

Temptation

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 January 2023

Preacher: Jonathan de Groot

[0 : 0 0] Well, we're on to temptation, trials last week, temptation this week, and I'm sure in the past week we have all been tempted in some way. Perhaps we have been tempted by something in particular, or maybe there have been a number of different things that have tempted us.

And temptation converge from the silly right through to the serious. When it comes to giving in to temptation, I'm sure that we have all heard it said before, well, I don't know what came over me. I just couldn't help myself. I wasn't really thinking. I didn't realize this would happen.

And we may have said similar things ourselves, because temptation is part of everyone's experience, whether you call yourself a Christian or not. We all know what it means to be tempted. Nobody can avoid temptation. And yet when we give in to temptation, then the consequences can be disastrous.

And so if we're going to overcome temptation, then what James is teaching us is we need to know where temptation comes from, and we need to know how temptation works. And our culture fails to help us when it comes to dealing with temptation. A recent article in Psychology Today highlights how willpower isn't enough. And the title, The Illusion of Willpower, Why You Can't Just Stop. The Illusion of Willpower, Why You Can't Just Stop. In this article, the author Jeanette Hugh says that when it comes to fighting against our own desires, most people rely solely on willpower to change their behavior. But she says relying solely on willpower or just being told to stop, well, it might help in the short run. But in the long run, it is never going to be enough to fight against temptation. And so while our culture might be good at highlighting the problem of temptation, it actually offers little or nothing to help us deal with temptation. It offers nothing to change us. It is only the message of Christianity that offers any kind of change or help when it comes to temptation. And that's why James' teaching on temptation is so helpful. It is good practical theology because James not only shows us the source of temptation, where temptation comes from, but he shows us the nature of temptation, how temptation works. And then he points us to the power for overcoming temptation. And the power for overcoming temptation doesn't come from us, it comes from God. And so we'll need to think how to respond to temptation. And so three headings for our passage this afternoon are there, the source of temptation, verse 13, the nature of temptation, 14 to 15, and then the power for temptation, 16 to 18. And so let's think first of all about the source of temptation. In verse 13, the question is, well, where does temptation come from? Because if we're ever going to handle temptation, we need to know its source. Now, if you were here last week, James spoke about the reality of trials in our lives and how believers should consider it pure joy whenever they face trials of various kinds because the testing of our faith produces perseverance. And so trials are part of the process of us becoming perfect, mature, and complete, or whole. And remember, those were key phrases for

James. Perfection, completeness, wholeness. And now James talks about temptation because there's a link between trials and temptations. And we know this because the original Greek, the root word, is the same for both, trials and temptations. So if you have your Bible in verse 2 and in verse 12, this Greek word is translated as trials and trial. And then in verse 13 and 14, it's translated as tempted and tempts. And so the same form of word is used to refer to both trials and temptations. And it's the context which determines which. And so this tells us something significant, doesn't it, that tells us every trial in life, every trial that comes carries with it a temptation to sin. Or put it this way, the trials in life can be an opportunity to persevere and make us mature, as we saw last week, or they can be a temptation that causes us to sin. Because every trial that comes our way will test us, our way will test us, and we will either be pushed towards the crown of life through trials, that's what James says in verse 12, or we'll be pushed towards sin and death through temptation. And so the same trial can either strengthen our faith or can cause damage to our faith. And there are many kinds of trials.

[5 : 13] trials, for example, for example, illness, bereavement, marriage, singleness, finance, loneliness, and so on. And we can respond to these trials in different ways. We can grow and mature through the experience, or we can fall into sin. And so if we're not careful, trials on the outside can become temptations on the inside, which then raises the question about the source of temptation. Because if trials come from God, then do temptations come from God too? Well, James says no. See what he says in verse 13.

When tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me. For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. So James insists that you can't blame God when you're tempted. You can't blame God when you sin.

God is never the source of temptation. And so God may bring trials into our lives, but he never brings temptation. The temptation to sin comes from our own sinful natures, not from God. But why? Because God is incapable of evil. It goes against God's nature to do anything that would entice people to sin. And so trials may come on the outside, but temptations come from inside us. And so the opportunity to grow in faith, that's from God. But the potential to sin, that's from within you and me. And so we can't blame God when we give in to temptation and fall into sin, as if somehow it's God's fault for getting us into that situation in the first place. So whether the trial be pressure at work or strain in our marriage or difficulty with our family, we can't blame God for our circumstances and use excuses like, well, the reason I get angry all the time is because of the pressure I am under at work. And that's the job you gave to me, God. Or the reason I flirt with that colleague is because of the problems in my marriage.

