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Impeccability: Was Christ Able to Sin?

by David Dunlap

Orthodox theologians have universally agreed that Jesus Christ never committed any sin. He was sinless, blameless, and holy. The sinlessness of the Lord Jesus Christ is an absolute necessity for the efficacy of His penal, substitutionary death and is a decisive proof of His deity. Any moral failure on the part of Christ would compromise His deity and nullify His finished work on the cross. While few evangelical Bible teachers doubt His sinlessness, some have questioned whether Christ was *able* to sin? The question of whether Christ was *able* to sin is not merely a debate for theologians, but one that is important and critical to all, for it touches upon the person and the work of Christ.

Those who argue that Christ was able to sin assert that He could only have been truly human if He were able to sin. If He were unable to sin, then He was also unable to be tempted. Therefore, His humanity would not be the kind of humanity that would be able to truly sympathize with mankind. This viewpoint seems to be attractive and biblical to many fine scholars, past and present. Among conservative evangelical leaders who have taught this view are Charles Hodge, Everett F. Harrison, and Dr. Martin R. DeHaan. Additionally, Ellen G. White, of Seventh-day Adventism, also strongly advocated this view.

What is Peccability and Impeccability?

Christians use the terms "peccability" and "impeccability" when speaking of Christ's ability or His inability to sin. But there is more to the debate than the ability to sin; there is also the question of the nature of the temptations which Christ experienced. Scripture teaches that Christ did not sin and that He did not possess a sin nature. Therefore, whatever temptations came to Him would be from without and not from within. The Bible insists that Christ can intimately sympathize with us in our trials, for Christ Himself was truly tempted. We read, "For we have not a High Priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Although Christ was tempted in His (holy) human nature, we must never forget that it was impossible for the Lord Jesus Christ to sin as a divine Person. Since the incarnate Son of God was impeccable, every attack of the evil one would be completely turned back. James tells us: "Let no man say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted of God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempteth no man" (1:13). Although Christ was tempted in all points as we are, His triumph over each temptation fully demonstrated and proved that He was both Lord and Christ.

"In the person of Christ, however, the human will was always subservient to the divine will and could never act independently...The omnipotence of Christ makes it impossible for Him to sin. Peccability always implies weakness on the part of the one tempted; he is weak to the extent that he can sin. On the part of Christ, this is out of the question."

Dr. John Walvoord
(1910-2002)

—Former president of Dallas
Theological Seminary

Was the Temptation of Christ Genuine?

While Christ in His humanity was subject to temptations from without, His divine nature was fully sufficient to resist each of those temptations. This has led some to suggest that the temptations of Christ were not real. This notion must be completely rejected. Clearly, the temptations that Christ experienced were real! The wilderness temptations of Christ, after fasting for forty days, describe temptations which none other has ever endured. The temptation to turn stones into bread was all the more real because Christ had the power to do it. He was tested as no one else was ever tried. Moreover, the temptations to which Christ was subjected were of a stronger nature to Christ because He had a much greater sensitivity to sin than other men had.

The final test of the reality of His temptations is found in the example of His struggle in Gethsemane and His death on the cross. The cross was undoubtedly His greatest trial, for we hear Him in prayer saying, "Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done"...and being in agony, He prayed more earnestly..." (Luke 22:42,44). There is a divine mystery in these things which the human mind struggles to fully understand. The well-known Scottish expositor Alexander MacLaren (1826-1910) writes:

His will never wavered but remained supreme over the natural recoil of His human nature from pain and death. If He had not felt the cross to be a dread, it had been no sacrifice. If He allowed the dread to penetrate His will, He would have been no Savior.¹

Though uniquely human and fully divine, the Lord Jesus Christ, without divesting Himself of any of His divine attributes, was sorely tested and "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). Nevertheless, despite all these testings, Christ did not surrender to sin but yielded Himself fully, to the will of the Father.

Christ's temptations do not always exactly parallel our own; nevertheless, He was tried fully even as we are tried. We can come to Him as our High Priest with the assurance that He thoroughly understands the power of temptation, having met it in His life and death (Heb. 4:15). Therefore, in Gethsemane and on the cross of Calvary, Christ experienced the vivid reality of temptation without losing any degree of His impeccability.

The Purpose of Temptation

The Holy Spirit led the Lord Jesus Christ into the wilderness to be tested. He was not tempted so that the Father could learn anything about the Son, for the Father had already given His approval at His baptism by John (Matt 3:17). Christ's temptation was for others. Jesus was tested so that every creature in heaven and on earth, whether angel or demon, might see that Jesus Christ is Lord and Victor. The temptation would expose Satan, the "god of this age," as a defeated and dethroned foe. Christ was not tempted by Satan to see if He could sin, but to demonstrate and to prove that He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Savior of the world. Trusted author David Long writes:

A diamond may be drawn over a plane of glass before an onlooker, not to see if it is a real diamond, but to demonstrate that it is. A piece of gold may be dropped into a container of acid, not to see if pure gold can be marred by the acid, but to show that it cannot.³

"Christ was human and Christ was divine...The evidence of each is abundant, and the necessity for both is obvious. Had He not been man, He could not have sympathized with us; had He not been God, He could not have saved us."

