

“Temptation and [Jes]us (Part 4)”– 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...

I hope you had a wonderful time celebrating freedom on the 4th of July. We are truly a blessed people to live in a country such as this. In many ways our freedoms are the envy of the world. This is something that shouldn't be lost on us as Christians. In fact, believers should have the deepest appreciation for freedom, because we alone know the truest kind of freedom there is to know—the freedom that is found in Christ alone. Is there any person who is freer than the Christian? I think not. And our text today will remind us of that in an ironic way because it's about what slaves we can be to our fallen desires. It's a grim picture, but it helps us see why the work of Christ is so vital for us. But don't take my word for it, let's look at God's Word...

I'll begin reading in verse 12 once again. 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)

As you know if you have been tracking with us in recent weeks, we have slowed down substantially and taken a deep dive into this topic of temptation. We have been considering how our temptations tend to cycle through a series of questions. The first ones related to our identity and God's identity.

Temptation's Identity Questions

*Who Are We?
Who Is God?*

The past couple weeks we have considered how understanding our identity in Christ and God's nature can help disarm the lie of the temptations we face. This week we will pivot to a new question...

Temptation's Desire Question

What Do We Want?

“The second step in temptation is the confusion of desires.”¹ The key verse here is verse 14.

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

Clearly there is something dangerous about our desires. To understand why our desires are so dangerous we have to know something about a key biblical doctrine—the doctrine of depravity. We are going to look at that heavy this week and especially next, Lord willing, so think of today as something of an introduction and setup for the next week. But before we explore that doctrine and how it explains what James is describing in verse 14, we should consider what James himself has described in that verse.

First of all, notice, James is addressing something that is true of “*each person*”. This is the universal experience of fallen humanity. It is something that we all face and will continue to face in this life. But the agent in our temptation, as we saw last week, is not the Lord, but our “*own desire*”.² We can’t blame God when we fall into sin. We can’t even blame the temptation. “The temptation itself is a necessary cause, but not a sufficient cause. The point? We, *alone*, are culpable.”³ That’s James’ point. What’s happening inside us is why we fall into sin. And that means *we* are why we fall into sin.

We don’t need any help. We don’t need any external stimuli or serpent. That is not to say that we, like Jesus, cannot be tempted by some external means, like the Devil or his minions. We can and James will address that in chapter 4. But generally speaking we need no external tempter. We just need to be sinners and we will possess desires so corrupted by sin that they themselves will serve as the agent in our temptation.⁴

What is their method? Luring and enticing, says James. This is threatening language. This language provides us with two illustrations of the same idea. Many commenters have pointed out the association that these words have with hunting and fishing.⁵ The image of a fish being baited along by a delicious looking worm, unaware that all the while the worm is concealing the instrument of its death, is a helpful image to bear in mind when one reads this verse. And it should come as no surprise that the next verse highlights the outcome of such sinful desires—death. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Here’s how the process of temptation was described by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian executed by the Nazis for taking a stand against Hitler’s regime:

“In our members there is a slumbering inclination towards desire which is both sudden and fierce. With irresistible power desire seizes mastery over the flesh. All at once a secret, smouldering fire is kindled. The flesh burns and is in flames. It makes no difference whether it is sexual desire, or ambition, or vanity, or desire for revenge, or love of fame and power, or greed for money, or, finally, the strange desire for the beauty of the world, of nature. Joy in God is in course of being extinguished in us and we seek all our joy in the creature. At this moment God is quite unreal to us, he loses all reality, and only desire for the creature is real...Satan does not here fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God.”⁶

That’s so true isn’t it? When desire takes over, we aren’t thinking about God. We are enflamed by our lusts. Forgetful of what matters. Forgetful of what James says our sin will lead to in verse 15. But we’ll get to that.

