

“Temptation and [Jes]us (Part 6)”– 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 a Bible and meet me in James 1...

Welcome. It is good to be back with you this week and I look forward to sharing the Lord’s Supper together by the end of the service. Hopefully, when you came in you received a unit that looks like this, containing the elements of the Supper. Don’t open it yet. But notice that there are two tabs on the top that give you access to the bread and wine. A bit later in the service (and I’ll let you know when), we will open them together and partake together as we remember Christ’s death that has made our salvation possible.

In the meantime, I want us to consider the final verse of this paragraph we have been unpacking for a little over a month now. Let me invite you to follow along as I read it, beginning in verse 12. 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)

Weeks ago when I began doing research on these verses, I came across some information on factory farming and how some major companies go about slaughtering their cattle. The report “profiled a highly functioning autistic scientist who had learned through years of research how to register which stimuli produce which animal sounds and how to track what scares and stresses livestock.”¹ This information proved very valuable in the beef industry for a number of reasons, including humanitarian concerns, efficiency in their practice, and because higher levels of stress in animals leads to the secretion of certain hormones that can diminish the quality of the meat they were seeking to harvest.

What this scientist discovered is that “novelty distresses cows.”² That being the case, various slaughterhouses have labored to remove anything that a cow would deem unfamiliar. So that meant that you don’t want to yell at the cows or use cattle prods or dress differently than you would have dressed if you were milking the cow. Everything must look familiar. “If you just keep the cows contented and comfortable, they’ll go wherever they’re led.”³ Eventually this research led to a new technology that has revolutionized the way these slaughterhouse operations are carried out at major companies. Here’s how the author described it:

“In this system the cows aren’t prodded off the truck but are led, in silence, onto a ramp. They go through a ‘squeeze chute,’ a gentle pressure device that mimics a mother’s nuzzling touch. The cattle continue down the ramp onto a smoothly curving path. There are no sudden turns. The cows experience the sensation of going home, the same kind of way they’ve traveled so many times before. As they mosey along the path, they don’t even notice when their hooves are no longer touching the ground. A conveyor belt slowly lifts them gently upward, and then...”⁴

I’ll spare you the details of what comes next, as you can probably imagine. I have no desire to offend some of your delicate ears this morning with details on how livestock transition to meat. Instead, listen to these words of Jesus,

“The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. ⁵ A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:3-5)

Jesus clearly understood, long before the meat industry of our day, that “livestock are better led by a voice than a prod”.⁵ And He also understood that this insight is as applicable to humanity as it is to farmed animals. This explains why Jesus, like so many of the prophets before Him, was so prone to use sheep and shepherding imagery to describe human tendencies and needs. And He also warned that there would be those who notice these patterns and seek to exploit them for our destruction. These “shepherds” would lead to death. And now, I hope, you are beginning to see what all of this has to do with temptation.

You see, sometimes the Bible describes our temptations as issuing from some sort of predator figure who is seeking to hunt us down. But other times the language used is more that of a rancher and his livestock. “You are not just being tracked down—you are also being cultivated (e.g., Ezekiel 34; Zechariah 11; John 10).”⁶ You are being led like lambs to the slaughterhouse. Go read Proverbs 7 sometime, where a father warns his son about the lure of an adulteress. Toward the end of the chapter he pleads with his son and offers this word of warning,

“With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. ²² All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast ²³ till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life.” (Proverbs 7:21-23)

And that, brothers and sisters, is what James is referring to in verses 14 and 15, when he says,

“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 1:14-15)

Later he will declare that some of his readers “*have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter*” (5:5). But in both instances, he is helping his readers recognize their own culpability in temptation. They need no external agent. Because of the Fall of mankind into sin and the resulting depravity that has seeped into every crevice of our hearts, we possess desires that can draw us out and comfortably lead us down the “squeeze chute” toward sin and our own demise.