And that's the wife or the husband you gave to me, God. Or the reason that I've stopped going to church, they've stopped reading my Bible, I stopped praying, is because my father is dying of cancer.

And that's your doing and you're ordering God. No, James says, the responsibility for our sin is on us. It's on our shoulders. It always has been. In fact, it has been the story of the human race from the very beginning. We have always blamed God for our sin. Remember Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden? What was the first thing Adam said to God when God challenged him on his sin? He said, Genesis 3 verse 12, the woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it.

[8 : 23] He blamed his wife. And then what was the first thing that Eve said when God challenged her on her sin? Well, she said, the snake deceived me and I ate it. And so James is reiterating the reality of our fallen sinful human condition where the desire to sin comes from within us. And Jesus said similar, Mark chapter 7 verse 20 to 23, he said, what comes out of a person is what defiles them.

For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these things come from inside and defile a person. So let's be clear here. James is not saying that temptation itself is a sin because we can't avoid temptation. But the responsibility for sin is ours. We have sinful desires and so we act on them. We never end up doing something because we couldn't stop ourselves or that there was no other option open to us. And so while we might try and point the finger of blame to God, the reality is that we sin because we want to. And so if we're going to have a faith that works, a faith that can handle temptation, then we've got to recognize the source of temptation.

And James tells us the source is never God. It is inside us. And so that's our first point, the source of temptation. Secondly, let's look at the nature of temptation. And this is in verse 14 and 15. James shows us here how temptation works because we need to know the nature of temptation so that we're prepared. Rather than being caught out when temptation comes, we need to know what it's like.

And there's a process. And the process really aims to say it can be enticed by the bait because we're tempted by what is attractive to us. It might be food, it might be drink, it might be sex, whatever.

Whatever the temptation is, it will always be attractive. Now, of course, food, drink, sex aren't bad. They're good gifts from God and so they're to be used and enjoyed in the right way because not all desires are evil. But the kind of desire James is talking about here is the evil desire that wants to sin. He's speaking of a desire that is lustful, it's sinful. Where what is attractive on the outside can become an evil desire that grips us on the inside. The desire can start to occupy our minds, it can then grow stronger, it can preoccupy our hearts, and it can then change our wills so that what was innocently attractive can soon become the object of our desire. Where our affections are captured by it. And that's when we begin to lose control and are dragged away, just like the fish with the bait. And so we swallow the bait, as it were. And then we open a door to sin instead of closing the door firmly shut. As let me just try and give you an example of the coming together of temptation and desire and how they come to bring sin. So just imagine if you can for a moment, just imagine you like chocolate. Maybe it's not so hard to imagine that you like chocolate, maybe you do love chocolate. And just pretend there is a big bar of chocolate in the cupboard in the kitchen, but you're on a diet, or you've made a New Year's resolution not to eat chocolate, and so you know that the chocolate is out of bounds, you can't touch it, you can't go there.

[12 : 23] And yet, the temptation to eat it is still there. There's no denying that. But you've already resolved not to eat chocolate. And so you leave the chocolate in the cupboard. So far, so good.

Later on, you go and make yourself a cup of tea. As you go and sit down, relax on the sofa with your cup of tea, watching TV, a perfectly innocent activity. As you make your tea, you open the cupboard, you pull out the tea bag, and you see the chocolate bar. It is sitting there, shiny wrapper, in all its glory. And you think, I've resolved not to eat chocolate. So you close the cupboard door, make your tea, and enjoy the TV show you're watching. But as you sit there, you're thinking, halfway through your cup of tea, well, there's something inside me that wants that chocolate.

chocolate. And then you have these flashbacks about this glorious bar of chocolate in the cupboard, and you keep thinking about it. And it's lonely in the cupboard all by itself. And it just needs something to be done with it. And you think how good it would be to taste the chocolate. And so desire begins to occupy your mind. Then you become preoccupied, and you can't stop thinking about the chocolate.

So the temptation and the desire come together. And then you begin to rationalize it to yourself, and you think, well, just one bit, no more, one block, one square. It won't do the diet any harm.

