

SERIES: Walk the Talk

SERMON: **When Temptation Overpowers You**

SCRIPTURE: James 1:13-18

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Last Lord's Day Pastor Dick took the first step in a summer journey through the Epistle of James, introducing the book and sharing some practical and encouraging answers about what to do when troubles pile up. Today we are going to examine a closely related topic—what to do when temptation overpowers you. I can't think of any area in which we need to "walk the talk" more than in regard to temptation. Let's read James 1:13-18:

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Temptation is as universal an experience as is trouble. Our passage begins in verse 13 with the words, "when tempted," not "if tempted." Just as sure as you're breathing you will face temptation, no matter what age, no matter what economic or social status, no matter what level of spiritual maturity. It may come galloping boldly or slithering subtly, but it will come.

British playwright Oscar Wilde summed up the attitude of millions when he said, "I can resist anything but temptation." If you've ever read a biography him, you know he wasn't kidding, because he essentially sinned himself to death at age 46. But to be honest, resistance is not much in vogue today anywhere in our culture. It is much more popular to succumb, let it all hang out, and then blame someone else. We blame the one who tempts us, like Adam blamed Eve and Eve the serpent. Or we blame the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Or we blame our hormones. Or we blame our parents for the way they reared us.

Not that there isn't some blame to be shared. To just take one of these issues, if home environment didn't have some effect, the Bible wouldn't go to such great lengths to teach parents the proper way to rear children. But at the same time there is the inescapable factor of individual responsibility. You know, the Bible *doesn't* say, "No temptation has sized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it *unless you grew up in a dysfunctional home*" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Ultimately, if we're honest, all this blaming goes right back to God. It's His fault. We would probably never say that in so many words, but that's exactly where the blame game leads. "If He hadn't given me such a big mouth or such a hot temper or such a strong sexual drive or such a

humongous appetite, I wouldn't find myself constantly battling temptation and, more often than not, yielding to it."

So universal is the tendency to blame God for temptation that James, the Lord's brother, opens his discussion of temptation with a warning about just that.

Don't blame God. (13-15)

God is not responsible for temptation. (13) In the first paragraph of his letter, James clearly taught that God *is* responsible for trials. He brings them into our lives to test our faith, to teach us perseverance, and to bring us to maturity and completeness. From beginning to end our trials have His fingerprints all over them, and that's why we can afford to take a positive attitude toward them. We don't enjoy the experiences, but we can chalk them up as assets rather than liabilities because we know that God is in control. The result is real joy and peace no matter what the outward circumstances.

But temptation is different. While trials are intended to test and approve us, temptations have as their primary goal to destroy us. So, James says, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." Let's think about these two concepts, which together seem to convey that God has no more to do with temptation than the obvious fact that He allows it.

1. He cannot be tempted by evil. Two problems with this statement immediately come to my mind. First, Jesus was God and yet He was certainly tempted. In fact, Hebrews tells us He was tempted in all points as we are. Certainly James is speaking of God as God, not God as incarnate man. Jesus was both God and man, but it is obvious that some of His characteristics reflect His humanness, while others reflect His deity. God can't get hungry, but Jesus did. God can't get tired, but Jesus did. I do not believe the statement that God cannot be tempted is contradicted by the observation that Jesus in His humanity was tempted.

The second problem is, "If God cannot be tempted, what about all the places in the OT in which Israel tempted God?" I think of Numbers 14:22, where the KJV quotes God Himself as saying that the Israelites "have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice." Virtually all modern versions translate such passages, "they put God to the test." In other words, they tried to see how far they could go before He clobbered them. I don't suppose your children ever do that, but if memory serves me well, I think I have a pretty good idea what the author is talking about. God can be put to the test, but He cannot be tempted by evil. Evil presents no attraction to Him; "in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5).

More important for James' purpose than the fact that God cannot be tempted is that He cannot tempt.

2. He does not tempt anyone. But here again a problem arises based upon one of the best-known passages in the Bible—the Lord's prayer. You're quite familiar with the phrase, "And

lead us not into temptation." If God doesn't tempt anyone, why does Jesus encourage His disciples to pray that He won't lead them into temptation? Why pray for something if it can't happen? This presents a significant interpretive problem, and I don't wish to gloss over it lightly. I have to conclude that there is a difference between directly tempting someone and leading them into areas where temptation resides.

Think, for example, about the fact that God put Adam and Eve in a beautiful Garden. In that Garden He placed a tree which He told them not to touch. If during one of His walks with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening God had led them up to that very tree, picked a piece of fruit, polished it, and held it under Eve's nose, we would have to say God tempted her. He never did that and He never does that sort of thing. But it is quite possible that some of their walks took them within sight of that tree. At times God does lead His children into the vicinity of temptation.

