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James 1:13-18

Second Message

Andrew Drake

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# A TALE OF TWO BIRTHS

*SERIES: A FAITH THAT WORKS*

Last week, I mentioned what a sports nut I was as a kid. One friend from down the street wasn't into sports, so we'd role-play as superheroes. He would always choose Superman, but Batman was my favorite. I never was much into the comic books, but I loved to watch the TV version of Batman and Robin (although as I see those episodes now I realize that these were grown men wearing very bad-fitting tights!).

The main reason I liked the TV version so much was because at the end of each show, Batman and Robin would fight and defeat the hated villain and his thugs. Each punch by Batman or the Boy Wonder was accompanied by a satisfying exclamation shown on the TV screen: a KAPOW! here, a BAM! there. We all love to see good overcoming evil. Wouldn't it be cool if we had superpowers to defeat the villains in our life?

Today we are going to look at the words of James as he discusses what is for many a villain that we can't seem to defeat. That villain is temptation. Most of us battle with temptation of one kind or another almost every hour of every day. There is no escaping it. It pursues us at home, at work, in our times of leisure, even in our ministry. We are weary from the battle. In some cases we're barely able to pick ourselves up off the floor from the beating we've taken.

In the opening verses of his letter James encourages us to persevere in our trials and face them with joy, knowing that God is at work, forging us in his image, making us mature and complete, lacking in nothing. It's a difficult and thorny road, but it's one that will result in the crown of life for those who love God.

In verses 13-18 of chapter 1, James warns that as difficult as the trials that confront us can be, the temptations that arise from within us are even more dangerous.

**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 first-fruits of all he created. (James 1:13-18 NIV)**

Here James sets out where temptation does not come from, where it does originate, and finally, how to battle it.

## A. Where temptation does not come from

**When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. (1:13)**

The word used for tempted in verse 13 is the same term used for trials in vv. 2-12. The New Testament uses the same word for both; the context determines the meaning in each case. A trial is an adversity in life that tests our faith for the purpose of developing perseverance. It has as its goal maturity in Christ, resulting in the crown of life. Temptation, on the other hand, is an enticement to sin for the purpose of disobedience. It has as its goal separation from God, resulting in death.

James begins his exhortation by emphatically stating that God is not the source of temptation. First, he says, "God cannot be tempted by evil." God is not enticed by evil. There is nothing within his nature to which any evil or temptation could appeal. Second, "He himself does not tempt anyone." God does not entice others to do evil. His motives are pure. He does not desire to bring his people to harm.

Why would anyone say, God is tempting me? The chief reason, I believe, is to make an excuse for giving in. If God is the one tempting us, then we obviously have no choice but to give in and sin. We say, This whole mess is God's fault, not mine. He's the one who put me in this tough spot. If God hadn't dealt me such a bad hand in life I wouldn't be doing this.

Scripture makes it clear that God uses trials to strengthen our faith and perfect our character, but not to tempt us into sin and disobedience. As James said earlier, when a trial comes our way, God desires that we persevere through it and receive the crown of life. When the reverse happens, the blame cannot be placed on the God of all mercy and grace.

James now turns his attention to where the source of temptation actually originates.

## B. Where temptation originates

**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. (1:14-15)**

James uses two metaphors to describe how the process of temptation happens, in three stages. First comes our evil desires; next, our willful and sinful disobedience; and then, the final consequence of our sin is death.

Desire, disobedience and death can be seen very clearly in the process of temptation, found in Genesis 3. Satan arouses an evil desire within Eve for the fruit which God has forbidden her for her protection. The tempter plants seeds of doubt and distrust in her heart and mind about God's sovereign love. Once Eve believes Satan's lies she acts quickly and takes the bait, eating the fruit and giving it to Adam, who also eats. As a consequence of their sinful disobedience they are banished from the Garden of Eden and destined for a life of toil and ultimately death.

