

“Temptation and [Jes]us (Part 2)”– James 1:12-15

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and meet me in James 1...

Today marks the start of Phase 2 of our transition plan at the church. Obviously our three Sunday service times have remained the same, but we have reintroduced a few additional ministries. To begin with the youth group is meeting again in person on Wednesday nights. They had a very large (social-distanced) crowd this week, which was awesome! Additionally, we now have our nursery available in the second and third services, along with children’s church in the third service.

We still have a ways to go obviously, but we are making progress in this transition. We don’t know when we will launch “Phase 3” because, quite frankly, we don’t really know how to launch that phase responsibly as it involves our in-person Sunday school classes and home groups. So we ask you to be patient. There are about as many opinions on the “right” way to go about this as there are bodies in this room. But rest assured, we are at least as eager as you to get those gatherings back together. So pray for us as we seek the Lord and His wisdom for the days ahead.

Hopefully you have found your way to James 1. The next section in this chapter has to do with the temptations we face. We are going to look at the larger section, make some general observations about how it unfolds, and then use the rest of our time considering its immediate context and a broader pattern we see in the Old and New Testament. Then next week pastor James (Neumeyer) is going to take us through one section of these verses. And then, Lord willing, I hope to unpack the rest in the following weeks. That’s the plan. Now let’s read the text, beginning in verse 12. Follow along as I read. This is God’s Word...

“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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. ¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” (James 1:12-18)

The major theme that runs through these verses has to do with trials or temptations. The secondary theme has to do with what God does and doesn’t give to us. At the risk of being too rigid, we might see in this section a chiasmic shape.

- A - The Life God Gives Us (12)
- B - What God Doesn’t Give (13)
- C - The Death Temptation Gives (14-15)
- B’ - What God Does Give (16-17)
- A’ - The Life God Gives Us (18)

It begins and ends with comments on how God gives us life—both eternally (A) and in our regeneration (A'). We have some clarification about the nature of God, which informs what He does and doesn't give to His people (B and B'). And then the central section has to do with temptation, something described as initiating a process that, paradoxically, gives birth to death (C). So it seems to me that our author believes that it is important for us to know some truths about ourselves and about our God if we are to survive the death-dealing trap of our temptations.

In a helpful book called *Tempted and Tried*, Russell Moore argues that any cycle of temptation involves a series of question. The first is the question of our identity—Who are we? The second relates to a confusion over our desires—What do we want? And the third relates to a contest of visions for our future—Where is this going to take us?¹ We are most susceptible to temptation when we get the answers to these questions wrong. This section of James strongly suggests this and in the next few sermons I want to show you that the rest of Scripture does as well. Today, I want us to focus on that first question, the identity question—Who are we?

Temptation's Identity Question *Who Are We?*

Actually, this question is pressed upon the readers in the verses that come immediately before this section on temptation. It's a context question. Do you remember what he told the poor and lowly Christians? Boast in your exaltation! And what about the rich believer? Boast in your humiliation! Why? Because it's important for us to remember that we are all on the same footing before the cross of Christ. None of us is more deserving of God's grace. We all come to faith in the same way—poverty of spirit. And we ought not let our present circumstances—be they impoverished or prosperous—conceal the facts of who we are in Christ. The Gospel humbles the haughty and exalts the encumbered.

But why draw that to our attention before diving into this discussion on temptation? Could it be because we are more susceptible to temptation when we forget such things about ourselves? I think so. “James understood that temptation begins with an illusion about the self—a skewed vision of who you are.”² That's why what James has said about our identity in Christ is so vital for the Christian life. As Moore points out,

“The satanic powers don't care if your illusion is one of personal grandiosity or of self-loathing, as long as you see your current circumstances, rather than the gospel, as the eternal statement of who you are. If the poor sees his poverty as making it impossible for him to have dignity, he is fallen. If the rich sees his wealth as a denial that ‘like a flower of grass he will pass away,’ even ‘in the midst of his pursuits’ (James 1:10-11), then he is undone.”³

When we start taking our identity ques from circumstances, then we are far more vulnerable to temptation's power than we realize. Indeed, that which we are tempted to indulge in may be seen as a means of reinforcing that false identity we have adopted as real. So understanding who we are is absolutely vital for disarming temptation of its power.

