

### **Handling Temptation**

Do you struggle with temptation? I struggle with temptation, just as Christ did; however the difference is I am a sinner and Jesus never sinned. “*Jesus ~~he~~ himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*”

(Hebrews 2:18) Jesus experienced and suffered temptation, but never sinned.

Several years ago, a popular Christian magazine conducted a survey of its readers, asking them to rank the areas of greatest spiritual temptation. The top 5 answers were, first materialism, which is the American way. Then in second place was pride, followed by self-centeredness, then laziness, and tied for 5<sup>th</sup> was anger or bitterness and sexual lust. Of those responding to the survey 80% also noted that temptations are stronger when they had neglected their time with God. No wonder here, for when we neglect God we are naturally drawn back into the world. More than 50% said temptations were more difficult to deal with when they were physically tired. As Americans we are always moving fast with goals and tasks. In our culture it is hard not to be so busy we do not take time for what is important, time with God, family and church. American Christians should be different from non-believing Americans. Yet, the truth is for many Christians their lifestyle is much like those who are unbelievers.

There isn't a day that goes by that we are not tempted in some way. Temptation comes in many forms. We are tempted not to tell the truth, to take something that does not belong to us, to take advantage of someone, to gossip, to hold a grudge, to feel superior and look down on others or to give in to that part of us that constantly wants more money and things. I was raised in a family in which ones job title and how much money you make defines you. Very American! My materialism led to

poor choices. I did not believe in God, so I could not blame Him for my bad decisions. The natural thing to do was blame my parents or my wife. Look around you and you will see many Americans have become victims of their our decisions but blame everyone else for their choices.

So how do you handle temptations? Do you struggle a little? Do you struggle a lot? If you give into temptation, which is sin, do you take responsibility? The good news is that the Bible tells us it is possible to resist temptation.

We have learned from James in verse 2 that we are to “[count it all joy](#)” when we are faced with trials, for as we will be spiritually stronger having come through them. It is not difficult to see a connection between adversity or trials and temptation. In the midst of adversity, we may be tempted to think or act in a sinful manner. Many people wrongly conclude that times of stress somehow justify ungodly responses. For them the ends justifies the means. We are tempted to strike out or strike back, to feel resentment or to respond in other ways that are harmful to us or to others. This is certainly not what God teaches.

James deals with temptation in the first chapter of his letter in verses 12 to 18. Interpreting this passage is made difficult by the fact that the word for trials, found in verse 2 and the word for temptations found in verses 12 to 18 is the same word in the Greek, the original language in which James wrote this letter. But a trial is not the same experience as a temptation. The word can refer to external stresses that press upon us or it can refer to internal attractions that tempt us. It is the context that determines the proper translation and application and the context of our passage today is the matter of the temptations with which we are faced.

There is not always a connection between trials and temptations but often the trials on the outside can become temptations on the inside. In the midst of adversity we may be tempted to think or act in a sinful manner - to respond selfishly, lash out,

blame others, complain, question God's love and resist His will. In our trials and difficulties, Satan loves to show us the opportunity to escape the difficulty in a sinful manner and we are tempted to take the bait. The point James makes in verses 1 to 11 is that trials can help us grow spiritually. But the point James makes in verses 12 to 18 is that we can recognize and respond in a righteous manner to temptations.

### **Temptation Is Inevitable**

James presents the first truth in verse 12, **“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.”** The truth here is clear, we can indeed, endure and overcome temptations. The word “steadfast” relates back to verse 3, in which he teaches that patience or endurance or steadfastness results from successfully facing trials. The sense in verse 3 and in verse 12 is that we can experience a victorious outcome or success when facing temptation. He tells us that the person who endures temptation is blessed, because he or she has “stood the test.” That term might better be understood as “passed the test.” James further writes that the person who has “passed the test” is successful and will receive the “crown of life,” which might be better translated “the crown, which is life” and this crown is eternal life.

James is not saying that God tests us, but that God allows trials and temptations and it is those trials and temptations that test us. He elaborates in the verses that follow.

Verse 13 is straight forward, **“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”** Temptation does not come from God. He does not put our favorite vice in front of us to help our endurance grow. He does not test our faith with the invitation to sin. Temptation comes from Satan, who puts some very alluring choices before

us to try to attract us to the pleasures he offers and take our focus off of God.

Remember too, that temptation itself is not a sin. The writer of Hebrews points out that Jesus Himself was tempted, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) Temptation is simply the invitation to sin. We sin when we decide to accept the invitation.

James leaves no question that temptation’s assault will come. Reading verse 14, “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.”