What then is the point of the prayer, "Lead us not into temptation"? I believe that prayer is designed to express a heart attitude that is essential to spiritual victory—the attitude of wanting to steer clear of sin. Some Christians seem to constantly flirt with moral danger, getting as close to it as possible. If they were to express their lifestyle in a prayer it might sound something like this: "And lead me *into* temptation, but at the last minute rescue me from the fire with nothing more than minor burns."

Some years ago in the comic strip, *The Wizard of Id*, Bung the drunk goes into the tavern and asks for a soda. "I'm 'on the wagon," he proudly announces. The bartender replies, "If you're on the wagon, why do you come here?" The cocktail waitress who overhears the conversation butts in and answers for Bung, "Because if he falls off, he won't have so far to walk."

Such an attitude, Jesus says, is completely inappropriate for the Christian disciple. We should instead be pleading, "Lead me not *into* temptation but as far *away* from it as possible!" And I believe that if that is our real desire God will answer that prayer and the temptations of life will decrease. They will never be completely absent from this life, of course, and the wise Christian will recognize that he can grow by resisting temptation when it arrives, as well as by avoiding it altogether.

Now so far we have seen that when temptation overpowers us, we should not blame God. He is not the guilty party. But somebody must be. True!

We are responsible when we yield to temptation. (14, 15) The passage continues, "God does not tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." It's interesting to me that James places the blame for yielding squarely on our shoulders. When we yield to temptation, we really have only one person ultimately to blame—ourselves.

That is not to say, however, that there aren't multiple sources of temptation. In fact, it is obvious from Scripture that there are at least three major sources.

1. The sources of temptation: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world is an external source. The term refers to the world-system, the culture, and the environment in which we live. It is basically opposed to God and presents constant temptations to God's people. I read recently that an average urban driver traveling ten miles is subjected to well over 500 advertisements, including billboards, radio, bumper stickers, store signs, etc. Many of these advertisements could appropriately be called "temptations." In my estimation one of the great values of wilderness experiences or any kind of retreat is reducing the number and intensity of temptations from the world.

But we can't escape all of them, because a second source of temptation is internal. It's called "the flesh," a reference to the sinful tendencies inherent in our human nature. Suppose you have a craving for Dove Bars. The temptation to spend the mortgage money on Dove Bars could come from the world if, for example, you saw a billboard with a beautiful woman enticing you to buy one. But you don't need a billboard—just the memory of the incredible smoothness and the deep, rich chocolate may be enough to wipe you out. You begin to fantasize about Dove Bars and your flesh craves one. (As you may be able to tell, this is a time of personal confession).

The third source of temptation is the devil. The part he plays in temptation is significant enough for him to actually be called, "The Tempter" in Scripture. What is most interesting to me is that the Bible never puts the ultimate blame on Satan when the believer succumbs to temptation. The well-known Scripture verse "the devil made me do it" is from the Gospel according to Flip Wilson, not the Gospel according to Jesus Christ. (Sorry, for those of you under 40 who may not have any idea who Flip Wilson is, or was).

So the sources of temptation with which we have to contend are the world, the flesh and the Devil. But James seems more concerned with the cycle than the source, for he goes on, "each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death."

2. The cycle of temptation is as follows: bait, inner desire, sin, death. Consider fishing as a metaphor to explain the cycle of temptation. I don't fish much, but I do know it's important to choose the right kind of bait for the fish you're after. You're not generally going to catch bass on catfish bait. So also the temptations that come to us are tailor-made by the evil one to trip us up—different temptations, of course, for different folks. Nicotine has zero temptation for me, while for a few of you it has been a life-long struggle. On the other hand, I have temptations that drive me crazy that many of you probably don't struggle with.

When we see that unique bait we are attracted to it. Why? Because of our own inner desire. The NIV speaks here of "evil desire" and several other versions translate the term "lust," but the word in the original is morally neutral—it simply means "strong desire." This is important because many temptations allure us by appealing not to bad desires but to good desires in illegitimate ways or at inappropriate times. I have quoted Charles Durham before when preaching on Joseph, but he deserves to be quoted again:

Back of every theft there was somewhere a desire for ownership that became

misdirected. Behind every act of gluttony there was once a pleasure in good food that God gave. Beneath every instance of adultery has been a desire to be loved, to experience closeness, to know the warmth of human touch and to have satisfied a sexual drive that was conceived in God's mind. Even behind an act of violence is somewhere a good desire that has been frustrated and unmet until twisted into criminal form. This does not justify any sin; it merely shows more clearly what temptation really is.