And it has always been this way. Even at the very beginning of the human story. When we think back to our ancestral roots, as described in the book of Genesis, we see our first parents were wrestling with identity issues when they fell into sin. You know the story. Eve, the mother of us all, was enjoying the Garden of God's grace when in comes a serpent. Who is this mysterious figure? We are not told. The only description we find in Genesis 3 is that he was a “*beast of the field*” and he was “*more crafty*” than the others (Gen. 3:1).

But that description alone is enough to show how these two creatures—Eve and the serpent—should have related to one another. Eve, along with her husband, were created “*in the image of God*” (1:27). Among other things that meant that they “were living signs of God's dominion over everything except God and one another.”⁴ Nothing else escaped their dominion. In fact, when God created them, He declared, “*let them have*

dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (1:26).

In other words, the serpent falls under their jurisdiction. And yet it is the serpent who questions her. He seems to assume a position of power and she doesn't exert herself against him. She was “the image-bearing queen of the universe,” but she seems to assume his level. There is something wrong with this picture. Moore puts his finger on it:

“[The serpent] persuaded her to see herself as an animal instead of what she had been told she was....At the same time...he also subtly led her to see herself as more than an empress—as a goddess. He auditioned for her role as deity by leading her to act like a god, distinguishing autonomously between good and evil, deciding when she and her fellow were ready for maturity, evaluating the claims of God himself. The snake prompted her to eat the fruit of the tree God had forbidden to her. The tree somehow carried within it the power to awaken the conscience to ‘the knowledge of good and evil’ (Gen. 2:17). The serpent walked the woman along to where she could see herself as if she were the ultimate cosmic judge, free from the scrutiny of her Creator’s holiness. At the very beginning of the human story was a question: Who are you?”⁵

So the very first temptation known to man was born out of an identity question—Who are you? When Eve partook of the fruit of that forbidden tree it was because she answered that question wrongly. And the same is true of us every time we go the way of sin through the door of temptation. This has been a pressing question for the people of God for as long as they have existed. And because we have failed to answer this question well, we have ever and always been in need of redemption, at least since Adam and Eve adopted the serpent’s perspective instead of God’s.

Not surprisingly then, Jesus, the Savior sent to redeem fallen humanity, has entered into our story and has been confronted with this same question. As we considered last week, Jesus was tempted in every way as we are yet was without sin. So this must mean that He was confronted with this identity question. And indeed He was. Consider the very first time the temptation that Jesus suffered is highlighted in the Gospel accounts—His temptation in the wilderness. Matthew 4:1 reads,

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” (Matthew 4:1)

In the fourth century there was a Christian figure by the name of John Chrysostom who pointed out that the word “*Then*” (τότε) is quite significant. It was only “*then*” that Jesus was prepared to go into the wilderness to face the temptation of that ancient serpent. Only “*then*”, after having His identity publicly acknowledged by His Father. What happens immediately before the temptation of Jesus? The baptism of Jesus. His hair may have been still dripping from being submerged in the Jordan when He “*was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*” (4:1).

The New Testament shows us that Jesus first began His public ministry by finding John the Baptist and requesting baptism. But if you had been an onlooker that day, you may have noticed something peculiar when Jesus entered the waters and approached John. For the first time, John didn't seem very eager to receive a person for baptism. There's a discussion. A debate even. But eventually John went through with it and Jesus was baptized.

In retrospect, John's reluctance was understandable. “This baptism is, after all, a sign of God's judgment.”⁶ It's a baptism of repentance. All those religious “vipers” (as John called them) were warned that God's wrath was close at hand and they needed to repent of their sin (3:7). If they entered those waters, they were acknowledging that God's wrath was rightly upon them. “As they are cleansed beneath the river, they are calling out with ‘an appeal to God for a good conscience’ (1 Pet. 3:21), that they might be saved when the flood of his anger falls.”⁷

So why has Jesus come to John. He was, by John's own admission, "*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). He's no sinner. He's the Savior! No wonder John is so puzzled to hear of Jesus' request to be baptized. John pleads with him to change roles. "*I need to be baptized by you,*" says John to Jesus, "*and do you come to me?*" (Matt. 3:14). But Jesus insists, declaring, "*Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*" (3:15). Something deeply mysterious is in the works.

