

## **Temptation 101**

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James 1:13-18

Today we are continuing in our study of the book of James, called “Unwavering: Living out a single-minded faith.” Today James is going to talk to us about the topic of temptation. As we prepare to talk about that, let me ask you a question: When was the last time you faced temptation?

Whenever I think of temptation I’m always reminded of a good friend of mine. He was a serious Christian. He was engaged at the time. When we were in college, he was reading a famous book called “Pilgrim’s Progress” which is a classic allegory of the Christian life written in the 1700’s. You know the characters all have these allegorical names – Christian - Mr. Worldly - Wiseman - Talkative - Mr. Standfast.

While he was reading Pilgrim’s Progress and engaged, he returned to his apartment one day after work. Here in front of him on her balcony was this very attractive middle-eastern looking girl, who was sun-bathing in a bikini. She stops him and strikes up a conversation with him and really starts flirting with him. So he talked to her for a while and finally he says “so what’s your name?” She said “Affair.” He got out of there!

OK so maybe that’s not your experience with temptation. But when was the last time you faced temptation? What kind of temptation was it? Was it lust? Were you tempted to look at something God tells you not to look at? Or to cheat on your spouse physically? Guys, was it anger? Were you tempted to blow your stack and let someone really have it? Ladies, was it jealousy? Did you feel slighted and want to find ways to get even? Was it a pet sin like gossip or lying or taking something that didn’t belong to you? Was it a powerful temptation like substance abuse? Was it the temptation to misbehave so that you could fit in with certain people? What kind of temptation was it? How did you respond? Did you resist or did you cave in? Did you even recognize the temptation as a temptation or did it just float by as another moment in your day where you just did what you do?

Finally and perhaps most importantly for our passage today - if I were to ask you what happened in that moment of temptation what would you say? Why were you tempted? How did you view the situation?

Well, let me invite you to turn in your Bibles to James 1:13-18. Today we are going to look at a passage that I would entitle “Temptation 101.” There are other passages in the Bible that talk about how to resist temptation or relate to whether or not it’s a sin to be tempted. But this is a passage where James describes for us in the most basic terms possible just exactly what happens when we are tempted. Today James is going to tell us four things about temptation:

1. Who is not responsible for temptation
2. Who is responsible for it

3. Where Temptation takes us
4. The alternative to temptation

This is a fascinating passage. To me, it totally changed the way I view the moments of temptation in my life. As we look at this passage, here's my prayer: There are some of you here today that are either really wrestling with or are really messing around with a particular temptation. In a group this size, there are definitely people that are knowingly participating in that. It's my prayer today that you will understand how temptation works, that you will recognize the danger that you are in, and that you will walk away from temptation. For all of us, my prayer is that we will recognize temptation, understand it better, and that we will be able to stand up under it. That's my prayer.

Let's read James 1:13-18. I'm actually going to start today by reading verse 12, because we didn't cover that last week. Let me just bring you up to speed on where we are at. James started his letter by talking about trials. He told his readers who were going through trials and adversity that they should respond to those trials by:

1. Rejoicing in adversity when they can, because they know God is using that adversity to mature them.
2. Ask God for wisdom when they can't rejoice. Trust in his goodness and ask him to help them see how He is using the trial for good in their life.

Then he gave examples of how that plays out for rich and poor Christians.

That's verses 1-11, which we looked at last week. We will start reading in verse 12 today, which is kind of a hinge that relates to both passages and then we will read our text for today.

*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*  
- James 1:12-18

So James is going to give us four truths about temptation the first one is this:

## God is not responsible for Temptation

The first thing James wants us to understand about temptation is that God is not responsible for it. Look at verse 13. When tempted, no one should say "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. Now that like so many of the things James says is a pretty categorical statement. James is saying, temptation is irrelevant to God's nature. God can't be tempted, and he doesn't tempt. So don't blame him for temptation.

