

“Temptation and [Jes]us (Part 3)”– 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 copy of God’s Word and meet me in the first chapter of the book called James...

We will share the Lord’s Supper with one another today before we conclude and once again, given the circumstances, we are going to be using those portable units that you picked up when you entered this morning. Hold on to those. I’ll give you a heads up when we are close to partaking of those elements and that’s when you’ll go ahead and peel, first, the top tab to get out the wafer of bread and then, second, peel the additional tab to open the cup that holds the liquid. For now, just put that aside and focus your attention on the Bible in front of you.

We are still considering what the author, James, has communicated about the nature of our struggles with temptations. Let’s read the text again and then we’ll review. I’ll begin reading in verse 12 of chapter 1. 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.” (James 1:12-15)

Building off the insight of Russell Moore, from his *Tempted and Tried* book, we considered two weeks ago how the cycle of temptation tends to involve a series of questions. The first of those questions is an identity—Who are we? We examined how the context of this text impresses on us truth about who we are in Christ—our humble and exalted standing—which James calls us to boast in. With that firm in our minds he then turns to the topic of temptation. This is appropriate because, as we’ve seen, when we forget who we are before God we are more vulnerable to temptation. That was the lesson from two weeks ago.

Last week, James Neumeier, one of our pastors here, helped us to see that temptation’s identity questions relate not simply to who we are, but also to who God is.

Temptation’s Identity Questions

Who Are We?

Who Is God?

Pastor James helped us to see, especially from verses 16 to 18, some crucial truths about who God is. There we are reminded that God is the sovereign “*Father of lights*,” whose unchanging nature assures us that He will always be the source of every “*good gift and every perfect gift*”. One of those gifts was mentioned there in verse 12—“*The crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*” The “*crown of life*” is a vivid way of describing not a physical crown, but the everlasting life that God graciously gives to His people. As one commentator explains,

“The ‘crown of life’ represents one of five ‘crown’ metaphors found in the [New Testament] epistles, all of which refer to unending, perfect paradise in the company of God, Christ, and all the redeemed. The other four speak of an incorruptible crown (1 Co 9:25), a crown of rejoicing (1 Th 2:19), a crown of righteousness (2 Ti 4:8), and a crown of glory (1 Pe 5:4). In each case, the context makes it clear that these are not rewards above and beyond eternal life itself, but vivid metaphors for the perfections of the life to come.”¹

And that life, brothers and sisters, is what is in store for God’s people. Truly, then, He is the giver of good gifts. And these truths are important to remember because Satan would have us question God’s generous nature when we engage with temptation. Eve’s interaction with the serpent is proof. There we find the evil one drawing attention to the one tree that she was forbidden to eat from instead of the countless trees that she was freely given to enjoy. He wanted her to think of God as stingy, as someone who was keeping things from her. The last thing he wanted her to remember is that God was the source of every good and perfect gift. He wanted her to question God’s identity. He wanted her to draw the wrong conclusion about God’s nature because he knew that whenever that happens a person is most vulnerable to whatever lie temptation is selling.

And, therefore, it shouldn’t really surprise us that in the verses we just read there are additional reminders of God’s character. Look again at verse 13. James begins, “*Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God...’*” What does such a claim show? It shows that a person has answered temptations identity questions incorrectly. They have come to the wrong conclusion about God. Why? James continues, “*for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.*” That is a significant statement.

The first claim—“God cannot be tempted with evil”—has occasioned a number of debates concerning the meaning of the Greek word James employs that is here translated “*cannot be tempted*”. This is the only occurrence of the word in the New Testament. It also never occurs in the Jewish Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was common in James’ day.² It’s quite common, even borderline cliché, in writings after James’ epistle, which has led some scholars to surmise that James may have coined the word himself.³ It’s hard to know for sure and it’s equally hard to find consensus on its exact meaning since James supplies us with the first known use.

I’ll spare you the debates, but from my perspective, the best suggestion is that the word means something like “un-temptable” or, perhaps, “invincible to temptation”.⁴ He’s not susceptible to evil. Simply put, James’ point is that God and temptation do not mix. Various philosophical conversations are sometimes raised at this point, but they exceed the scope of this sermon and certainly of James’ intent. His intention is for us to discard any thought that God—who is by nature the very definition of good—would see anything appealing in temptation to sin and vulnerable in any way. “*God cannot be tempted by evil*” (1:13).