J. D. Greear, who is the president of the Southern Baptist Convention presently, has talked about how this passage was very comforting to him as a freshman in college. He understood that repentance—the act of turning from sin and to God—is essential to every believer, but he wrestled with whether or not he had ever truly repented or repented sufficiently. He suffered a lot of anxiety over this because he wondered, "How could I ever repent enough to be truly worthy of Jesus? How could I ever give a sufficient response to His Lordship? How could I ever be sorry enough for my sin?"⁸ He struggled because he realized that even his best attempts at repentance and surrender would always fall short of what Jesus was worthy of. He felt anxiety because he knew that God would never look at him and say, "Your repentance was perfect! You were sorry enough for your sin. You gave due weight to My glory."⁹ That thought kept peace at bay.

But then he noticed something in the words of Jesus when he came to John to be baptized.¹⁰ Jesus said, "*Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness*" (Matt. 3:15). Not for "Me" to fulfill all righteousness. It's "us". Greear writes,

"Whose righteousness would that baptism fulfill? *His* righteousness was already fulfilled and could not be any fuller! It was *my* righteousness He was fulfilling. He was undergoing a baptism of repentance in my place, repenting in a way that could truly be called 'righteous,' so that His death could be a perfect substitute for mine. He lived the life I should have lived. All of it. He did everything perfectly in my place. So the good news for me is that I don't have to repent *perfectly*, because He did so for me. As the Puritans used to say, 'Even our tears of repentance must be washed in the blood of the Lamb.' This does not negate that when we come to Christ there must be a recognition of, and submissiveness toward, His Lordship. It simply takes off of us the weight of feeling like we have to repent perfectly in a way that earns His approval. Jesus earned it. Believe that and submit to it."¹¹

Amen! This act of Jesus can provide such great assurance and peace in times of doubt and shortcoming. It has for Greear. And it has for me.

But imagine yourself at the Jordan again. What happens when Jesus comes out of the water. Something you have never seen before and will never witness again. "A strange presence would have shot down from somewhere above you—what you would later be told was the Holy Spirit coming down, like a dove, on this Jesus (Matt. 3:16)."¹² Then a voice thunders from the heavens, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (3:17). Can you imagine?

But here is the point of all these considerations—we cannot rightly understand the account of Jesus' temptation unless we see it as connected to His baptism.

"Here, in the water, Jesus identified himself with us, and God identified himself with Jesus. In every one of the temptations, Satan attempted to counteract God's voice at this point: 'If you are the son of God, then...' This is equivalent to the Edenic 'Has God really said?'"¹³

That's not a coincidence. In the Garden, Satan began his tempting by inviting Eve to question her identity as God had declared it. In the wilderness, Satan began his tempting by inviting Jesus to question his identity as God the Father had just declared it. The Father says, "*You are my beloved Son,*" and the deceiver slithers in and says, "Are you really God's Son?" He cuts at the identity because he knows if he can compromise a person's understanding of their true identity, then he can victimize them with temptation. As Moore writes,

“Identity confusion is the reason people are able to affirm one thing and then do another. And it’s the reason more worldview training on how to think like a Christian doesn’t stop people from wrecking their lives. Most people don’t ‘choose’ fiery tempers or alcoholic binges or torturing prisoners of war or exploiting Third-World workers or dumping toxic chemicals into their community’s water supply. Most people don’t first conclude that adultery is right and then start fantasizing about their neighbor...Most people don’t first learn to praise gluttony and then start drizzling bacon grease over their second helping of chicken-fried steak. It happens in reverse.

First, you do what you want to do, even though you ‘know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die,’ and only then do you ‘give approval to those who practice them’ (Rom. 1:32). You start to see yourself as either special or as hopeless, and thus the normal boundaries don’t seem to apply.”¹⁴

Think about it. There are probably behaviors and lifestyle patterns that you are involved in these days that you wouldn’t dare, if asked, claim were morally right. In fact, you could probably tell me why they are sinful and perhaps even cite chapter and verse from God’s Word to build your case. What does that tell you? It shows that your problem is not that you are incapable of diagnosing moral situations. For some of you, the problem, generally speaking, is that you, like Eve, slowly begin to believe that you are exceptional in a way that God has not declared (cf. ‘you can be like God’) and then you find all kinds of reasons why technically your envy or lust or greed or unforgiveness or abuse of power or whatever is justified in your situation (cf. ‘I am able to discern good and evil’). On the other hand, some of you may believe that you are powerless before your desires and that you can somehow escape accountability (cf. ‘I will not surely die.’)¹⁵ Just like Eve you have forgotten who you really are. “You are a creature. You are also a king or a queen. You are not a beast, and you are not a god.”¹⁶ And when you forget who you are, temptation has you in its crosshairs.