The desires within us are sometimes extremely strong. That's why James uses the terms "dragged away and enticed" to describe the result. Fishing lures are not called "lures" for no reason. They have attractive colors, shiny materials, seductive smells, they wiggle, and sometimes they even blinking lights—all designed to be irresistible to the fish. (Any resemblance there to Las Vegas?) But they also have hooks, designed to go unnoticed. When the fish grabs hold he immediately realizes that what promised to be so delectable and nourishing is actually quite hurtful and terribly destructive.

The hook for us is the point where sin comes in to play. Temptation itself is not sin; even strong desire is not sin; sin occurs when we yield, ignore the hook and go for the forbidden glitter. Where our metaphor goes awry, of course, is that while the fish may never have received a warning concerning the danger of enticing lures (I don't know whether momma fish have a way of communicating such things with baby fish or not), we certainly have been warned about trying to satisfy our desires in ways contrary to God's revealed will.

James completes the cycle for us: "After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." The fish that is well-hooked usually dies. Even if it succeeds in breaking the line, it may well die of internal injuries or because the lure in its throat prevents it from eating. The same is true of us. Death does not always come immediately; if it did there would undoubtedly be a lot less sin, just as there is a lot less theft in Saudi Arabia where the thief has his hand immediately chopped off.

No, death often comes later. But it will come. When we continue to yield to temptation, we will experience some kind of death—perhaps physical death, maybe the death of an important relationship, or the death of self-esteem, or for some, even spiritual death.

I remember years ago when Rock Hudson died of AIDS—one of the first sexually promiscuous Hollywood stars to succumb. TV newscasters went to great pains to interview and then criticize certain "fundamentalists" who were so brazen as to suggest that such a tragedy may have had something to do with God's judgment. In contrast sociologists, physicians and fellow entertainers spoke of hope for remission of the disease but there were no prayers for remission of sin. It was treated as a no-fault scandal.

But Cornelius Plantinga, president of Calvin Theological Seminary, wrote, "Serious Christians are reminded by the AIDS phenomenon that God is not mocked. When someone sins, someone pays." However, he then went on to make clear that homosexuals were not the only ones susceptible to the awful cycle of temptation:

Happy heterosexuals who ignore their spouses and children cannot hope for solid

homes. Nicotine-stained souls should not be surprised by the dreaded report that one day comes back from a lab. We should all know by now that drunkenness yields hangovers and deaths, greed produces stress and enmity, promiscuity issues in disease. The notion that we shouldn't bother our heads over private immorality (the kind that "doesn't hurt anyone") suddenly seems naive . . . When misery follows hard after sin we are reminded that divine prohibitions and judgments are in fact a merciful early-warning system. None of us . . . can hope to live as we want without taking sin's wages. It is not in the nature of the universe. Thus the sprightly beer commercial asks a question veteran Christians can answer: 'Who says you can't have it all?' God.ⁱ

Psychologist Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen reminds those who will not listen to the voice of God in Scripture that there is the more muted, but often devastating voice of God in nature. Special revelation warns against drunkenness, greed, and adulterous discarding of faithful spouses, but so does general revelation. The Bible condemns sexual promiscuity. So do AIDS and herpes and broken psyches.

Well, so far this morning we have looked at the problem of temptation and the fact that we have no right to blame God; we are responsible when we yield to temptation. But that's just part of what we need to hear. We need to know not only what not to do but also what to do. And frankly, there is a great deal of practical help available in resisting temptation. I have an excellent book in my library entitled *Temptation: Help for Struggling Christians*, written by Charles Durham. In a very biblical and practical way he offers solutions to this universal problem, as indicated by some of these chapter titles:

Change Your Mind
Know What God Expects
Know Your Enemy
Walk by the Spirit
Build Your Walls
Learn to Run
Build Your Faith
Focus on the Source of Power
Know the Purpose of Temptation

I recommend this book and the solutions Durham offers. But this morning I want to concentrate on what James himself offers as his principal antidote to temptation. It's rather strange and not at all what one might expect; and I have never found it offered as a solution to temptation in any of the books or articles I have collected over the years.

It seems to me that James is saying in verses 16-18 that the solution to the problem of temptation is not to blame God but rather to be grateful to Him—not grateful for the temptations but for all the factors that make it possible for us to resist temptation. In other words, we need a mindset that doesn't focus on the frequency and severity of the temptations, but rather on the power and love of the Savior.

Be grateful to God. (16-18)

The first thing for which we should be thankful is His good and perfect gifts.

For His good and perfect gifts. Please note that these words follow immediately after James' discussion of the cycle of temptation: "Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights." Anytime you see the phrase, "don't be deceived, my dear brothers," you can be certain that many Christians are deceived about the very issue being discussed. "Come to your senses, friends," he cries. Far from being responsible for tempting you to take a lure with a hook in it, God is the source of every good and perfect gift. If we will just open our eyes we will see that if we reject the forbidden thing, God has substitutes that are just as attractive and delightful, and they won't lead to destruction and death!

Instead of blaming Him for the lure of alcohol, think of the enormous variety of beverages that God allows us to enjoy that both taste good and are good for us.

Instead of blaming Him for the temptations that face us in the electronic media, why not thank Him for all the excellent alternatives to watching TV or going to movies, like reading good books, talking with family members, playing games, visiting with friends, taking a walk, etc.

Instead of blaming Him for the temptation that comes from the seductiveness of a certain woman at the office, why not thank God for the beauty that women add to life (what would it be like without them?) and for the great gift of sexual intimacy in marriage.

You see, every time we are tempted to get our needs met in illegitimate ways or at illegitimate times, there is a far better choice we can make than to blame God and yield to the temptation. We can thank Him for the many legitimate ways He provides to meet our needs in which there are no hidden hooks.

Our text then mentions three other specific factors for which we should be grateful to God besides His good and perfect gifts. We should be grateful also that He is our Father.

For His Fatherhood. His fatherhood implies care, concern, protection, provision, intimacy. Except for a rare pathological person, human fathers don't try to destroy their children, but rather pursue what they believe to be best for them. How much more is this true of our heavenly Father! But God not only cares for us as our Father; He's also powerful enough to meet every need, for He is "the Father of the heavenly lights." That term takes us back to Genesis 1 and reminds us that our Father is an all-powerful Creator, who merely spoke the universe into existence, with the stars, the sun, and the moon. If such a God is our Father and we are His children, the notion of an irresistible temptation takes on an almost ludicrous sound.

For His consistency. "He does not change like shifting shadows." He is immutable. His requirements do not change, His love does not change, His holiness does not change, His hatred

of sin does not change. We never have to wonder if we'll find Him receptive, willing to offer divine wisdom in response to prayer, open to forgiving us, ready to refresh us after doing battle with the Enemy.

For His gift of spiritual life. In verse 18 James says, "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." Rather than tempting us and sending us on a cycle that leads to death, God chose to give us life. No one has ever received the new birth by his own effort or initiative. God took the initiative; it is a gift from His hand. We only love Him because He first loved us.

Please understand that James is not talking here about our physical birth but about spiritual birth. He's talking about the same kind of birth which Jesus broached with Nicodemus in John 3: "Unless a person is born again He cannot see the Kingdom of God."

And how does He bring about the new birth? Through the Word of Truth, the Scriptures, the Gospel. Every temptation that comes our way has something deceptive about it. It promises more than it can deliver. What we need is truth—truth about ourselves, about temptation, about God, about God's will, about God's judgment, and about the Gospel of salvation. That's what God has given us in the Bible—the truth about all these things so that we might be born again by faith in Christ.

Friends, there is nothing you will ever face—no temptation, no challenge, no ethical dilemma, no option, nothing—that does not have an answer, at least in principle, in the Word of God. Now if that's true, what logical conclusion should we draw from it? Of course, we must know the Word of God if we're going to face the issues of life with God's answers. The Psalmist wisely said, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word." "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:9, 11)

If God is my Creator, if He knows me best, and if He has revealed the answers to life's issues, then I am a fool not to search for those answers! Fortunately, God has not sent us on a quest for a Holy Grail or an Ark of the Covenant—some mysterious entity that always seems to be just out of reach. He has placed His Word squarely in our hands and given us every tool we need to discover what it means. In his farewell address to Israel Moses spoke these words:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. (Deut. 30:11-14)

Conclusion: I know there is not a person in the audience this morning who has a perfect record in battling with temptation. All of us have won some and lost some. Some have won more than they've lost; others may have lost more than they've won. A few may be at the end of your rope feeling totally helpless and hopeless. May I offer you a word of encouragement this morning?

Losing a battle is not the same as losing a war! Proverbs 24:16 says, "For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again." The righteous can fall, but they don't stay down.

But who are these "righteous" he talks about? If they have fallen, how can he call them righteous? The answer is that there are people whom God views as righteous, not because of their perfect record but because of their perfect Savior. The Gospel is that you can become righteous even before you quit sinning. In fact, you *must* become righteous before you can quit sinning. You must have the righteousness of Christ and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit if you are going to have victory over temptation, or more importantly, eternal salvation. Only with Christ in your life can you really walk the talk.

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1. Cornelius Plantinga, "The Justification of Rock Hudson," *Christianity Today*, 10/18/85, 17.