So far, in studying these verses these last several weeks, we have looked at how our temptation tends to cycle through a series of questions. The first one relates to our identity and God’s identity.

Temptation’s Identity Questions

Who Are We?

Who Is God?

We considered how understanding the nature of God and our identity in Christ can help disarm the lie of temptation. Then we considered...

Temptation’s Desire Question

What Do We Want?

This is where we considered the confusion of our desires and how our depravity has shaped what we desire, how we desire it, and where we look to satisfy those desires. Today, I want us to consider a final question...

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

Once again, when we answer that question wrong, temptation gets the best of us. We find ourselves in a mess of sin. And if left to our own devices, reaping the end for which we have sown. James could not be more direct in his warning about the future outcome of temptation. Let's look more closely at verse 15.

In verse 15, James exploits the sexual connotations that the word "*desire*" often carries in Greek literature by personifying our "evil desire" as an adulterous female who conceives and gives birth to a son—sin. This sin is then pictured as maturing and when it is "*fully grown*" this sin gives birth to its own offspring, namely, "*death*." That's an interesting way to put things. We are not accustomed to thinking of death being born. That seems like an odd way of putting it and it's clearly a truth that we try to convince ourselves otherwise. As Sam Allberry explains, "We like to think that giving in to sin is a way of 'getting it out of our system'; that if we indulge it, it'll go away and leave us alone. James shows us just how mistaken that thinking is. Acting on sin is never the end of it. It takes on a life of its own."⁷ And that life leads to new life—death.

In this context, this "*death*" is set in stark contrast with "*the crown of life*" mentioned in verse 12. And since that "*life*" is eschatological (i.e. forward looking, something that lies at the end), this "*death*" should probably be seen in a similar fashion.⁸ It's a different way of putting it, but it is reminiscent of what Paul said to the Romans: "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Rom. 3:23).

We need to take this process more seriously than we do. Sin is not something to mess around with. Its end is the slaughterhouse. It may feel good and innocent enough, all the while fattening us for the slaughter. And this is why, if you believe what James has taught us about our depravity, your desires and feelings in isolation can't be trusted. "Follow your passion" is not good advice when that passion is the unchecked inclination of one's fallen human nature.⁹ If you let your desires—your feelings, your peace, your gut, whatever you want to call it—fly the plane, they will crash land in hell. And yet I have conversations most weeks with people who make decisions based on what feels right to them even though their decisions take them into places that so obviously contradict the teaching of God's Word. They prove how frequently we elevate our feelings above the Bible when it comes to ultimate source of authority in our lives.

Another implication of James' teaching here has to do with how we fight sin. Consider the metaphor that James has used—one of maturation. Apart from the grace of God, we are slaves to sin and this process that James describes. But when we become believers and are brought to spiritual life and indwelt and empowered by the Spirit of God, we are made able to make war with sin. What's easier to overcome in life—a newborn baby or a full-grown adult? The answer is obvious. And James understood that when it comes to the believer's fight with sin, it's a much easier fight when the fight begins at sin's conception. In the late 19th century, J. C. Ryle made this point:

"Habits, like trees, are strengthened by age. A boy may bend an oak when it is a sapling—a hundred men cannot root it up, when it is a full-grown tree."¹⁰

Your sin is not going to be a one-and-done—you got it out of your system—occurrence. The best time to make war on your sin is now. It will only get stronger. It will only burrow deeper. If left unchecked, it will destroy you. And the only way to make war effectively is with the Gospel. Because only the Gospel—the good news that Jesus died for sinners and saves freely those who would believe in Him—has the power to forgive our sin and cover us with perfect righteousness. Do you find yourself in the grip of temptation? Then the best thing for you to do is admit that you and you alone are to blame. "Then, having confessed your responsibility fully to God, thank him for forgiveness and appropriate to yourself the life-giving solidarity you have in Christ."¹¹ Rejoice that He provides you with the strength you need to resist temptation, a way of escape when you face temptation, and forgiveness of sin when you give into temptation. Let that kindness lead you to repentance. Let

it lead you to put on the armor of God that He provides and make war on your sin. Not next week. Not after you get it out of your system. Today. Now. Don't say, "God is tempting me." Say, "God help me." And He will.