Notice in verse 14 James says, “each person is tempted.” James does not say “*if*” one is tempted. As Christians, we are not exempt from temptation. The fact is we will never be without temptation until we are with Christ. That is because as Christians we are in a spiritual battle. There are opposing forces constantly trying to draw us away from God. Even though people around us may not appear to be doing so, everyone is wrestling with temptation just like you and I are. Christian’s wrestle for our desire is not to sin, but the world wrestles little, if at all, and desires that we do sin in order that we are like the world.

### **Temptation – No Excuse**

By “no excuse,” I don’t mean giving into temptation and sinning is unforgivable. I mean there simply is not a good excuse for giving into temptation and sinning, because as Christians we know about the spiritual battle that is going on and which choices are the righteous choices. We are instructed how to prepare and ready for spiritual battle throughout the Bible.

James points out that we have personal responsibility for handling temptation. We cannot blame God when we are faced with temptations, we cannot blame God or someone else when we give in to temptation. We are responsible. Temptation is

not from God and God is not the one responsible when we give into it. Yet, sometimes people point an accusing finger at God when looking for an excuse. It is true today and it was true when Solomon wrote the proverb, **“When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD.”** (Proverbs 19:3) God allows temptations, but he does not send temptation. He is never involved in tempting anyone to do evil.

However, we have the tendency to find someone else to blame when we sin rather than taking responsibility for our rebellion. When I was growing up there was a comedian named Flip Wilson who was so popular he had his own TV show that constantly had the highest ratings. He had comedy routines based on the famous lines people sometimes use to excuse bad behavior. His most famous line was “The devil made me do it.” The point of the comedy routine was that his character tried to excuse bad choices by blaming it on the devil. Satan is, indeed, responsible for the temptation, but he is not responsible for our yielding to it - we are.

Trying to avoid accountability for yielding to temptation is almost as old as creation itself. When Adam and Eve gave into temptation in the Garden of Eden and God confronted them, He asked, **“Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?”** What was Adam’s reply, he throws Eve “under the bus” and tries to transfer blame to her and ultimately to God. Adam says to God, **“The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”** Now God turns to Eve and asks, **“What is this that you have done?”** Eve immediately shifts the blame to Satan saying, **“The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”** (Genesis 3:11-13) Notice, that this is not what God asked. God asked if they **“eaten of the tree”**? Knowing he is guilty, Adam was saying, in effect, “God, it’s her fault and you are the one who brought her to me.” Eve does not blame Adam but lays the blame on Satan. In other words, like Flip Wilson’s signature line, Adam and Eve pass the responsibility in effect saying, “The devil made me do it” and it is not our fault.

The truth is, we sometimes think the very same way as Adam and Eve. We shift the blame for our weakness, saying things like, “I just couldn’t help it” or “It’s not my fault.” or “He made me so angry” and “She knows not to say something like that, because she knows I will react in that way.” One of my favorites I hear is “That’s just the way I am or it is the way God made me.” Of course, people do not say it out loud, but they think, as Flip Wilson said, “The devil made me do it” - it’s not my fault.

But the fact is, God puts before us righteous alternatives when we are tempted. Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians, “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. 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.” (1 Corinthians 10:13) God strengthens us through His Word, both Living and written, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and through prayer. So, when we give into temptation and sin we have no excuse other than we did not seek God and His strength.

In verses 14 and 15, James describes the process that leads to sin. “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. <sup>15</sup> Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”

First, James says we are tempted by our “own desire”. This is pretty clear and needs little explanation. We want something we don’t have. We see a way to experience pleasure, satisfaction, or fulfillment of our desires. Temptation may involve anything; material possession, a man or woman not our spouse, a promotion on the job, the satisfaction of vengeance or anger that just feels righteous.

Temptation can be anything that offers short-term satisfaction in an unrighteous way.

James writes in verse 14 that temptation is enticing. The term “enticing” to us might

be a positive term. A new car is enticing, that outfit at Macy's is enticing or a nice vacation can be enticing. But that is not exactly what James is communicating here. The term "enticing" he uses is a fishing term that literally means, "to lure with bait." Bait is something the fish sees as good, he thinks it will be a satisfying meal, but it is a deception. Buried in the bait or the fishing lure is the hook. In the same way, Satan entices us with something that looks good and appeals to our desires, but buried in the promised pleasure and fulfillment is the hook that leads to disaster, pain, disappointment and suffering.

James adds in verse 15, "Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin ...". Once we let desire to sin grow strong enough, it will give birth to the act of sin. James adds to the progression, "and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." Even though sin sometimes brings a temporary period of pleasure, it always leads to negative consequences, even though this may not be immediately apparent.