Nobody will know. That's my New Year's resolution anyway. And so, well, if you eat it, you can even go for a run afterwards. And you begin to justify it to yourself. And so your desire lures you to the kitchen cupboard to get some chocolate. And so what you had resolved never to do just one hour ago now becomes something that is a serious, serious option for you. And you want to do it. And so you eat the chocolate. One square, two squares, half the bar, the whole thing. And it tastes so good.

[14 : 37] And you've come so far that you sit there on the sofa with an empty wrapper feeling defeated. Now, of course, I'm not saying eating chocolate is a sin. Thankfully, I don't think eating chocolate is a sin. So go ahead and eat as much chocolate as you like. But if we are going to avoid sin, can you see how we need to be aware of how temptation to sin can meet with desire and then cause us to sin?

And that's why James uses this other image, the second one, conception. He takes us from the cupboard in the kitchen, in a sense, to the maternity ward and to birth and to conception.

So verse 15 says, Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And so when temptation and desire unite, they gave birth to sin. So remember the fishing image earlier? This is when the bait has been swallowed.

This is the giving in to our sinful desires. And so there may have been some resistance for minutes or hours or days or weeks or months or even years to certain temptations. We may have resisted.

But when desire conceives, when the desire plays on our minds, fills our hearts, changes our wills, that's when the result is sin. And this is true whatever the temptation is. Eating too much, drinking too much, spending too much, getting angry, viewing pornography, sex, laziness, lying, stealing, cheating, gossiping, misuse of social media. Whatever it is, we can be tempted by these things and the desire can be so great that it leads us into sin. When a friend of mine, Ben Trainor, he preached on this passage. And in his sermon, he put it like this. He said that it is as if temptation and desire form an illicit union. And then before we know it, we meet them in the maternity ward where the fruit of their union is a child called sin. And then many years later, sin herself grows up and gives birth to a child of her own. That child is death. And he says temptation produces very ugly children because it is sin and death. And so the process is desire and sin and death. And so let's think about this result, which is death. At the end of verse 15, sin always results in death. And that's why we should never treat temptation lightly because the temptations which appear to promise life to us actually deliver death. Sin's destination is always death. And yet we don't like to look too far down the tracks to see where our sin will lead us.

[17 : 37] And since the death for sin isn't immediate, then somehow we tend to not take sin too seriously or rationalize it to ourselves. And yet the nature of temptation is that if desire is uncontrolled, it gives birth to sin. And when sin grows up, it gives birth to death. And there's a great example of this in the Bible and the tragic incidents of King David's adultery with Bathsheba.

in 2 Samuel chapter 11. So David was tempted by Bathsheba when he saw her taking a bath. Now, he could have stopped it there, but he didn't. And because he was attracted to her, he then went and found out who she was. He was told that she was another man's wife. He could have stopped it there, but he didn't. He took it further. He got her to come to him and he slept with her. His desire gave birth to sin. And then Bathsheba became pregnant and David committed more sin by having her husband Uriah murdered. And then the son born as a result of David's sin also died. Sin gives birth to death.

And David and Bathsheba really is a tragic tale illustrating the nature of temptation that James outlines for us here in his letter. Temptation is serious. And I wonder whether that's why James connects trials with temptations. It's because we like to keep them apart. What do I mean? Well, we're probably far more concerned when we face trials in life than we are when we face temptations.

Seeing our trials as being a greater threat to our lives than our temptations. Maybe we pray more about the trials in our lives than we do pray about the temptations we face. As a pastor, I find that people talk to me far more about their trials than they do about their temptations. But it's the desire on the inside, the temptation to sin that does more damage to our faith than our trials. And so the implication is we should never be ignorant about the nature of temptation or somehow think that we have got sin under control. That desire will never blow up in our hearts and minds and cause us to sin.

But sin ultimately leads to death. And so if we don't seek forgiveness for our sin and turn from our sin, then there's going to be death in one way or another in our lives. Remember the chocolate and the diet?

[20 : 26] Well, if you eat the chocolate, the diet dies. You commit adultery in your marriage, then the marriage dies. At work, you begin to lie and steal and cheat. Your integrity dies.