But we won't say "God help me" unless we answer temptation's future question correctly, unless we see where it can take us. Get that question wrong and you're in trouble. Not surprisingly, the very first temptation we read about in the Bible contains "a contest of visions of the future."¹² God said, you can have all of this that I have made for you, but do not eat of that one tree in the middle of the garden lest you die. He set before them life and death. He said obey me and you will enjoy life to the full. Disobey this one command you will be met with death because that is the end of sin.

So what does the serpent do in order to tempt Eve? He invites her to question the future outcome of sin. "Did God really say that? You will not surely die" (see Gen. 3:4). What is that? That's the tempter offering "Eve another possible future reality: godhood apart from submission to the Creator."¹³ And yet, as Russell Moore points out,

"...the serpent did not wish to conceal judgment from Eve permanently, but only until she could fall and lead her husband to do the same. Ultimately, after all, the serpent wasn't concerned with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was concerned with the tree of life, the source of the man's and the woman's continued existence from God. The dragon knew that if they became like him, they would be separated from communion with God and in judgment be exiled from God's sanctuary, from the presence of that life-giving tree."¹⁴

And, friends, that same pattern—temptation concealing the future—has played out more times than we can count ever since. It's why Esau would trade away his birthright for some soup. It's why Israel would trade away a land of milk and honey for the short-term comforts of disobedience. It's why each of us chooses sin, each and every time we do. Do not be deceived, brother and sisters. Sin is not your friend. Temptation is not to be trifled with. Your depravity is more dangerous than you realize.

Now let me bring together some closing insights in light of what we have seen in these past six sermons on temptation. So much of this conversation has been about human depravity, because unlike our go-to response in the face of temptation, James doesn't want us to blame anyone for our temptations except ourselves. As fallen creatures—as sinners by nature and by choice—we are very susceptible to temptation and we are very capable of introducing ourselves to temptation. We would be wise to heed Paul's instructions to the Corinthians:

"Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Corinthians 10:12)

James, I hope, has helped us to do this by making us more sober-minded when it comes to temptation and human weakness. If we take his teaching to heart, then it should help protect us in at least three areas. First of all...

It Protects Us from Pride

Sin is never a good thing and we all are sinners. One would think that having this in common would breed a certain sense of solidarity with other sinners and humility in the face of sin, but that hasn't always been the case. Often in the face of some sin or the aftermath of sin in another person's life, we can come off as judgmental and arrogant. Perhaps a better response would be grief and humility. We grieve the sin and its effects. But we humble ourselves with the recognition that as a fellow sinner we too are capable of such acts. Even if it's hard to imagine us ever reaching a point where we would do what we heard some person did, we confess, "But for the grace of God, go I."

One of the sources that impresses this reality on me is the Bible itself. Make a list of all those characters in the Bible that are most often put on a pedestal and then go back and read their stories in detail. You might be surprised at their blunders. Just read your Bible and it's inescapable. Think of the headlines.¹⁵

“Brother Murders Brother in a Fit of Jealous Rage”

“Spiritual Leader Discovered Drunk and Naked in His Home”

“Husband’s Lies Place Wife in Danger of Assault”

“Wife Let’s Husband Father a Child with the Maid”

“Twin Brother Deceives Blind Father and Steals from Absent Brother”

“Man in Polygamous Household Faces Constant Family Strife”

“Mass Slaughter Perpetrated by Brothers to Avenge Sister’s Dignity”

“Jealous Brothers Sell Younger Brother into Slavery”