At first, that may sound like an obviously true statement. I mean he's God after all. What are we going to do - blame Him? But is it really true? Is it really true that God is not responsible for temptation? The more we think about it, the less simple it gets. Consider the following:

First of all, some circumstances are more tempting than others. Would you recommend that a recovering alcoholic work at a bar? Probably not. That would be a very tempting circumstance for him. When your kids are little and they're messing with something you want them to leave alone, what do you do? Get it out of their sight. You change the circumstance. Why? Because some circumstances are more tempting than others.

God is in some sense in control of circumstances. Now I don't have this all figured out. Skip White's Bible study loves to discuss God's sovereignty and control and predestination. We have had many a rip-roaring discussion about it! I think that one thing that is clear is that we don't have this all figured out. So I don't have this all figured out. I don't understand the difference between what God causes and what he allows. But there is some sense in which God is in control of the circumstances we face. Ephesians 1:11 says "God works all things after the counsel of his own will." Again and again in the Bible, we see the writers of Scripture give God responsibility for their circumstances - both good and bad. We pray about our circumstances, because we believe that God has control over them. In the Lord's prayer, we pray "lead us not into temptation." The fact that we are bringing that to God shows that he has some control over our circumstances.

OK, but wait a minute, you're probably thinking:

- \* Some circumstances are more tempting than others
- \* And God is in control of circumstances
- \* How does that make him not responsible for temptation?

I'll do you one better. There are passages in Scripture where God is portrayed as directly testing or tempting someone. Genesis 22:1: "After these things God tempted/tested Abraham." God tested Job. He tested David. There are times when the Bible says "God tested Israel."

So then James - how can you say that God doesn't tempt anyone? Some circumstances are more tempting than others. God is in control of circumstances. God directly tested people. How can you say he doesn't tempt anyone?

Answer: James can say this, because circumstances are not what tempts us. As we talk our way through this passage, I think it will become clearer. Notice first of all James points to God to show us that circumstances don't tempt everyone. Look at the way James describes God in verse 13: "God cannot be tempted by evil." Now, why does James describe God in that way? This passage isn't about God being tempted. It's about us being tempted. So why does James describe God as one who cannot be tempted? The point is this: God is not tempted by circumstances. Circumstances never cause God to do evil or to want to do evil. When we look at God, we can see that maybe circumstances are not what tempts us.

Now we can further see this if we take a very close look at the way James describes both trials and temptation. This is kind of a big-picture concept, so I'll try to explain it clearly here. If you were here last week, you may remember that James talked about trials. He said "Rejoice whenever you face trials of many kinds." In the Greek the word for "trial" is the word *peirasmos*.

Now this week we are talking about temptation. "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God. God can't be tempted we are tempted when we are drawn away." In the Greek, the word for "temptation" is the same root word as the word for trial. It's *peirasmos*. Actually, James uses the verb *peirazo* for temptation and the noun *peirasmos* for trial, but it's the same root word.

Now in English, we have separated these two concepts so that to our minds the two words seem unrelated. We see a trial as outside adversity that we want to run away from but should stay under. A temptation is an inside enticement to sin that we want to run toward but should stay away from.

So trials and temptations are different in our minds. But what we see as two unrelated concepts, James' readers would see as two related concepts. I'm not saying that they were the same thing that they say trials and temptation as identical, but they were related.

It's sort of like our English word "sanction." If I say the UN sanctioned a nuclear test for North Korea, I'm talking about approval. If I say "the UN put sanctions on North Korea for nuclear testing" I don't mean the same thing, but the concepts are connected.

If you work through the two passages with this in mind - that there is a relationship between trials and temptation - what you get is this: "Sometimes what is a perseverance-producing trial for one man is a sin-producing temptation for another." The temptation is not found in the circumstance, because what is a perseverance-producing trial for one man is a sin-producing temptation for another.

In fact, we can see this even more clearly if we compare the flow of thought from one passage to another. If we take a look at last week's passage (verses 1-12), we will see this:

1. Situation: Trials (verse 2) - James talks about "trials of many kinds"
2. Response: Faith (verses 5-8) - James talks about "ask in faith, nothing wavering"

3. Result: perseverance (verse 3) - "the testing of your faith brings perseverance"
4. End: Life (verse 12) - "he will receive the crown of life"

Now if we compare that to this week's passage (13-18), we see that James follows the same flow of thought:

1. Situation: Trials (verse 2) versus Temptation (verse 13) - "when he is tempted"
2. Response: Faith (verses 5-8) versus Inappropriate Desire (verse 14) "lust"
3. Result: Perseverance (verse 3) versus Sin (verse 15) - "desire gives birth to sin"
4. End: Life (verse 12) versus Death (verse 15) - "sin gives birth to death"

The point is it's our response that makes the difference. So even though God is in control of Circumstances, he is not responsible for temptation. But if God isn't responsible, who is?

## **We are responsible for temptation**

OK so maybe God isn't responsible for my temptation. But how can James say that I am? Wasn't I tempted by the circumstance?

Look at verses 14-15. James says: *But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*

What is James saying? Temptation comes from our own weakness. Let me explain. The words "dragged away" and 'enticed' there come in James' Day from the realm of hunting and fishing. "Dragged away" has the idea of being trapped, or hooked or controlled. "Enticed" is being lured to something. James says this is what happens when we are tempted.

What is his point? How does this relate to God not tempting people?

I never could understand this until I thought about a duck call. This is a totally red-neck illustration. I grew up in the Midwest where a lot of people hunt. I used to hunt ducks a lot when I was younger. It was something that I really enjoyed. You have to outsmart them. Since my intelligence level is roughly equivalent to a Mallard drake, it's a hobby that I find intellectually challenging. You have to pick the right spot and figure out where they want to be. You have to set the decoys just right, taking the wind into account. Then you have to call them. Gotta use just the right call at the right time. Start off with this highball that says "hey duck - party over here!" Then when they pass you, you give them a comeback call "Whoa! You missed it. We're right over here, and we have space for you!" Then a chuckle that says "yeah this is the spot you want to land!"

It's a lot of fun. But here's the thing. I've never had a deer come to a duck call. In fact, I've never had a dove, or a pheasant or even a goose come into a duck call. Why? Because there is nothing in the nature of that deer for those decoys to appeal to. Hearing someone say "duck party!" has no effect on them, just like God cannot be tempted. There is nothing in his nature for that circumstance to appeal to.

It's the same with people. Ladies when you see a nice looking gal in a tight outfit walk by - does it make you want to cheat on your husband? No, because there's nothing in your nature for that to appeal to.

James wants us to learn something today. Temptation doesn't come from our circumstances. It comes from our weakness. Circumstances may be "tempting," but the enticement to sin comes from us!

So the next time you face temptation whatever it is - whether it's lust or jealousy or lying or theft or anger - you need to know that that temptation does not come from your

circumstances. It actually comes from you. It comes because there is a weakness within you to which that circumstance can appeal.

There are times when that seems impossible when the situation seems so tempting that we want to blame it on our circumstances. We say "anyone would be angry - anyone would look - anyone would be jealous." But it's not true. There are other people who could go through that circumstance and not be tempted to respond they way we would .

When we were in Zimbabwe, we had an older couple in our church - the Elliotts. They were in their 70's, and they were set for retirement. John had bought a 40,000 acre ranch in the south of Zimbabwe. He had a 3,000 acre farm in Centenary. They had money in the bank.

Then the farm invasions hit. First they took his ranch. Then they took his farm Then his money became worthless. He ended up in his 70's going to work at a fertilizer plant. A Christian couple loaned them a little apartment to stay in.

Now for many of us - myself included - that would have been an occasion for great anger and bitterness. I think I would have told myself "I don't have any choice in the matter!" Nobody could go through this and not be bitter! Circumstances are tempting me! We did see some people consumed by bitterness in similar situations. Do you know what John's response was? "How wonderful! We have a cozy little place to stay and my friends give me fuel and food. I'm so grateful."

He wasn't tempted at all. He put me to shame. I realized that temptation doesn't come from our circumstances. God is not responsible even if he sends a trial. Temptation comes from our own weakness.