A question each you should consider is this: Where are you most vulnerable? When it comes to the lure and enticement of your desires, where are you most susceptible? You may already know the answer because of some pattern of sin in your life. But even if no pattern has materialized, that doesn’t mean that you don’t have susceptibilities that haven’t been exploited yet by virtue of the right set of circumstances not having developed. Knowing where you are most vulnerable, in as much as it can be discerned, can help you know where to address your safeguarding efforts most wisely and efficiently. So where are you most vulnerable?

One thought exercise that can prove to be a helpful diagnostic is sometimes called “the desert island test.” If you found yourself on a deserted island with whatever thing is tempting you, with no one around to find out ever, would you indulge?

“Ask yourself that question now. Imagine you could do anything, you could make it happen exactly how you wish, and could then go back and reverse time so that it had never happened—no consequences for your life, your work, your family, or Judgment Day. What would it be? Whatever comes to mind might be a pretty good insight into where it is your desires are being farmed [out for the slaughter].”⁷

On the other side of that exercise it is incumbent on you to start asking yourself how you can best safeguard against such temptations. You need to pray to the Lord for help in that area. Seek wisdom from His Word, hide it in your heart, and put it into practice so that you might not sin against the Lord. Because just because you haven't sinned in that area, doesn't mean you won't. And just because you never will find yourself on a desert island alone with that temptation, doesn't mean that your circumstances won't change just enough for your sinful desires to lure you away and entice you into thinking, "Now's my chance. No one will ever know. I deserve this. What can it hurt?" An opportunity may not have presented itself, but there's a pretty good chance one will. So will you be ready? Not unless you take seriously those broken desires within you.

But the exercise should also deepen your worship, because Jesus did endure the desert island test, quite literally in a desert. No one was around but him and the evil one. And there in the wilderness he faced one temptation after another and did not give into sin. Not once. He succeeded where the first Adam failed. He resisted the evil one and eventually the serpent fled. He was tempted as we are, but never once sinned. This is why He is both a sympathetic and helpful High Priest for us. "He is able, through the Spirit, to conform our desires to his own, being other directed toward God and neighbor."⁸

Today, I think it's worthwhile to consider the brokenness of the human condition, before we consider, next time, the end of that brokenness. At the core of our brokenness is our broken desires. This is what James is referring to. But our desires have not always been broken. Indeed, God created us to have certain longings. As Russell Moore explains,

"When God created humanity, he didn't design us to be blank and passionless. There was a mission to undertake, a mission that required certain drives. In order to live, we must have a drive to eat. In order to be fruitful and multiply, we must have a drive to copulate. In order to subdue the earth, there must be a drive for creativity. That's all perfectly—and I mean, literally, perfectly—human."⁹

Satan understood this well when he slithered into the garden in pursuit of Eve. So what did he do? He aimed his appeal at those desires that God had created within her to have a "*very good*" function (Gen. 1:31). His temptation met her at the point of her desires as temptation always does. Here again Moore is insightful:

"Eve was designed to long for that which is 'good for food' (Gen. 3:6) because God had created a savory array of foods in the trees around her to eat. She was designed to recognize beauty. After all, the text leading up to the temptation account celebrates the beauty of the creation, describing the majesty of the universe and the lushness of the garden in lyrical detail. It's no accident then that she is lured along by the fact that the forbidden fruit was 'a delight to the eyes' (Gen. 3:6). She was designed to want to be wise, to be like God. She was, after all, crafted in God's image and was to represent him in ruling the creation as God does, by wisdom (Prov. 8:22-31). Is it any wonder she found it tempting that the fruit could make her wise?

The snake knew not to question the goodness or the sovereignty of God outright, at first. Instead he let her ponder what she wanted, and then ponder why she didn't have it. He pulled her craving along to envy and her envy along to action. Lured by her own desires, she became the serpent's slave."¹⁰

Bingo. He exploited her God-given desires toward sinful ends. And this is precisely what James is talking about when he talks about our desires luring and enticing us toward sin. It happens in much the same way. Except for us, unlike for Eve in that moment, we need no external being to introduce that temptation to us. We are so corrupted by sin that we don't need a serpent tempting us. Sin has so utterly damaged the human person that our own desires now do the serpent's crafty work. We don't need the devil to tempt us because we are pretty good at entertaining temptation ourselves. And that's James' point in verse 14, where he declares that "*each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.*" And if this is true, then we too are subject to a kind of slavery. Apart from the grace of God, we are, what the Bible calls, "*slaves to sin*" (Rom. 6:6, 17-20; 7:14; John 8:24; Titus 3:3; 2 Pet. 2:19). Not free. Slaves.

But why? Because we have inherited a sin nature from the first Adam. The Fall—that event where Adam, with eyes wide open, chose to disobey and sin against the Lord—has forever shaped the experience of humanity in this world. No longer are we born in innocence and into innocence. We are born with an inherited sin nature and into a world that is marred by sin. We are “fallen” creatures, shaped by Adam’s fall in the garden of Eden. And there is not a piece of us that is unaffected by sin. Sin has touched the entire person. It’s ruined our innocence. That is one of the consequences of the Fall. We are sinners. As Paul said, “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom. 3:23). And yet,

“Despite this verdict on human shortcomings, the idea persists in our humanistically dominated culture that sin is something peripheral or tangential to our nature. Indeed, we are flawed by sin. Our moral records exhibit blemishes. But somehow we think that our evil deeds reside at the rim or edge of our character and never penetrate to the core. Basically, it is assumed, people are inherently good. But if we lift our gaze to the ultimate standard of goodness—the holy character of God—we realize that what appears to be basic goodness on an earthly level is corrupt to the core.”¹¹

If you have ever seen the musical *Wicked* (inspired by *The Wizard of Oz*), you might recall the opening scene where one of the residents of Oz asks, “Glinda, why does wickedness happen?” And Glinda the Good replies, “That’s a good question. One that many people find confusifying.” Then she proposes two possibilities. “Are people born wicked? Or do they have wickedness thrust upon them?” The humanism of our day would generally cast its vote with the second proposal. But the biblical answer is “yes” to both suggestions. “People do respond in wicked ways to the circumstances of their lives—but their wicked deeds are rooted in a nature that was inclined toward sin before they were even born”¹² We are sinners by nature and by choice.

The *tabula rasa* of our age is a cute idea, but it’s not biblical. We are not born with a blank slate. We are not neutral. Our desires are inclined toward sin because we are born in sin. “How can you say that preacher?” Technically I didn’t. God’s Word did. David said, for example,

“*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me*” (Psalm 51:5; NIV)

Elsewhere, the king declares,

“*The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.* ³ *All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.*” (Psalm 14:2-3)

And, as we will see in a moment, Paul echoes this sentiment to the Romans when he is describing why all humanity is in need of the Savior. From the womb to the tomb, all of us need the work of Christ if we are to have any hope of deliverance from sin and death.

Perhaps you have seen the musical adaptation of *Les Misérables*, the classic literary work by Victor Hugo. The protagonist is a man named Jean Valjean, who has a jaded past, but is given a second chance at life. But there is a very moving scene where Valjean is haunted by the question, “Who am I?” He is reminded of his guilt—past, present, and future—and he senses the heavy weight of the condemnation he deserves before God and man. He had changed his name and assumed a different identity but couldn’t seem to shake the guilt and shame. It all comes to a head when another man is misidentified as Valjean and is about to face sentencing. The true Valjean needs only let the arm of the law fall upon this innocent man and he would forever be free. But he can’t. His conscience compels him to confess that he is the true Jean Valjean, not the falsely accused prisoner number 24601.

Recently, I read something about that scene that I never realized.

“Many readers of *Les Mis* don’t know the significance of the number. Literary scholars argue that Hugo [the author] assigned Valjean that number as a way to identify himself with the protagonist, because it signified the date on which Hugo believed he had been conceived—24 June 1801(24-6-01). Hugo was identifying himself with Valjean as a sinner not simply from the moment he first sinned but from the day of his conception. Hugo very well could have had in mind what David confessed: ‘Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me’ (Ps. 51:5).”¹³

It would seem that Victor Hugo understood something of what theologians have called the doctrine of “total depravity.” What does depravity mean? It comes from a Latin hybrid word—*de*, which means “down” or “thoroughly,” and *pravus*, which means “crooked” or “perverse.” So when we speak of someone as “depraved,” we mean that they are radically corrupt. And that description fits the sinner like a glove. “You and I are not people who stubbed our big toe on the cobblestone well of sin. We are people who jumped into the well and now lie in it with legs broken and no strength, trapped.”¹⁴

And this depravity is “total” in two senses. First, in the universal sense, it is total because every person on the planet shares this condition. There are no exemptions. This is what Paul was getting at when he stated,

“What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,¹⁰ as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one;¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God.¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’” (Romans 3:9-12)

But our depravity is not only “total” in its universal scope, but also in an individual sense. We, as individual sinners, are “totally” affected by sin. No part of us has not been marred. And this includes the “desires” that James speaks of and the “heart” which Jesus referred to when He said, “*out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander*” (Matt. 15:19). We sin because our hearts are sinful. Depravity is preinstalled on our hardware. “We can’t shatter the shackles of our sin—and apart from God’s intervention, we don’t want them smashed.”¹⁵ As Paul said, “*For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God*” (Rom. 8:7-8). We lack the ability and the desire to please God, apart from God’s grace working in us.

The totality of this state does not mean that we are as bad as we possibly could be. By God’s grace we are not. That would be utter depravity. But total depravity, properly understood, “means that every component of human nature has been infected with sin.”¹⁶ If left to our own devices, we would have no hope. In the words of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s Terminator, “It’s in your nature to destroy yourselves.” Say what you will about that android, his theology in that moment is much better than what is espoused in most of the largest churches in our country these days.

Joel Osteen famously told us that everyone was born above average in his *Best Life Now* book. But wait, if everyone exceeds average, then doesn’t that just change the average? That’s an obvious question, though he doesn’t address it. He seems to think it’s better for people to see themselves as superstars than sinners. The Bible has a different approach. It may not tickle the ears enough to fill a stadium, but it can save your soul. Steven Furtick just a couple of days ago tweeted a simple phrase, “You already are enough.” Wait, what? No, no. You are not enough. That’s why you need Christ. You’re dead in your trespasses and sins. That means, by definition, you are not enough. Compare that tweet to Jesus, who said, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*” (John 6:44). It takes God’s initiative for us to draw near. You’re not enough. Not now. Not ever.

But unfortunately the doctrine of sin runs against the grain on our age. Yet from our perspective, I would hope, that doesn’t really matter. We want to be biblical, not popular. And if we are biblical, we will sound more like Paul than many of the preachers characteristic of our day.

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:1-5)

You’re not enough. But He is enough. I want to look more closely at those verses with you next week as we continue to consider this doctrine of depravity. This will help us to see why our desires can be so dangerous and deceptive when it comes to temptations. And then I’m going to show how a biblical understanding of such things can protect from, among other things, prejudice, pride, and pessimism (how’s that for timely and relevant?). This is how the Spirit of God moves in us when we understand these truths.

And the glory of the Gospel, which I hope we will all agree with by sermon’s end next Sunday, is that the Christian has been set free and we don’t have to struggle with Jean Valjean’s question—who am I?—any longer. We can humbly, yet boldly declare: “I was conceived in sin, born a sinner, deserving of condemnation, but I have been born again by the Spirit, have been united to Jesus Christ, and am bound for glory. That’s who I am: my identity, by God’s grace, is in Christ.”¹⁷

What greater news could there be than that! To God be the glory!

To be continued...

Let’s pray...

¹ Russell D. Moore, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 37.

² What kind of “desire” James is referring to is debated. The word does not necessitate a negative idea (e.g., “lust” or “evil longing”) even though that is the way it is most frequently employed in the New Testament. There are examples though of positive connotations that could be cited (Prov. 10:24; Luke 22:15; Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:17; et al). The context, of course, is what casts the deciding vote one way or the other. Contextually, the normal pejorative sense fits better in light of the process that follows. Therefore, a translation such as “evil desire” is appropriate (NIV; CSB; HCSB). The next question that needs to be asked is whether or not James was using ἐπιθυμία in the same way that the rabbis used the idea of the “evil inclination” (i.e., *yesser ha’ra*). Peter Davids claims that “this is one of the clearest instances in the New Testament of the appearances of *yesser* theology” (*The Epistle of James* [NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 83-84). This theology basically held that there were two inclinations within each person: the good inclination (*yesser ha’tob*) and the evil inclination (*yesser ha’ra*). If this is what James had in mind when he used ἐπιθυμία, it is anything but clear. The fact that there is no hint of a counter-inclination in the context also seems to dismantle any dogmatic attempt to try and locate this theology in this particular text. Furthermore, never in the LXX is *yesser* translated with ἐπιθυμία, so one should at least question whether such a link was readily available in the minds of the original audience. That being said, there is some evidence that *yesser* theology may have been prevalent enough in Judaism that some Jewish-Christians reading this letter may have read it through that interpretive grid. Still, there is not enough evidence in the context to conclude that this is James’ aim. So Patrick J. Hartin, *James* (SP; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 91; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James* (AB; New York: Double, 1995), 194; Marie E. Isaacs, *Reading Hebrews and James* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2002), 188; contra David P. Nystrom, *James* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 74; Davids, 83-84. For additional perspective, see Roland E. Murphy, “Yesser in the Qumran Literature,” *Biblical* 39 (1958) and Joel Marcus, “The Evil Inclination in the Epistle of James,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (October 1982). Marcus argues that just because *yesser* is never translated as ἐπιθυμία, it would not be a far stretch of the imagination for a Jew to conceive of the two as synonyms. He looks at the Old Testament, Sirach, Qumran, Philo, Test. of the Twelve. His work is worth a consulting, but I did not find it convincing.

³ Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on James, 1 & 2 Peter* (SNTI; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 35.

⁴ The phrase ὑπὸ τῆς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας could modify either the main verb (i.e., "...tempted by our own desire") or the pair of participles (i.e., "...being dragged away and enticed, by our own desire"). Peter Davids argues that the grammar is deliberately ambiguous and so no firm decision needs to be made on the matter (*The Epistle of James* [NIGNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 84). If a decision must be made, however, I am inclined to see ὑπὸ τῆς ἰδίας ἐπιθυμίας (the agent) as modifying the verb, because the source of temptation (the main verb) is what is in question. Ultimately the difference in meaning is so subtle that commentators on both sides of the issue come to the same conclusion that desire is the agent in our temptation.

⁵ For examples, see Joseph B. Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James* (Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, 1977), 54. That these two images in particular are linked together with reference to sin is not without preference (e.g. Philo, *Husbandry*, 103; cf. 1QH 3:26 and 5:8; 2 Pet. 2:14, 18).

⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall; Temptation: Two Biblical Studies* *New York: Collier, 1959), 116-117.

⁷ Moore, 49.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., 38-39.

¹¹ "Human Depravity," *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2015), 889.

¹² Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones, *PROOF: Finding Freedom in the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 49-50.

¹³ "Who Am I?" by Burks Parsons, *Tabletalk* (July 2020), 2. At the time of preaching this article could be accessed online at: <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2020/07/who-am-i/>.

¹⁴ J. A. Medders, *Humble Calvinism* (Good Book Company, 2019), 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ Jim Scott Orrick, *Mere Calvinism* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2019), 27.

¹⁷ Parsons, 2.