But Jesus was different. He was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Why? In part because He never forgot who He was. You must not either, if you are to have any victory over temptation. And so I don’t think it is a coincidence that immediately before James speaks about how we are to view temptation, he speaks about how we are to view ourselves in Christ. Hear his words again.

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation,¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.” (James 1:9-11)

We must not forget the lessons from previous weeks. We must not forget our humiliation—our poverty of spirit, our lack of merit to earn salvation. And we must not forget our exaltation in Christ—that He has met us where we are and made a way for our salvation through His life, death, and resurrection. Through faith we have become children of God. That is who we are. We bear His image. Our adoption papers have been sealed with Christ’s blood. That is who we are.

And if that is who we are then we have no business listening to a serpent who has no dominion over us. We must resist him and watch him flee. This is what Christ did. And this is what we are called to do in James 4:7—*“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”*

Unfortunately for us, as James will say next in chapter 1, we don’t need the devil to introduce us to temptation. We are perfectly capable of doing that ourselves. And this leads us to the matter of our desires, their origin and their outcome. And that is what we will consider in a couple weeks.

Temptation’s Desire Question *What Do We Want?*

And then we’ll address what James’ answer to...

Temptation's Future Question *Where Is This Going to Take Us?*

And, once again, if we get the answer to these questions wrong, then we will find ourselves very vulnerable to the temptations that cross our path.

Aren't you glad Jesus got these questions right? Aren't you glad He got that identity question right? He knew who He was. He was the Father's Son. He enjoyed the Father's good pleasure. He was sent to be the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. And if Jesus ever forgot or wavered on His identity, then we would still be in our sins. As I said last week, Satan only needed to win one temptation battle with Jesus in order to win the entire war for our salvation. But Jesus didn't waver. He knew who He was. The identity issue was settled. He would not bow to Satan in the garden. He would crush him. And that's why we can be saved.

I know that not a single person gathered today has a perfect record in their fight with temptation. Not a single one of us. We have won some. We have lost some. Perhaps some have won more than they've lost. For many of you the reverse is true. Maybe you are feeling pretty desperate, hopeless, and helpless when the topic of temptation comes up. Is that you? There is hope. There is good news. Just because you lose a battle, doesn't mean you have to lose the war. Listen to these words from Proverbs:

“For the righteous falls seven times and rises again....” (Proverbs 24:16)

Have you heard those words before and wondered, “Yeah, but who are these ‘righteous’ he speaks of?” That's a fair question. And if they are righteous, then why did they fall in the first place? Why call these fallen righteous? Great questions. Here's the answer. They are righteous because that is who God says they are. “The answer is that these are people whom God views as righteous, not because of their perfect record but because of their perfect Savior.”¹⁷ This is the Gospel. In the words of Michael Andrus,

*“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.”¹⁸*

You see, something happens when we turn from our sin and confess Jesus as Lord, when we believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead. Not only are we forgiven our sin. Not only are we justified, a legal term that means to be declared innocent before the courts of heaven. But we are also clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ. Our filthy garments of sin and been replaced with the garments of Christ's righteousness through faith. That is why the Christian is not just forgiven, but also righteous in God's eyes.

Thanks be to God that His Word has proven true:

“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:18-19)

You may have come to this place dead in your sins. But you can leave today alive in Christ, if you will put your faith in Jesus. You can leave this place righteous in God's sight. That's grace. And that's the glory of the Gospel. So trust in Christ and live. Turn from your sin and self-sufficiency to Christ alone to receive a righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Let's pray...

¹ Russell D. Moore, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 25-59. This chapter has greatly shaped the content and progression of this sermon.

² Ibid., 28.

³ Ibid., 28-29.

⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart: How to Know for Sure You Are Saved (Teen Edition)* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 68-69.

⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹⁰ He credits N. T. Wright for helping him notice this insight. See N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part 1 (London: SPCK, 2002), 19-22.

¹¹ Greear, 79-70.

¹² Moore, 32.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Michael P. Andrus, "When Temptation Overpowers You," a sermon preached on June 8, 2008, and accessed online at <https://www.csmedial.com/firstfreewichita.org/when-temptation-overpowers-you.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid.