

**James: sermon #2**  
**Overcoming temptation**  
(James 1:13-18)

## Introduction

In the last sermon (the first in this series from the book of James) we learned that Christians mature spiritually as they persevere in faith through trials. Sometimes these trials come as *tests* from the *outside*—sometimes sent from God and sometimes simply allowed by God. Now in **James 1:13-18** we learn of other kinds of trials that come from the *inside*—James calls them **temptations**. Temptations never come from God—though testing's on the outside can lead to temptations on the inside. For example, when our circumstances are difficult, we may find ourselves complaining against God, questioning his love, and resisting his will. At this point, Satan provides us with opportunities to escape through our own devices. ***These opportunities are temptations.***

**Christians mature spiritually as they persevere in faith through temptations**—not through mere human effort, but **through participation in the life of Jesus which is ours by grace**. This is the outworking of the gospel of grace—the good news about what God has done and is doing for us and in us through Jesus. James highlights three gospel truths concerning persevering in faith through temptations: 1) sin's outcome, 2) God's goodness and 3) God's divine nature within.

## 1. Sin's outcome (James 1:13–16)

***1:13 When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. 16 Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.***

James starts with a negative proposition: **temptation is NOT from God—rather it comes from within us**. And succumbing to these inner temptations has **consequences**—namely sin, which leads to death. We tend to think of sin as a single act, but James wants us to know that **it is a part of a dynamic process**—one that has four progressive stages in a downward spiral:

### 1. ***Evil desire*** (v. 14a)

*14 each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire...*

The downward spiral begins with **desire**. Now understand that desire is not wrong—in fact our desires are gifts from God that should be celebrated and protected. They are not sinful. But when we satisfy godly desires in ways outside God's will we are headed down a destructive path. Eating is normal; **gluttony is sin**. Sleep is normal; **laziness is sin**.

Sexual desire is normal; **lust is sin**. It is not wrong to desire to pass an examination. **But cheating to pass leads into the downward spiral.**

What is the answer? Some try to be “spiritual” by denying normal desires; **but this only makes them less than human**. The answer is not to deny desire but to **channel it** in a positive, **godly direction—toward life and away from death**. This we can do through Jesus **as we experience his victory over evil desire**. The progress may be slow—two steps forward and one back. **But gradually, over time, we can experience more and more of Jesus’ victory.**

## 2. *Deception (v. 14b)*

*14 each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is **dragged away and enticed**.*

No temptation appears as temptation; **it always seems more alluring than it really is**. James used a hunting and a fishing analogy here to make his point. **Dragged away** carries the idea of baiting a trap; and **enticed** in the Greek means “to bait a hook.” The hunter and the fisherman have to use bait to attract and catch their prey. No animal is deliberately going to step into a trap and no fish will knowingly bite at a naked hook. The idea is to **hide** the trap and the hook.

Temptation is the **bait** that appeals to our natural desires. The bait not only attracts us, but it also hides the fact that yielding to the desire will eventually bring tragic consequences (death). It is the bait that is the exciting thing. **Lot** would never have moved toward Sodom had he not seen the “well-watered” plains of Jordan (**Gen. 13:10**). When **David** looked on his neighbor’s wife, he would never have committed adultery had he seen the tragic consequences: the death of a baby (he and Bathsheba’s son), the murder of a brave and devoted soldier (Uriah), the violation of a daughter (Tamar). **The bait keeps us from seeing the ultimate consequences of sin.**

When Jesus was tempted by Satan, **he battled the temptation with the Word of God**. Three times he said, “It is written.” From the human point of view, turning stones into bread to satisfy hunger is sensible; but not from God’s point of view. Knowing Scripture helps us detect the bait and the hook and deal with it decisively. This is what it means to **walk by faith** and not by sight.

## 3. *Disobedience (v. 15a)*

*15 Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin...*

We have moved from the **emotions** (desire) and the **intellect** (deception) to the **will**. Here James changed the picture from hunting and fishing to the birth of a baby. Desire conceives a method for taking the bait. **The will approves and acts; and the result is sin (an act contrary to God’s will for us)**. Conforming to God’s will for us is a matter of the will, **not the feelings**. Children operate on the basis of feeling, but **mature adults operate on the basis of will**. *They act because it is right, no matter how they may feel*. This explains why immature Christians easily fall into temptation:

**they let their feelings make the decisions.** The more we exercise our wills in saying ‘yes’ to the Spirit and ‘no’ to evil desire, **the more we bring our lives under God’s control: “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Phil. 2:13).**

#### 4. **Death (v. 15b)**

*15b ...and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death*

Disobedience takes us toward death and away from life. James is not talking here about losing our salvation, but about experiencing a ‘living death.’ God wants us to experience fully Jesus’ life—to live in the light, not the dark. **But succumbing to temptation by sinning, places us in darkness.**

**Illustration:** These four stages in the downward spiral from desire to death are depicted in the first sin recorded in the Bible in **Genesis 3**. The serpent used *desire* to interest Eve: **“For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).** Is there anything wrong with gaining knowledge? Is there anything wrong with eating food? Eve saw that “the fruit of the tree was good for food” (**Gen. 3:6**), and her desire was aroused.

Paul described the deception of Eve: **“I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3).** Satan is the arch-deceiver, and **he seeks to deceive the mind.** The bait that he used with Eve was the fact that the forbidden tree was good and pleasant, and that eating of it would make her wise. She saw the bait but forgot the Lord’s warning: **“For when you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17).** Eve disobeyed God by taking the fruit of the tree and eating it. Then she shared it with her husband, and he disobeyed God. This disobedience plunged the human race into darkness and death (**Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Tim. 2:12–15; 1 Cor. 15:21–22**).

Whenever you are faced with temptation, get your eyes off the bait and look ahead to see the ultimate consequences of sin: **death.** Indeed **“the wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23a). **That’s the bad news; but then James takes us to the good news,** just like Paul did in adding that **“the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23b).**

## **2. God’s goodness (James 1:17)**

*17 Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*

One of the most devastating consequences of the downward spiral of temptation leading to sin and the resultant experience of death **is coming to believe that we are defeated—that God does not love us and care for us.** When Satan approached Eve, he suggested that if God really did love her, he would permit her to eat of the

forbidden tree. When Satan tempted Jesus, he raised the question of hunger. ***“If your Father loves you Jesus, why are you hungry?”***

The goodness of God is a powerful weapon against temptation. **Since God is good, we do not need any other person (including Satan) to meet our needs.** It is better to be hungry **in** the will of God than full **outside** the will of God. Once we **start to doubt** God’s goodness, we will be attracted to Satan’s offers; and the natural desires within will reach out for his bait. Moses warned Israel not to forget God’s goodness when they began to enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land (**Deut. 6:10–15**). **We need this warning today; and we need to embrace the four facts that James presented about the overwhelming goodness of God:**

### **1. God gives only good gifts**

Everything good in this world comes from God. If it did not come from God, it is not good. **If it comes from God, it must be good, even if we do not see the goodness in it immediately.** Paul’s thorn in the flesh was given to him by God and it seemed to be a strange gift; yet it became a tremendous blessing to him (**2 Cor. 12:1–10**).

### **b. The way God gives is good**

We can translate **verse 17a** as ***“Every good gift and every good act of giving....”*** It is possible for someone to give us a good gift in a manner that is less than good. The value of the gift is diminished by the way it is given. **But when God gives us a blessing, he always does so in a loving, gracious manner. What** he gives and **how** he gives it are both good.

### **1. He gives constantly**

**“Coming down”** is a present participle: ***“it keeps on coming down.”*** God does not give occasionally; **he gives constantly. Even when we do not see his gifts, he is sending them.** How do we know this? Because he **tells** us so and we **believe** his word.

### **2. God does not change**

There are no shadows with the Father of the heavenly lights. It is impossible for God to change. He cannot change for the worse because he is holy; he cannot change for the better because he is perfect. The light of the sun varies as the earth changes, but the sun itself is still shining. **If shadows come between us and the Father, he did not cause them.** He is the unchanging God. This means that we should **never question his love or doubt his goodness** when temptations appear.

**Illustration:** If King David had remembered the goodness of the Lord, he would not have taken Bathsheba and committed those terrible sins. At least this is what Nathan the prophet told the king: ***“Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you***

*even more*' (2 Samuel 12:7-8 NIV). Note the repetition of the word *give* in this brief statement. God had been good to David, yet David forgot God's goodness and took the bait.

The first barrier against temptation is a negative one: **the outcome of sin**. This second barrier is positive: **the goodness of God. A fear of sin's consequences is appropriate and helpful, but the love of God is far more powerful. We can say no** to temptation out of fear of consequences, or we **can say yes** to God because he has already been so generous to us, and because we love him for it.

**Illustration:** It was this **positive attitude that helped keep Joseph from sinning** when he was tempted by his master's wife (Gen. 39:7ff). "*Behold, with me around, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil, and sin against God?*" (Gen. 39:8-9, NASB) Joseph knew that all these blessings had come from God. It was the goodness of God, through the hands of his employer, that restrained him in the hour of temptation.

**God's gifts are always better than Satan's bargains.** Satan never gives any gifts, because you end up *paying for them dearly*. "*It is the blessing of the Lord that makes rich, and he adds no sorrow to it*" (Prov. 10:22, NASB). Achan forgot the warning of God and the goodness of God, saw the forbidden wealth, coveted it, and took it. He became rich, but the sorrow that followed turned his riches into poverty (Joshua 7).