And if that is true (and it is), then the second claim follows by necessity—“*and he himself tempts no one.*” If God in no way is tempted to do evil, then He should not be construed as the one who tempts you to do evil. He does not. In fact, He is the one who can help us with our temptations and, therefore, the one we should turn to in our temptations. This accords well with Paul’s promise in 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.” (1 Corinthians 10:13)

How’s that for good news? How’s that for hope? Not only does God not tempt you to sin, but He also ensures that no sin is inescapable for His people. We must keep these truths in mind “because the human inclination from the Garden of Eden to this day is to consciously, or at least subconsciously, blame God and thus try to palliate our own feelings of guilt.”⁵ The writer of Proverbs observed this when he lamented,

“When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the Lord.” (Proverbs 19:3)

And Scripture is certainly not alone in recognizing this tendency. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the fictional Zeus complains "it is incredible how easily human beings blame the gods and believe us to be the source of their troubles, when it is their own wickedness and stupidity that brings upon them sorrows more severe than anything which Destiny would assign" (1:32-34).⁶

Even in extra-biblical Jewish literature we see parallels to James' wisdom here. Philo, for example, observed, "when the mind sins and departs from virtue, it blames divine things, imputing its own sin to God" (*Legat.* 2:78). The most striking parallel is probably found in Sirach, a book in the Apocrypha, "Do not say, 'It was the Lord's doing that I fell away'; for he does not do what he hates. Do not say, 'It was he who led me astray'; for he has no need of the sinful" (Sir. 15:11-12). Of course, these are not inspired writings, but they show that James' concern is one that has been shared across cultures and even religions.

Indeed, the "blame game" has been played by generations of contestants since Adam and Eve, the original finger-pointers, invented it. Who could forget Adam's words in the garden when God called him on his sin? To paraphrase, "Yeah. I ate from the tree, God, but it was only because Eve gave the fruit to me. And let me remind you that it was You who gave her to me in the first place." The silent implication was that his sin may have actually been God's fault. Sinners have been giving God credit for their sin ever since humans first became sinners. "The road to self-excuse, the tendency to always blame others, finally leads one to blame God."⁷ But claiming that God is the source of temptation is not only dangerous, it is also groundless. So James' command and justification stand intact:

"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" (James 1:13).

Two more clarifications are needed at this point. The first is directed to that person who knows just enough Greek to be dangerous. If you read a little Greek, then you will notice that the word for "temptation" and the verbal forms meaning "to tempt" in this context are actually the same words used for "testing" and "trying" elsewhere in the Scriptures. Indeed, even in James we have seen the same roots in play. Back in verse 2 it spoke of various kinds of "*trials*," which is the same word for "temptation" in Greek.

But the connotations of those words differ in English, don't they? We would probably agree that there is a difference between the word "trial" and the words "test" and "temptation." There may be overlap in certain situations, but generally speaking there are contexts where, in English, we would choose one word and avoid the other. Greek is different. The same Greek word can have all three meanings (and even some others). As always, the author's intention and context determine the meaning. And while it is debated somewhat, the majority of scholars have concluded that James is using this root word (whether in noun form or verb form) more broadly as "trials" in the earlier verses in chapter 1 and then shifting to a more narrow meaning of "temptation" in verses 13 and 14. People have debated the meaning of the early references, but they generally agree that temptation is the subject by (at least) verse 13.

So perhaps you can see where some confusion emerges. James says in verse 13 that God doesn't *tempt* anyone, but we know from elsewhere in Scripture that God is said to *test* people. For example, it wasn't all that long ago that we studied how God put Abraham to the test on that mountain in Genesis 22. He tested Abraham. And lots of other biblical examples of God's testing could be catalogued. God tests His people. But we should quickly add that these tests are for their proving and benefit, which James early explained.

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4)

So God may bring “trials” (or tests) upon us, but His intention is to mature His people to leave them stronger on the other side. Compare again 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.” (James 1:13)

The word for trial there is the same root word. God intends those trials to render His people fit for glory. They may not be pleasant in the moment, but we are blessed in and through them. So when God “tests” or “tries” His people, the connotations aren’t sinister. The same, however, cannot be said about the word “tempt” and its related forms. When Satan tempts a person the design is for them to fall into sin. That’s never God’s aim for us, as we’ve seen. God tests, but he doesn’t tempt. Yet in Greek, the language that James is writing in, those two notions are conveyed with the same word. This is why context matters. Depending on the context, God can and cannot be the subject of the same Greek verb. If we are dealing with temptation, God is not the source. If we are dealing with testing, He may or may not be.

And yet, even a brief reflection on human experience suggests that “tests” and “temptations” may be more closely related than is often admitted. What test could be imagined that does not involve a simultaneous temptation to compromise? Indeed, some have even argued temptation itself could be viewed as a test of sorts.⁸ And even though God doesn’t tempt, He does give good gifts and do not even the good things in our lives provide temptations to misuse those good gifts in some evil fashion? J. A. Motyer has made this point,

“Indeed, it is even possible to say that [God] never gives any gift without, at the same time, providing some test regarding our use of his bounty. When he gave Solomon wisdom, he gave him also wealth and reputation, the very things which would put his wisdom to the test and reveal whether he would use it for God or for himself (1 Ki. 3:12–14). When he would give his people the blessing of their own land, he would give them also the perilous pathway leading to it, to reveal how their hearts stood with him (Dt. 8:1–2). But there is never an ulterior motive in all this, for his holiness offers no lodging-place for evil within his nature; neither is there the least impulse to trip us up, for his goodness forbids that he should seek our hurt. When he tests, it is so that we may pass the test and inherit the blessing. When the reverse happens, the blame lies elsewhere than in the God of all grace.”⁹

And where does the blame lie, according to James? Look at verse 14.