So (1) God is not responsible for temptation and (2) we are. Now the third thing James points out about temptation is this:

## Temptation leads us toward death

Notice that this weakness - this temptation - starts a process that both willingly and unwillingly leads toward death. Look at:

*But each person is tempted when he is dragged away and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

- James 1:14-15

Once again, when we look at those words “dragged away” and “enticed” we can see that James has accurately depicted what happens when we are tempted. Most temptation has a:

- \* Willing component: enticed - we want to chase after it
- \* Unwilling component: dragged away - can't say “no” to it

Notice that this temptation in turn kicks off a cycle in verse 15 : *desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.*

What James is saying is this: Temptation doesn't stay little! If we feed it, it grows up into desire, or lust and when that lust grows up it has children which James calls “sin” and grandchildren that he calls “death.”

My own weakness causes me to be tempted. Then what entices me today, drags me away tomorrow. And it ends in a cycle of sin and death. From willing to unwilling. What entices me today - if I yield to it - drags me away tomorrow.

Now we can easily see this in some things like alcoholism. Once that becomes a serious problem, it seems a totally unwilling thing. Yet no one becomes an alcoholic without willingly taking a first drink.

So we can easily see this process there, but there are many other sins where this is true. Lying. The more willingly you solve your problems by lying, the more lying becomes your default response. The more lying is your default response, the more impossible it is for you to see your way through a difficulty without resorting to lying. Same for theft. But also for anger. And gossip. And immorality. See sin is - in many way - an acquired taste. What entices me today - if I yield to it - drags me away tomorrow.

It's an acquired taste that leads eventually to death. Do you realize that? Because I think a lot of times I don't! That's the essence of temptation. That weakness inside of us causes us to think that more life - more safety - more happiness - can be found for us, if we will just stretch the truth - if we'll just cheat on our taxes or look at something we shouldn't - or take control of a situation by anger - we think we're going to find more life there. So that even when we're saying “no” to temptation, it feels like we're saying “no” to something that would really give us happiness if we could just say “yes.”

But James says that's not the case. He reminds us here that yielding to temptation starts me down a road that if I continue on it has a final destination called "death". What entices me today drags me away tomorrow and ends in death.

So (1) God is not responsible for temptation, (2) I am, and (3) Temptation leads us toward death. Now, one last thing James wants to say, is this:

## God gives better gifts

Look at James says:

*Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*  
- James 1:16-18

Now how on earth does this fit into what James has been saying? What James is saying is that God doesn't have a dark side. There's no shifting shadow with God. He doesn't give us temptation rather, he gives us good gifts. Then James uses the example of Salvation. God created the plan of salvation and he sent his own Son to die. Then he drew us. He enabled us to hear the message of salvation. Some people would even say - and I would be one of those people - that he gave us the faith to believe in Christ. The Greek here says "of his own will he begat us through the gospel."

So the point James is making here is that we often get it backwards. We blame God for temptation, and we take credit for salvation. We say "temptation wasn't my doing but salvation was." When in reality, it's the opposite. We are responsible for the temptation, and God is responsible for the salvation. God gives good gifts.

With this, we're right back where James had us last week. Remember last week, when we talked about trials, James said "You have to believe that God gives generously single-mindedly without finding fault." Now here he calls us to believe that God is the Father of light with no shifting shadows.

The point is the same. We have to believe in God's goodness - in his complete, unmixed goodness - whether we can see it in this broken world or not. Because we've seen his goodness in the gift of his son Jesus - in the story of the gospel - in the life that he has given to us through the word of Truth.

Because believing in God's absolute goodness and being single-minded about that is the thing that will enable us to say "yes" to joy in trials. It's what will enable us to say "no" to temptation.

So today, let me encourage you: Say "No" to temptation. Take responsibility for it. Say "no" while it's enticing you don't wait til it's dragging you away. Believe in God's goodness, because that's what will really enable us to say no to temptation and yes to joy.

God is not responsible for temptation.  
We are responsible for it.  
Temptation us toward death.  
But God gives better gifts.