



TEMPTATION: NO SMALL PROBLEM
James 1:13-18

Today, we continue in our sermon series on the biblical book of James. Last time we examined **James 1:1-12** and discovered that the reality of trouble comes into every life. We simply recognized this dimension of life – and discovered biblical counsel on how not to overreact to this part of our life.

Today I want to share another biblical reality beginning with the letter ‘T’ – temptation. In **verse 13** of our lesson today – notice that James did not say, ‘If temptation comes’ – but **“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’”**

In the reality and insight behind and beyond this word – lies the source of **ALL** our many personal problems and national and international ills.

We sometimes jokingly share that we can resist anything but temptation. However, as we look over the landscape of our world and the landscape of our individual lives – it is no laughing matter.

We know from the biblical witness that this is our story as well. We are all tripped up by the tempter. Ever since that war in heaven between God and Satan – and Satan’s removal from paradise and his residence on earth – temptation is simply present in our lives. Don’t waste time and effort debating it – but defeating it – and rendering invalid its ability to entice us.

The late John Claypool often shared if Adam and Eve had only asked God about the offer that came to them in the Garden – that God could have given them the wisdom to see through the offer that the Crafty One had made.

In **James 1:5** we learn “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.”

Sin often paints a picture that is temporal – full of fantasy – and fades quickly. The Bible expresses that truth by sharing, **“There is pleasure in sin for a season.”** However, the human soul and spirit is not designed for a season – but for eternity. God has placed something far greater into our souls and spirits. While bread is a need in our journey of faith – the deeper hunger and need is for God.

Let me illustrate this way. One day, while walking down the street, a highly successful female executive was hit by a bus and killed. Upon arriving in heaven, she was met by none other than St. Peter, himself. **“Welcome to heaven,”** said St. Peter. “Before you get settled in, though, it seems we have a problem. Strange as it may see, we’ve never had an executive make it this far and we’re not really sure what to do with you.” **“No problem,”** said the woman. **“Just let me in.”**

“Well, I’d like to,” said St. Peter, “but I have higher orders. What we are going to do is let you have a day in hell and a day in heaven. **Then you can choose.**”

“Actually, I think I’ve made up my mind,” said the woman. “I prefer to stay in heaven.” But after saying something about ‘rules being rules,’ St. Peter put the executive in an elevator and down it went. **Eventually the doors opened and she found herself stepping onto the putting green of a beautiful golf course.** In the distance was a country club and mingling about were all of her friends – brother and sister executives all dressed in evening attire and chanting her name. They ran up and kissed her on both cheeks and commenced to talk about old times.

After a wonderful round of golf, she was invited into the dining room for an excellent steak and lobster dinner. The evening closed with music and dancing.

But before she knew it, it was time to leave. Everybody waved good-bye as she got on the elevator.

After going up and up, she was privileged to pass through the Pearly Gates and spend 24 hours in heaven. She spent the time lounging on the clouds, playing the harp and singing. But eventually St. Peter approached her and raised the issue of choice. The woman paused for a second and then replied: “Well, I never thought I’d say this. I mean, heaven has been really great and all. **But I think I had a better time in hell.**”

So St. Peter escorted her back to the elevator, whereupon she pressed the button marked **‘down.’** When the doors opened, she found herself standing in a **desolate wasteland covered in garbage and filth.** She saw her friends dressed in rags, picking up garbage and putting it in sacks. The Devil approached her and put his arm around her. **“I don’t understand,”** stammered the woman. “Yesterday I was here and there was a golf course and a country club and we ate lobster and danced the night away. Now all I see is a wasteland of garbage and my friends look miserable.” Whereupon the Devil looked at her and smiled: **“Yesterday we were recruiting you. Today, you’re staff.”**

As William Barclay often shared: “To be forewarned is to be forearmed for battle.” To be tempted is not the problem – submitting and accepting the offer is where the damage and destruction comes from. William Shakespeare was so right when he wrote: **“Tis one thing to be tempted – another thing to fall.”**

Before I go much further in this sermon, I want to make it perfectly clear that God never tempts us. God allows the condition or environment in which temptation or testings take place – but God never tempts his people with sin.

Sin is totally contrary to the will of God. Turn now in the Book of James, **chapter 1, verse 13 & 14**. We are taught, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one; but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desires.”

So without further chit-chat let us dig in and see how James helps us to overcome temptation in our journey of faith.

FIRST, WE MUST HAVE A VERY CLEAR PERCEPTION AND PERSPECTIVE ABOUT THE POWER OF TEMPTATION.

The Bible resounds with a crystal clear message. There is a power at work in the world whose work and mission is not of God’s design or desire. You may call it a variety of names but nevertheless, it is very real. You may call it the Devil, Satan, the Serpent or simply an evil person. The point is that even Jesus had to wrestle/fight a power hostile to God’s working on the human scene. The Christian faith boldly declares, **UNLESS YOU HAVE A LIVING RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST, YOU WILL BE A VICTIM - NOT A VICTOR.** Remember James, the half brother of Jesus, had heard about these encounters first hand from Jesus.

However, temptation is never defeated by blaming it on others. Temptation begins with you and me. Some of these false theories James refutes in our lesson today are:

1. It was God’s fault.
2. It’s the devil’s fault.
3. I grew up in the wrong environment/neighborhood.

Temptation itself is not sinful. Temptation is to appeal to sin. There first must be an enticement, an appeal, and a hook that gets its ugly claws into us.

Dr. Henry Therssin in his book, **SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**, shares, “Satan’s appeal is in making man desire what God has forbidden – to know what God had not revealed – and to be what God had not intended.” It forces us to focus in on something else besides God’s guidelines. In **verse 15** it shares, “After desire is conceived – it gives birth to sin – and sin when it is full blown – gives birth to death.”

So James writes and joins his voice with the other witnesses in the Bible warning us about the tempting power of our adversary who is to be resisted at all times. This is why in **James 4:7** he shares, “Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the evil one and he will flee from you.”

So, first of all, temptation begins in us and no one else can be blamed or held accountable.

SECONDLY, BE OBEDIENT TO THE INSIGHT IN THE WORD OF GOD.

In **verse 16**, James writes, **“Don’t be deceived my dear brothers.”**

The late Dr. Norman Vincent Peale shares the story of how certain Indian youths would go away in solitude to prepare themselves for becoming an adult. One such youth hiked into a beautiful valley, green with trees, bright with flowers. There he fasted. On the third day, as he looked up at the surrounding mountains, he noticed one tall, rugged peak, capped with dazzling snow.

“I will test myself against that mountain,” he thought. He put on his buffalo-hide shirt, threw his blanket over his shoulders, and climbed the peak.

When he reached the top, he stood on the rim of the world. He could see forever, and his heart swelled with pride. Then he heard a rustle at his feet, and looking down, he saw a snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke:

“I am about to die,” said the snake. “It is too cold for me up here and I am freezing. There is no food and I am starving. Put me under your shirt and take me down the valley.”

“No,” said the youth. **“I am forewarned.** I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite, and your bite will kill me.”

“Not so,” said the snake. “I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, you will be special. I will not harm you.”

The youth resisted awhile, but this was a very persuasive snake with beautiful markings. At last, the youth tucked it under his shirt and carried it down to the valley. There he laid it gently on the grass, but suddenly the snake coiled, rattled, and leapt, biting him on the leg.

“But you promised,” cried the youth.

“You knew what I was when you picked me up,” said the snake, as it slithered away.

“And now, wherever I go,” says Chief Iron Eyes, “I tell that story. I tell it especially to young people who might be tempted by drugs. I want them to remember the words of the snake: **“You knew what I was when you picked me up.”**”

The Bible clearly teaches us that there are some thoughts and ideas which should never be allowed in our hearts and minds. If they do, we should stop them right in their travels – change our plans and go in a different direction. This is why the Psalmist leads us to walk in the paths of righteousness – so we are not deceived and eventually destroyed.

In the crossfire of competing voices between God and our God-less culture – we can become tired and beaten down. We need to be constantly reminded that our existence and purpose comes from God – and is destined for God. Nothing can erase that reality from our lives

Some of the disciples were fishermen. We have fishermen and women in our midst today. When James uses the imagery in **verse 14**, “He is dragged away and enticed.” It refers to a fisherman using just the right bait - at the right time - to lure the fish away from its place of security. The bait looks attractive and harmless – but, if taken, will mean its destruction.

THIRDLY, WE CANNOT RESIST THE SEDUCTIVE POWERS OF TEMPTATION IF WE ARE LOOKING AND LABORING IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES.

In **verse 17**, James reassures us that ‘every good and perfect gift is from above (not below) – coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.’

It continues to astonish me that generation after generation chooses to believe the tempter’s lies – rather than the Father’s truth.

In the Lord’s Prayer we use every week here at the 10:30 a.m. service we share the petition, “**Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**”

When I was a member of Marlin Houck’s Disciples Class he once said, “Pastor, someday please explain what that line means.” Well, here is a stab at it. I believe Jesus is teaching us – and the disciples who first heard it – **that temptation is no small matter.**” If I were to say today that the war in Iraq is no small political issue for our nation – what I am really saying is that it is a very large issue. Jesus was teaching – and James continues that teaching – by reminding us that every day we are engaged in a battle that very often threatens to overwhelm us and we need God’s help. We are admitting to the Lord that at times we are naïve – and can be easily deceived and fooled. The Evil One can take advantage of us – unless you, O Lord, are the one guarding the entrance to our hearts and minds.

As Eugene Peterson reminds us, “We Christians are not moral giants flexing our muscles and displaying our trophies before the world as evidence of superior spirituality. We are in a battle that very often threatens to overwhelm us – and we need help.”¹

So we are careful never to strut or showboat – or be a ‘hot dog’ when it comes to this reality in our lives. We rely on the Lord. When God declares, “Don’t go there: - don’t go there.

Now to **verse 18**, “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created.”

We know that Satan tempted or tested Jesus by quoting from the word of God. Satan knows the Bible – but never submits to its authority – Jesus did. As a Jewish lad growing up in the synagogue and Temple – Jesus learned these words in **Psalm 119:9-11**, which Eugene Peterson translates:

“How can a young person live a clean life?
By carefully reading the map of your word.
I’m single minded in pursuit of you;
don’t let me miss the road signs you’re posted.
I’ve banked your promises in the vault of my heart,
so I won’t sin myself bankrupt.”²

May we treasure God’s truth as well in our hearts – it is no small matter.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper, San Francisco, 1993, March 7th devotional.

² Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE, The Old Testament Wisdom Books in Contemporary Language**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 1996, page 244.