“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” (James 1:14)

James wants to say that temptation for us is stirred up within us. In saying this he is unambiguously laying the blame for sin on our shoulders. We will have more to say about this verse next week. But for now consider how this leads to the second thing we need to clarify. If James is saying that we are tempted when our own evil desires lures and entices us to sin, then how are we to explain the temptation of Jesus. After all, as we have considered on multiple occasions, Jesus experienced true temptation. By now you probably know these verses by heart as often as I quote them to you:

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ 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 4:14-15)

Note well, He was tempted in every way and yet He remains without sin. But how can these things be true if Jesus was fully God and God, as James has said, is not tempted by evil? And how can that be if, as James claims, our temptations are owing to our own sinful desires and Jesus was without sin? Excellent questions.

Let's start with the first of them. God is not tempted by evil in the slightest. But one of the mysteries of the Gospel is that God the Son became a man. He didn't cease to be God. He became the God-man. He was not part God and part man, like a 50-50 split or some other combination. He was (and remains) fully God and fully man. This is part of the mystery and glory(!) of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In His humanity He experienced real temptation. In fact, that word for "sympathize" literally means "to suffer along with".¹⁰ He suffered the same weaknesses as us because He shared our humanity. That's one of the implications of the incarnation.

And He came incarnate—"in meat"—because we needed a Savior who could take our place in judgment. We needed a perfect substitute on the altar. No animal could do that for us. All the sacrifices pointed to a future sacrifice that would come and once for all atone for sin. That sacrifice was Jesus. And as Gregory Nazianzen, the fourth-century church father, explained, He had to assume that which He intended to redeem. Perhaps then we should pause for a moment and consider what exactly Jesus assumed. In the incarnation, Jesus took on what Stanley Grenz has called "essential humanity."¹¹ But what exactly is "essential" to humanity?

First and foremost, it must be stated that sin is *not* part of "true" humanity.¹² To be sure, it *is* part of "fallen" humanity, but it is *not* "essential" to human existence. It is a defect, not a built-in attribute. This truth is clearly seen in that Adam and Eve were created without sin. They represented humanity at its best. Perfect. Very good. What was true of them is what is "essential" to human existence. Jesus became human in the same sense that Adam and Eve were human *before the Fall*—without sin, without guilt, and without the damaging blow the Fall had dealt to the human person. And since the distinction exists in theology, we should add that Jesus was without *actual* and *original* sin.¹³

In light of this, it can and should be concluded that Jesus did not have the "[evil] desire" that is mentioned in James 1:14-15.¹⁴ James is there describing the condition of "fallen" humanity, not "essential" humanity. Still, some have wondered—could Jesus have been truly tempted if He possessed not evil desire or fallen nature? In other words, if He was by nature completely good, without any hint of sin or evil inclination, would temptation have been real for Him? The answer is emphatically, YES! Temptation could be every bit as real for Him as it was for Adam and Eve, who also lived, at least for a time, without sin and an inherited depravity. What made temptation real (at least for Jesus, Adam, and Eve) is not a built-in "evil desire" (resulting from an inherited depravity), but from built-in weaknesses.

Being human means experiencing weakness. Jesus was fully human, so the writer of Hebrews reminds us that He can "*sympathize with our weaknesses*" (Heb. 3:15). Those weaknesses imply vulnerability. They imply limits. But neither vulnerability, nor limitations are, in and of themselves, bad. Adam and Eve were created with vulnerabilities and so they depended on God for provisions. Adam was created with limitations and so God provided for him a "*suitable helper*". Thus, we should acknowledge that weaknesses are part of "essential" humanity. And this is why Jesus became weak. He hungered. He thirsted. He soiled His diapers. He grieved. He sweat blood. He grew. He slept. He learned obedience. He submitted. He humbled Himself. And so on. He knew what it was to be weak as much as, if not more than, any person who has ever walked the earth. As Grenz writes,

"In short, Jesus of Nazareth had no predisposing advantages. He traveled no shortcuts to maturity, transcended none of the limiting aspects of embodied existence, was spared no difficulty in living in this fallen world. On the contrary, he was truly one with us; he experienced fully our humanness."¹⁵

