

*“Temptation: the fiend at my elbow.”*

— **William Shakespeare**

# Chapter 1

*“Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation.”*

**Mark 14:38**

Nothing robs us of spiritual success so devastatingly as yielding to temptation.<sup>1</sup> It may be the temptation of money, lust, power, position, sex, fame, perpetual youth, greed or a hundred other things. Whatever it is, it always seems to be there. While opportunity knocks but once, temptation seems to be constantly banging on our door.

There’s that once-in-a-lifetime deal that will make you a lot of money in a hurry, but is as shady as a Banyan tree in the rain forest. There’s the lady next door who always seems to be sunbathing when you’re cutting the grass. There’s the pre-approved credit card application that arrives in your mail, even though you have already maxed out three other cards. There’s the guy at the office who seems to be paying more attention to you than he should, and you kind of like it. Temptations come in all shapes and sizes, through all hours of the day or night. And the Christian is no less susceptible than anyone else.

When *Leadership Magazine* commissioned a poll of a thousand pastors concerning temptation, 12 percent of them admitted that they had committed adultery while in the ministry. And 23 percent said they did something they considered sexually inappropriate while serving as a pastor.<sup>2</sup> *Christianity Today*, a magazine for mature Christians, surveyed a thousand of its subscribers (not pastors) and discovered that 23 percent admitted to committing adultery and 45 percent admitted to doing something they deemed sexually inappropriate.<sup>3</sup>

Statistics may give us a snapshot of the number of people succumbing to temptation, but it's the real-life stories, the flesh-and-blood accounts, that impact us the most. We hear about a respected couple from church who are getting a divorce after 25 years of marriage—apparently the husband found someone younger more attractive. We learn about a neighbor who is losing his house and filing for bankruptcy—his gambling problem finally caught up with him. We discover a coworker has been abruptly dismissed for downloading pornographic material from his computer on work time. How do these things happen?

Of course, temptation is not the problem; resisting it is the problem. British writer Oscar Wilde said, "I can resist anything except temptation." To be sure, resisting temptation is not easy, but the only way to be a spiritual success is to manage the temptations that confront us. It can be done, but it can't be done alone and it can't be done without a plan.

Dave was a friend of mine. I've lost track of him now, but I used to work closely with him years ago when I was pursuing graduate education. Few people had the skills on the basketball court that Dave did. Relatively short (6 ft. 2 in.), he could dribble between his legs or behind his back. He was a master at the outlet pass, and he could dunk with either hand. After playing basketball successfully at the high school and college levels, he dreamed of a professional career, but he knew his height would only make that a fantasy. So, he entered the business world instead.

Dave had committed his life to Christ as a young man, but he always seemed to have a weakness with the opposite sex. Although married and with two small children, he began to find himself attracted to Cindy, a lady who worked in his office. They began sharing meals together in the lunchroom each day. Dave was active in his church, though much of his life was a sham. Nobody at church knew it, but his spiritual life was in the pits. It wasn't long before he was involved in a full-blown affair with Cindy, one which cost him his job, his position in the church and his family. What a tragedy! Someone so bright and talented, with a future full of promise, and he threw it all away. Why? Because he couldn't—or rather wouldn't—resist temptation.

In the pages that follow, we will explore five simple steps to manage your temptation. Unfortunately, the simpler the steps, the more apt we are to overlook them. I pray these steps will be like those electronic tags attached to clothing in department stores. They are there to detect shoplifters and prevent theft. If the device is tampered with in any way, or if someone tries to steal something from the store, a loud alarm goes off and the thief is stopped in his tracks. As we struggle to achieve spiritual success, may we hear the alarm ringing in our head every time we are tempted.