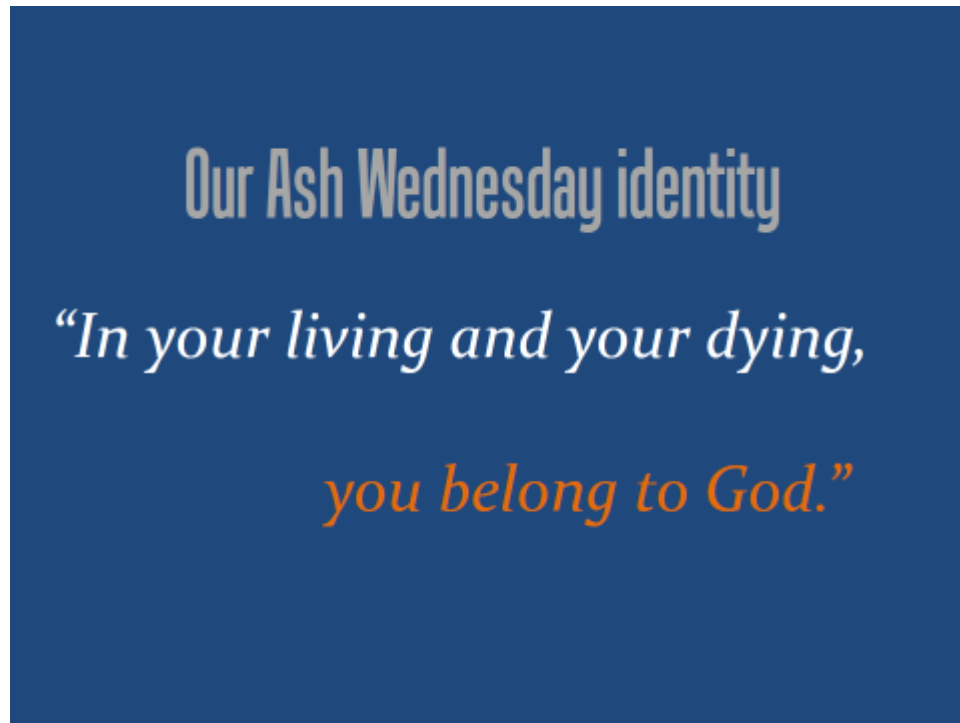
**Christian identity questions**  
*(when temptation hits)*

- Will this tempting choice make me more the person God wants? Or less?
- Is this really who I am in Christ?

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Or less?

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- d) Maybe when temptation comes around this next week, those of you who were here on Wed. night for Ash Wed. service can bring to mind those identity words that were spoken to you when you received ashes in the sign of a cross: [PPT Ash Wed. identity]



Our Ash Wednesday identity: “In your living & your dying, you belong to God”

### **C. Using this Xian identity approach, & finding God in it**

1. This approach does not mean WWJD or 10 Commandments have no value
2. It does mean we are cautious about simplistic Scripture-quoting ... means looking @ message of the whole Bible, not just a verse here or there.
  - a) I recognize that Jesus may have been able to quote one-liners from the Old Testament to refute Satan, but Jesus probably internalized the Scriptures far more than most of us do today.
  - b) Besides, quoting Bible one-liners doesn't always work so simply, especially if you find another verse in the Bible that seems to say the opposite thing
3. A Xian identity approach is esp. helpful when the moral choices are not so stark ...
  - a) Sometimes temptation we face is not between an obviously good thing & an obviously bad thing ...
  - b) Sometimes we are tempted between 2 things that are usually “good” but one of them will pull us away from God’s direction

4. I've outlined an approach we can take in the face of temptation, but I'd like to steer us back to our theme, "Encountering God"

## V. We may or may not clearly encounter God in temptations

### A. Temptation presents us with constant opportunities to ask ourselves "Who am I?" and "Whose am I?"

1. If in our moments of temptation we have the clearness of mind to ask ourselves those identity questions, we may well encounter God simply by being reminded of who God calls us to be.
2. But let's be honest to admit that often when temptation is strongest is when we're NOT @ our clearest thinking
  - a) Sometimes we're hungry, exhausted, stressed out or agitated & that's when we're most vulnerable to temptation
  - b) When we're not at our best is often precisely when it's easiest to give in to our weaknesses, or blurt out something thoughtless that we'll later regret
  - c) Temptation is easier to resist when we're well-fed & well-rested

### B. In reality, God is often far from our minds when temptation hits us hardest

1. Think about a time recently when you made a foolish choice that you later regretted (*how you spent time or \$, words that you said or didn't say, an action that hurt somebody*) ... Do you have a situation in mind?
  - a) Now recall the moments when you struggled with that temptation & then gave in ... Were you aware of God at that time? Probably not
  - b) Our times of greatest temptation are often when we're NOT consciously tuned into God in our lives
2. Those are the times when it's most important that we've already encountered God BEFORE the temptation
  - a) That's when the time we've spent in church singing hymns & Scripture songs pays off because one of those lyrics pops into mind to help us make the right choice.
  - b) Those are the times we see the value of Bible memorization as a resource to draw on when we're tempted



## **VI. Conclusion**

### **A. Friends, temptation will keep coming your way**

1. Knowing your Bible better is one good preparation for temptation ... then, when the tempter comes calling you may, like Jesus, be able to resist it with Scripture that you already know
2. But frantically grabbing a Bible verse here or a slogan there may not be enough to ward off temptation.

### **B. It's important to know your Xian identity & who God calls you to be**

1. Then, also like Jesus, you may be able to stay true to God's mission in your life.
2. Then, grounded in that identity, God's Spirit can help you resist those temptations that would lead you away from God's call