And then probably your job dies with it. And so we need to grasp the source of temptation. It's never from God. It's always from within. And we need to be familiar with the nature of temptation, at least from desire to sin to death. And yet we need more than simply knowing the source and being familiar with the nature of temptation. What we need is the power for temptation. And that's where James leaves us. He doesn't leave us in despair. And so thirdly, let's think about the power for temptation. Verse 16 and 18. James doesn't leave us here in despair, in sin, defeated. Defeated by our temptations condemned by our sin. He tells us the good news that we need to hear. Because we'll never be able to overcome temptation just by being told to stop it. Trying hard to stop it is never the answer.

But giving into temptation is never the attitude either. Because James wants us to discover the power for temptation that comes from our heavenly Father. See what he says in verse 16 and 17.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. So James has just said that God is never the source of temptation or anything evil. And now he says God is good, and God gives good gifts to his children. And so James doesn't just want to tell us what temptation is like, although we need to know. James wants to tell us what God is like, because that's what we need to know. Because it's only by knowing God and what God has done that we can have the power for temptation.

God is the loving Father, he says, of all those who have faith in Jesus. And so everything we have has been given to us by God. And so far from God enticing people to sin and evil, God generously gives good gifts to his people. Whether it's the air that we breathe, or the life we enjoy, or the food we eat, or the strength we have. James says every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. So he says God is unchangeable.

[23 : 08] And there is no dark side to God. I had a Nigerian friend in Edinburgh, and he would always say, God is good all the time. All the time, God is good. And it's so important that we get this.

Because when we face trials and our faith is tested, we might doubt God's goodness. And when we doubt God's goodness, that's when we're prone to fall into sin. And that is exactly what Satan the devil wants us to do. Remember how Satan tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden by asking, did God really say, you must not eat fruit from any tree in the garden? And what he implied was that God is not as good as he seems to be. That God doesn't really want what is best for you. And that God is a God who restricts your freedom. And that's really what's present in every temptation, isn't it?

The subtle implication is that God isn't good, and that God doesn't want what's best for us. And so we've got to know that God is pure goodness if we're ever going to have the power to resist temptation. So how do we know that God is good? Well, by remembering what God has done for us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so James says in 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. And so this is how God is good, and this is how gracious God has been. And so the word birth here in verse 18 links these sections together. It links what James is saying here with what he just said before. Because in contrast to sin, which gives birth to death, James is saying God gives birth to life, life in you and life in me.

He has given us birth through the word of truth. The word of truth is God's word, or another way to put it is the word of truth is the gospel. God's word points to the gospel of the Lord Jesus. So it's the same. And so the temptation to sin comes from within, in our hearts. Our desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and then sin gives birth to death. And yet the gospel, or the good news of Jesus, is that Jesus entered into our world. And he was, as Hebrews tells us, tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin. So Jesus lived the perfect life and died on the cross. And then he was raised from the dead, defeating Satan, sin, and death. And so James is speaking here about God's goodness and grace and salvation. Because Jesus died to take the punishment for our sin. And so we can be forgiven and then have a new birth. And it's a spiritual birth, or a regeneration that God gives to his creatures. And this regeneration he calls his people as the first fruits of this new thing, this new birth that he brings. And so in this world of sin and death, the spiritual birth of believers is a sign that God will eventually restore the whole creation. Where the ultimate renewal of the entire universe in the future includes the renewal of God's people right now. People like you and me. And so James is saying here that we're not on our own in our fight against temptation and sin. If we have been reborn for eternal life in the new creation, then due to God's goodness and grace, then there is power for resisting temptation and avoiding sin. Because it's when we forget the beauty of what God has done for us in Jesus that we easily fall into temptation and sin. But as we are convinced of the goodness of God in our heads and the grace of God sinks deeper into our hearts, then our desires and our passions and our affections are being remade into what they should be. Making us want to say no to sin and yes to God.

Seeking satisfaction in God and not in sin. Because sin leads to death and separation from God forever in hell. And so the implication is, if you're here and you wouldn't say you were a Christian, it is to know that yielding to sin will never give you the satisfaction that you crave in life.

[27 : 55] It might for a short while, but it will never satisfy you in the long run. Because our deepest desires will only ever be met in the God who made us. And so it's only as we respond to the good news of Jesus Christ that we discover the antidote to our sinful hearts and death itself comes from him. Because when we fail and when we fall into temptation, this good news of Jesus promises us forgiveness. As God refashions us, remakes us and shapes us into what we should be, what he wants us to be.

And so the great hope is that in Jesus Christ, we have a Lord who, if we receive him, will fulfill us completely. And yet if we fail him, he will forgive us eternally. That is good news.