And that’s just from Genesis. And these, in most cases, involved believers. And these aren’t even the worst of the headlines we could mention today. Imagine the list we could compile if we incorporated the rest of the Old and New Testaments. We will soon consider in more detail some heinous examples from an individual described in the Bible as “a man after God’s own heart.” Something’s wrong with you if you can read the Bible and walk away feeling more confident in your inherent ability to *not* fall into sin. The opposite should be true. We should have impressed upon us, as Chad Bird explains,

- We are Adams and Eves: the covetous desire to consume that which God has forbidden lures us into acts that fill us with shame.
- We are Noahs: even after the Lord has rescued us from threatening perils, we misuse God’s gifts in creation to become intoxicated with the pleasures of the flesh.
- We are Abrahams and Isaacs: in a selfish desire to save our own skin, we resort to lies that endanger those closest to us.
- We are Davids: lust lures us into adulteries of the heart, if not of the body.¹⁶

We are them. They are us. And it gets even worse.

“As they are unmasked, so are we. More importantly, we read the stories of how God revealed their vulnerabilities, and we see why God did it. He was at work in their lives to reveal not how strong they were, but how very weak. Through those stories, he opens our eyes not to some hidden reservoir of integrity within us, but to the swamp of vice inside us all.”¹⁷

When I read the Bible, I become more and more convinced that I am capable of far more wickedness than I realize. Is that your experience? And that should breed compassion in us when faced with the sins of others. We shouldn’t be judgmental when we see sin in others. We should take inventory and recognize that we are just as capable of the sin we see in others. That will not only help us to guard ourselves from temptation, but also make us more Christlike in our interaction with fellow sinners. We “remember the lumber dangling from our eye socket” (see Luke 6:41-42). And we recognize that “when we believe we are better than our brothers and sisters in Christ, because we don’t struggle like they do, we believe our own propaganda. We hit the power button on the personal hype-machine of our hearts—but the fine print reads, ‘Hypocrite.’”¹⁸

In addition to helping us avoid pride, James' teaching is also useful because...

It Protects Us from Pessimism

And here I am thinking of pessimism in our evangelism. As we saw from Ephesians 2 last time I preached, all of us "*were dead in the trespasses and sins*" (Eph. 2:1). Therefore, what all of us needed in order to be saved was a miracle, a resurrection—we needed to be born again. That's something that is wrought in us not by human effort, but by the grace of God and the power of God's Spirit. It's undeserved by us and it's not achieved by us. It's a work of God. And this God can change anyone's life and therefore there are going to be a lot of surprises in heaven, perhaps even some that we have long ago given up on.

Timothy Paul Jones tells the story of some evangelistic encounters he has had in a coffee shop with a frequent patron he calls "Bill." Given the conversation and how they have played out in the past, it would be understandable if someone put "Bill" on the "lost cause" side of the ledger. But Timothy Paul Jones has a different perspective because he understands the biblical teaching on human depravity and the need for God's grace to save. He writes,

"Viewed from the vantage of resurrecting grace, Bill is no less likely to trust Jesus than anyone else who's dead in sin and blind to God's kingdom. No one should be written out of God's story, because no one—not Bill, not you, not me, not the self-righteous deacon whose never believed, not the pedophile or the abortionist or the LGBT activist—is too dead to be made alive. Whenever Bill believes, it won't be because of his openness or my eloquence; it will be because of the resurrecting grace of God.¹⁹"

That's so true. We get pessimistic about evangelism when we forget that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe (Rom. 1:16). We get pessimistic when we forget that conversion is always a miracle of God's grace and that salvation is always a free gift. God can bring the dead to life—physically and spiritually. And since there are not degrees of spiritually dead, then the same miracle that saved me can save the worst sinner I know. The same miracle is required in both cases. It's no less needed by me and it's no less powerful in him or her. So we should not give up and keep sowing seeds by sharing the gospel with anyone we can, regardless of our assessment of them. As John Calvin once wrote,

"There is no group or type of people anywhere in the world that is excluded from salvation, because God desires that the gospel be proclaimed to all without exception...we [should] work to turn whoever we meet into a sharer of peace."²⁰

When we forget about human depravity, we begin to think of some people are more capable of obtaining salvation than others, and this can lead to a pessimism in our evangelism and pretty anemic efforts. James helps us counteract that because his teaching helps counteract that pessimism.