W. Graham Scroggie

(1877-1958)

*Minister of the Gospel at
Spurgeon's Metropolitan
Tabernacle, London*

The Lord Jesus Christ met every test and every temptation of Satan with divine power and authority, thus declaring that He is Lord of all. Satan had tempted Adam, Job, and David, but this One was incomparable to all the others that had come before. Of all those that were tested, all had failed except Christ. Just as the first Adam met Satan in spiritual combat, so the last Adam met the enemy. Adam met Satan in the garden of Eden, but the Lord Jesus met Satan in the wilderness. Adam had every resource at his disposal, but Jesus was hungry after fasting for forty days. Adam lost his battle and plunged humanity into sin and death. In the Judean wasteland, alone, the Lord Jesus Christ triumphed in His battle with Satan and later was once and for all victorious on the cross (Col. 2:15).

Can Omnipotence Be Tempted?

Many have suggested that since Christ is omnipotent, then He could not be truly tempted by sin. They suggest that if Christ's divine nature is so powerful and invincible, then every temptation without exception will be resisted, and Christ could not be truly tempted. So the question is advanced: Was Christ truly tempted? The answer must be a resolute, "Yes." We might ask: Can a superior be tempted by an inferior? Is it possible to attempt the impossible? We would all agree that it is! Bible scholar Dr. John Walvoord (1910-2002) explains:

It is possible for a rowboat to attack a battleship, even though it is conceivably impossible for a rowboat to triumph over a battleship. The idea that temptability implies susceptibility is unsound. While the temptation may be real, there may be infinite power to resist that temptation, and if this power is infinite, the person is impeccable.²

It is possible to attempt the impossible, to mount an attack on that which is invincible. The Lord Jesus Christ was tempted in the wilderness by Satan. He was tempted again in the Garden of Gethsemane. The sufferings of Calvary were also a temptation to Him, even though His deity would enable Him to resist every attack of the evil one. Just as a temptation might be easily resisted by a person of strong moral character but ensnare one of weaker character, so, a temptation is true and real even if one is not susceptible to that temptation. Sin can only appeal to sin. We must never think for a moment that sinful allurements appealed to Christ! In truth, Christ was tempted, yet in each victory over temptation, Christ's omnipotence was displayed in a unique way.

Impeccability and the Omnipotence of Christ

The hypostatic union of the divine and the human in one Person is a mystery beyond the full comprehension of the finite human mind. We bow in wonder before a God whose "ways are higher than our ways and whose thoughts higher than our thoughts" (Isa. 55:9). Nevertheless, Scripture at times reveals the "edges of His ways" (Job 26:14 NKJV). Although Christ is one divine Person who possessed both human and divine natures, nevertheless, in Scripture these natures are distinguished. In His earthly ministry, sometimes Christ spoke from out of His human nature, and so we hear Him say, "I thirst"; or in the Garden of Gethesamane "not My will but Thy will be done." Yet at other times, we discern the divine aspect of Christ. We hear Him cry out in a

"His will never wavered but remained supreme over the natural recoil of His human nature from pain and death. If He had not felt the cross to be a dread, it had been no sacrifice. If He allowed the dread to penetrate His will, He would have been no Savior."

Alexander Maclaren

(1826-1910)

from *Expositions of Holy Scripture: Luke*



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loud voice upon the cross, "It is finished." We must never mix nor confound the two natures of Christ. Moreover, and most importantly, in the person of Christ the human nature always yielded to the divine nature. The human nature never acted on its own. Thus, the divine and more powerful nature functioned in such a way as to make it impossible for Christ to be able to sin. Again, respected theologian Dr. John Walvoord writes:

In the person of Christ, however, the human will was always subservient to the divine will and could never act independently...The omnipotence of Christ makes it impossible for Him to sin. Peccability always implies weakness on the part of the one tempted; he is weak to the extent that he can sin. On the part of Christ, this is out of the question.⁴

CONCLUSION

When Christians look deeply into the person of Christ, they recognize immediately, like Moses, that they are on holy ground. We are gripped by the fact that we are only dipping our toes into a vast sea of the glories of Christ. We bow reverently at the grandeur and greatness of the eternal Son of God. Yet at the same time, our love for Christ compels us to seek the most biblical and Christ-honoring view of these holy things. We have tried to show that any explanation of the moral character of Christ apart from His deity falls short of the truth of Scripture and opens the door to a host of unprofitable questions. May we ever uphold the sinlessness, the impeccability, and the omnipotence of Christ, for the doctrines of the Person of Christ and His finished work depend upon it.

Endnotes

1. Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), p. 249
2. John Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), p. 147
3. David Long, *The Mighty God*, (Toronto, CA: Everyday Publications, 1978), p. 65
4. John Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 150, 151

Further Reading —

John Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969)