The next time you are tempted, **meditate on the goodness of God in your life**. If you think you need something, **wait on the Lord to provide it**. Never toy with the devil's bait. One purpose for temptation is to **teach us patience**. David was tempted twice to kill King Saul and hasten his own coronation, but he resisted the temptation and waited for God's time.

### **3. God's divine nature within (James 1:18)**

*18 He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*

In the first truth, God says, "**Look ahead and see the consequences of succumbing to temptation.**" In the second truth, he says, "**Look around and see how good I have been to you.**" But with this third truth, God says, "**Look within and realize that you have been born from above and possess my divine nature—I am with you and for you.**"

James used birth as a picture of desire leading to sin and death (James 1:15). He also used it to explain how we can **enjoy victory over temptation and sin**. The Apostle

John used a similar approach in **1 John 3:9**, where “**God’s seed**” refers to the **divine life and nature within the believer**. Note the **characteristics of this birth**:

### 1. ***It is divine***

Nicodemus thought he had to reenter his mother’s womb to be born again, but he was wrong. This birth is not of the flesh: **it is from above (John 3:1–7)**. It is the work of God. Just as we did not generate our own human birth, **we cannot generate our own spiritual birth**. In one sense, we were born again in eternity past when we were predestined to salvation in Jesus “**before the creation of the world**” (Eph. 1:4). In another sense, we were born again when Jesus accomplished for us our predestined purpose through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension (**Romans 6**). And in another sense we were born again at the moment the blinders were stripped from our eyes and **we truly saw and believed that Jesus truly is our righteousness, our life, our Savior**. These miracles are all from God. Our new birth is a **divine gift**.

### 2. ***It is gracious***

We did not earn or deserve this birth—that’s why we call it a ‘**gift**’; **God gave us spiritual birth because of his own grace and will**. We are “**children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God**” (John 1:13). No one can be born again because of his relatives, his resolutions, or his religion. **The new birth is the work of God**.

### 3. ***It is through God’s word***

Just as human birth requires two parents, so divine birth has two parents: the **Word of God and the Spirit of God**. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but **the Spirit gives birth to spirit**: “**That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit**” (John 3:6). “*For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God*” (1 Peter 1:23). The Spirit of God uses the word of God to bring about the miracle of the new birth. Since the word of God is “**living and powerful**” (Heb. 4:12) it can generate life in the heart of the sinner who trusts Christ; and **that life is God’s life**.

### 4. ***It is the finest birth possible***

We are “**a kind of firstfruits of all he created**,” James wrote to Jewish believers, and the word **firstfruits** would be meaningful to them. The Old Testament Jews brought the firstfruits to the Lord as the expression of their devotion and obedience. “**Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops**” (Proverbs 3:9). Of all the creatures God has in this universe, Christians are the very highest and the finest! We share God’s nature. For this reason, it is beneath our dignity to accept Satan’s bait or to desire sinful things. **A higher birth must mean a higher life**.

By granting us a new birth, God declares his resounding “**NO**” to our old birth into sin and death. Throughout the Bible, God rejects the firstborn and accepts the second born. He accepted Abel, not Cain; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau. **He rejects your first birth (no matter how noble it might have been in the eyes of men), and tells you of your second birth.**

It is this experience of our **new birth—of our life in Christ**—that leads us out of the downward spiral of temptation leading to sin and death. **If we live in the darkness of our old nature (from the first birth), we will fail.** No matter how much will power we have in our old birth, that nature (the flesh) is from Adam, and he was a failure. **But if we yield to and thus participate in the new nature (Christ’s nature in us), we participate in his victory over all temptation and sin. His victory is ours.**

A child explained this truth in simple terms. “Two men live in my heart: the old Adam and Jesus. When temptation knocks at the door, somebody has to answer. **If I let Adam answer, I sin; so I send Jesus to answer. He always wins!**”

Of course, **this new nature must be experienced and thus nurtured daily through the word of God.** Just as the Holy Spirit used the word to give us this new birth, so he uses it to renew our strength: “***Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God***” (Matthew 4:4). The use of spiritual disciplines is of vital importance in this process of renewal.

## Conclusion

Let us be clear, **if we live out of the old man,** we are on a descending spiral of distorted desire, leading to temptation, to sin and to the experience of death. God is not to blame for this. But he has dealt decisively with the problem—he warns us of the consequences and provides the solution—his love expressed to us through our **new life** in Jesus. **If we participate in that new life, we are tasting fully of God’s goodness for us—his victory is our victory.** In **union** with God, through faith, we may fully experience “***the crown of life***” (James 1:12).

**Sermon Series** is provided by Ted Johnston via the Senior Pastor Team of Tom and Alberta Ecker to assist ... Bible studies in series covering a book of the Bible.

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