Finally, his teaching is useful for another reason...

It Protects Us from Prejudice

The totality of depravity means that no people, tribe, or race has ever outrun the curse of sin. Since this is true then any sort of supremacist group has no biblical foot to stand upon. J. A. Medders writes,

"Nations and races have committed all kinds of hellish depravity against each other. From the mistreatment of Israelites in Egypt, through the African slave trade, Jim Crow in the United States, Nazi Germany, the Ku Klux Klan, to hate crimes against Syrian refugees in Europe, right down to sentences said among friends that begin with, 'I'm sorry but Mexicans/Chinese/Italians...'—it all comes from

Total Depravity. And once we know Total Depravity, we see that racial superiority is a charade. Every person of every shade of skin under the sun is, by nature, dead in sin. No one is better. Total Depravity explains why racism is so hard to see, repent of, or forgive. Depravity blinds us to depravity....[But this doctrine reminds us that we] are united in our helplessness, and united in our same source of hope—a risen Israelite, a Middle-Eastern man who is reigning in heaven.”²¹

The power the Gospel has towards destroying prejudice and racism has been on display since the very beginning of the church. In fact, the passage I examined with you last time, which speaks of our spiritual deadness and what God has done in Christ to make us alive—by grace and through faith—immediately shifts from this good news to how it brings together people groups that formerly hated one another.

Listen to where Paul carries the conversation with the Ephesians:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:8-22)

Take that Lord’s Supper unit you received when you came in today and go ahead and open it...

When we consider the body of Christ that was broken for us on the cross, we are remembering how Jesus was our Substitute. He bore the punishment we deserved for sin, so that we could be forgiven. When we drink of the cup, we are reminded of His blood that has atoned for our sins and brought us into covenant relationship with God. By consuming these elements, we are reminded of our union with Christ through faith. But the fact that this is a meal that is shared with other believers reminds us that we are also united to one another.

We were all sinners. We were all equally needed and equally dead in “*trespasses and sins*” (2:1). “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*” (2:4-7).

And He is showing that in part by this act. Because when we partake together, we are confessing our need for His grace and His work for our salvation. We are proclaiming that He is our only hope in life and in death. We are saying that while we are a room full of unworthy sinners, Christ Jesus is a worthy Savior. Our sins, they are many, but His mercy is more.

So invite you believers, together as one body, to take, eat, and remember...Let’s pray...

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- ¹ Russell D. Moore, *Tempted and Tried: Temptation and the Triumph of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 25.
- ² *Ibid.*, 26.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁷ Sam Allberry, *James for You* (The Good Book Company, 2015), 35-36.
- ⁸ Though even physical death is begotten to us by sin. Cf. Genesis 3:17-19; Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 7:7-12.
- ⁹ Robert L. Plummer, "James," in *Hebrews-Revelation* (ESVEC; Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 234-235.
- ¹⁰ J. C. Ryle, *Thoughts for Young Men*, 7; drawn from Allberry, 36.
- ¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *James: Faith That Works* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 49.
- ¹² Moore, 50.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50-51.
- ¹⁵ Headlines are adopted and adapted from Chad Bird, *Night Driving: Notes from a Prodigal Soul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 12-13.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91-92.
- ¹⁸ J. A. Medders, *Humble Calvinism* (The Good Book Company, 2019), 63.
- ¹⁹ Daniel Montgomery and Timothy Paul Jones, *PROOF: Finding Freedom through the Intoxicating Joy of Irresistible Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 60.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.
- ²¹ Medders, 66. He also quotes John Piper as saying, "The doctrine of total depravity has a huge role to play in humbling all ethnic groups and giving us a desperate camaraderie of condemnation."