Truly, we have a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses. And it is precisely these weaknesses that make it possible for Jesus to have experienced temptations as we do.¹⁶ His temptations, were not owing to broken desires within, like ours are (according to James), but were from external sources, just like those that came at Adam and Eve from the lips of the serpent, but they were no less real. And, as I have argued on multiple occasions, His temptations were even greater than those we experience. His sinlessness made His struggle with temptation even more severe, as William Barclay explains,

“We never know temptation at its fiercest because we fall long before that stage is reached...Think of this in terms of pain. There is a degree of pain which the human frame can stand—and when that degree is passed a person loses consciousness so that there are agonies of pain that he cannot know. It is so with temptation. We collapse in the face of temptation; but Jesus went to our limit of temptation and far beyond it and still did not collapse. It is true to say that he was tempted in all things as we are; but it is also true to say that no one was tempted as he was.”¹⁷

Is that not the human experience with temptation? Resisting is a struggle. If there were no struggle (between right and wrong) there would be no temptation. As we resist, the struggle progressively grows until either the temptation passes or we give in and sin. The sooner we give in, the sooner the struggle with temptation subsides and we gain a temporary breather. The longer we hold out, the more we feel the true force of temptation. Therefore, Jesus can understand our experience with temptation, even though we cannot fathom His.

Fortunately for us, He never gave in to temptation. He never sinned. And that is why we can be saved by His selfless sacrifice, offered up for us on the cross. And that brings us this morning to the table...Take that Lord’s Supper unit you received when you came in this morning and go ahead and open it up and then hold on to it and we will partake together in a moment.

Before we do I want to remind you of the verse that comes after that verse that reminded us that “*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.*” Do you recall what the very next verses tells us to do in light of this? It says,

“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

When we share the Lord’s Supper, we are to remember that suffering of Christ which it represents. His body was broken on the cross. His blood was spilled. It was by His suffering that our sins were atoned for. He took the punishment that we deserved and so that we could be treated like He deserved after a life lived perfectly, without sin. That’s why we call Him Savior. That’s why we call Him Lord. That’s why we have faith in Him and His work as the sole basis for our salvation. He is our only hope in life and in death. And when we partake of the Supper, we are remembering that. It’s an act of faith. It commemorates our union with Christ. We take the pictures of Christ’s body and blood and internalize them, even as we have previously been united to Him through faith. Through the ordinance we are drawing near to the throne of grace with confidence, believing that in Christ we find all the grace we could ever need. That is the right response, the biblical response, to remembering the work of Christ.

Last month I read a devotional that was commenting on this verse and this is what it said,

“Jesus became incarnate in order to atone for sin, but He also took on our nature in order to encourage us to come to God through Him. If we are in Him, we can come to God confident in the fact that the Father will receive us in the Son and provide all that is needed to sustain our faith and increase our holiness (Heb. 4:14-16).”¹⁸

It goes on,

“We should always have reverence for our God, but if we are in Christ by faith, we need not be terrified of Him. He welcomes us with open arms in His Son and draws near to us in Christ. We will rightly feel shame when we sin against Him, but we must not let that shame or fear keep us from running to Him for pardon. He wants to forgive His people, and He will do so when we go to Him in faith and repentance.”¹⁹

What a friend we have in Jesus, amen? As the song says,

*Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged:
Take it to the Lord in prayer.
Can we find a friend so faithful,
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness:
Take it to the Lord in prayer.*

What a friend we have in Jesus! “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). So let me invite you to...Take...Eat...Drink...And remember.

Let’s pray...

¹ Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam Kamell, *James* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 76-77. They continue: “Indeed, it is arguable that this doctrine of rewards, popular as it is in some circles, comes more from the vestiges of the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory than from the Bible itself. Every Christian may have a somewhat unique experience before Christ on the Judgment Day, with varying amounts of praise and censure, but after that we have complete perfection and happiness to which to look forward, which by definition excludes gradation.”

² Kistemaker is the only commentator that I have encountered that claims this word does occur once in the Septuagint, but he doesn’t provide a reference.

³ E.g., James Moffat, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1952), 18.

⁴ James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 70.

⁵ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 46.

⁶ For other examples of blaming others or the gods in Classical Greek, see James H. Ropes, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. James* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968), 154-158.

⁷ William F. Brosend II, *James and Jude* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 72.

⁹ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of James* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 51.

¹⁰ Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 122.

¹¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 355.

¹² For more on theological anthropology, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

¹³ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 164; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 2:707.

¹⁴ Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 107.

¹⁵ Grenz, 362.

¹⁶ “The reality of the temptations he endured follows from the reality of the human nature he assumed.” Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 172.

¹⁷ William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (DSB; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 42.

¹⁸ Tabletalk, May 5, 2020, which can be accessed online at: <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/daily-study/2020/05/near-to-us/>.

¹⁹ Ibid.