Now obviously we have all sinned and God did not strike us dead that very moment. But we must not be misled about the ultimate result of sin because of God's mercy. If we continue to sin and do not respond to God's mercy by forsaking our sins and repenting, James says sin "brings forth death."

This has been a difficult verse for theologians to reconcile with the promises of the Bible that Jesus paid once and for all time for our sins. His death is our atonement for sin. Literally, sin is giving into temptation and acting un-righteously, and this made it necessary for Jesus' to die as our atonement. It can be a difficult concept to accept. Jesus died because of you and me. God wants a relationship with us, but he cannot abide evil in His presence. Our sins are acts of evil, so Jesus became the atonement for our sin so that we can be in relationship with God.

James describes the process; desire brings sin and leads to death, just as described in Genesis 3. The result of Adam's sin is found in verse 19, "By the sweat of your face

you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” The desire to be like God led to the sin of Adam and Eve and both became separated from God, which is spiritual death and this also instituted physical death.

David longed for restoration of his relationship with God after his long period of sin with Bathsheba, which included continuing adultery as well as arranging the death of her husband. In Psalm 51, verses 11 and 12, David prayed to God, “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” Because David sinned against God he lived as a man devoid of a spiritual relationship with God, it was not until he repented and turned back to God that his spiritual relationship was restored. Because of Adam and Eve, and David’s sin they had no joy in the salvation God have given them, they needed to admit their sin, own their sin, repent of their sin and turn back to God.

Charles Swindoll, in his book *Living Insights on James*, offers a good explanation of verse 15 writing, “James is not referring here to physical death, for then none of us would be alive. Nor is he referring to spiritual death, for then no one could be saved. The fulfillment of our lust brings about in the believer’s life a death-like existence.” I would add, however, that James indeed meant a sinner’s physical and spiritual death had it not been for the atonement, in which Jesus sacrificed His own life so that we might be saved and spend eternity with Him.

### **Temptation – Do Not Be Deceived**

James tells us in verse 16, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.” In other words, don’t see a temptation as something good and rewarding. I am reminded of his earlier use of the word “entice,” the fishing term referring to the bait with a hook buried inside. Don’t be fooled by the bait of sin, he is telling us, but realize the



hook is buried in it, waiting to pierce you and pull you in. Reject the temptations that you experience, because you have the ability to see evil for what it is because God's Spirit dwells within you.

That is the key idea - seeing evil for what it is. Even though evil lures us like the bait lures the fish. We need to see our world through eyes that are spiritually mature, firmly rooted in God's truth. Then we are able to realize that the things that tempt us are evil and do not lead to any good, no matter how great they appear to be.

In verse 17, James draws a contrast with the preceding verses about temptation and what it can lead to. James writes, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." His point is that Satan does not give good gifts. Only God gives good gifts. Remember that James began by saying that God did not cause temptation to come to us. God is not the source of our temptation. Temptation is not a good thing, but ultimately it is a bad thing. God does not give bad things to his children. Satan would like for temptation to look like a good thing, but do not be fooled. Reject that lie outright. Every good gift comes from above, from our Father. We see in God that "there is no variation or shadow due to change" that is to say, God has given us the ability to judge between his pure and good gifts, which are unquestionably from him and Satan's temptations, which offer fleeting pleasure and fulfillment at a terrible price. Peter elaborates on this idea in his 2<sup>nd</sup> letter, "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,<sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." (2 Peter 1:3-4) Wow, that was a long sentence. We think Paul wrote long sentences and he did. But, not to be outdone by Paul, Peter gives us a 68-word sentence. Peter is saying, it is all about God's glory

and he sent Christ that we might be reconciled back to him and thus when we are saved we bring him glory. God has given us “[knowledge of him](#)” so we can discern truth from temptation.

Finally, in verse 18 James tells us that we are different. James says, “[Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.](#)” We are born again into a new spiritual existence entirely separate from the spiritual nature of those who are not born again. The good news is that we who are born of God can resist temptation. We no longer have to be slaves of our sinful human nature. We have been given the ability to see that what Satan tempts us with is a baited hook that lures us away from the righteousness of God.

We are also promised that when we waver in the face of temptation, we can fall back on the promise of 1 Corinthians 10:13, “[No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. 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.](#)” God gives us what we need to succeed in overcoming temptation. James gives us another promise later in his letter, “[Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.](#)” (James 4:7) By the power of God’s Holy Spirit and his sword, the Bible, we can stand against the devil and his temptations, and be victorious. This is the goal for us as individuals, as families and as a church. Amen.