*The first stage of temptation is desire.*

**but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. (1:14)**

Notice that James says "each one" is tempted. From the cradle to the grave, each one of us faces temptation to sin. Whether we are a brand new Christian or a believer of many years, temptation is inevitable. James says the reason is because we have evil desires within us.

These evil desires, most often translated lusts, refer to our desire for something which God has forbidden. Why would we want what God has forbidden? It is because, as the story of Adam and Eve clearly demonstrates, we believe that we know better than God what is best for us. We believe the self-deceiving lie that we can discern on our own what is good and evil, what will give us life and what will bring death. Peter says that our evil desires "war against our soul" (1 Pet 2:11). This side of heaven we are in a constant battle against our sinful nature, what scripture often refers to as our flesh.

Unlike the story of Adam and Eve, however, there is no mention by James in these verses of Satan being the source of our evil desires. There is no place to put the blame except squarely on our own shoulders. We cannot blame God and we cannot blame Satan. We cannot blame our difficult circumstances, our parents, our friends, our boss or our teachers. When we sin, the guilt of our sin lies with us alone. Paul expresses our desperate situation well: "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want" (Rom 7:18-19).

These evil desires are not harmless. First, they "entice" us, then they "drag us away." "Enticed" describes the actions of a fisherman to lure or bait his prey from a place of security. He cleverly disguises the bait to convince his prey that what is being offering is something other than what it actually is. The bait looks attractive and harmless, but embedded within it lies the means for destruction. Once the fish is enticed from its secure location and swallows the bait it is then hooked and dragged away.

The process of temptation and sin begins with the bait of a basic, single thought: God is not giving me the life I want. And if that thought is entertained in our minds it is inevitably followed by other thoughts like, I know what will bring me

abundant life, satisfaction and joy better than God does. Life would be easier, better, and more satisfying if I did things my own way and not God's way. With those simple thoughts we open ourselves up to being taken captive by anything that we find attractive. We seek to find satisfaction in something or someone other than the only One who can truly give us the satisfaction and significance we so crave.

Perhaps I can illustrate. The trial is when someone has slandered us; the evil desire is to seek revenge and gossip in turn about them. The trial is getting good grades; the evil desire is to cheat on our tests. The trial is financial hardship; the evil desire is to fudge on our taxes. The trial is feeling lonely; the evil desire is to do what our friends ask, no matter if it is wrong. The trial is living with a difficult spouse; the evil desire is to believe that divorce or adultery is the answer. The trial is preaching to hundreds of people; the evil desire is to preach in such a way that I get more glory than the Lord.

These kinds of evil desires lead us to the next stage of temptation.

*The second stage of temptation is disobedience.*

**Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. (1:15a)**

James uses the metaphor of childbirth to describe the inevitability that once an evil desire is embraced and welcomed into the very core of our being, sinful disobedience will certainly follow. Facing temptation isn't experiencing sin. Sin is born when we give into temptation.

Paul gives a few examples of what the birth of sin looks like: "When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce these evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other kinds of sin" (Gal 5:19-21 NLT).

Every circumstance we meet therefore requires a decision: When trials come and it seems like God is not giving us the life we want, will we persevere in our obedience in the midst of the difficulty, or will we succumb to the deceptive and evil desires within us and take the path of disobedience and sin?

Choosing the path of sin brings us to the third and final stage of temptation.

*The third and final stage of temptation is death.*

**Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (1:15)**

James is warning of the deadly danger of sin, a destructive force that cannot be toyed with. Death is not just the occasional result of the worst sins; it is the terrible and destructive end of all sin.

The chain of progression is: evil desire, disobedience, death. Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a destiny. Trying to find life apart from God may

lead temporarily to pleasure, but ultimately it results in guilt, fear, bitterness, regret, sorrow and alienation from God. All of these things suck the very life out of us and our relationships.

How do we emerge out of our dark and desperate situation before God? Our condition seems hopeless, but James has good news for us.

### C. Our battle to overcome temptation

**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. (1:16-18)**

The power of temptation lies in its deception. James urgently commands us therefore, "Don't be deceived."

Combating temptation begins with our minds. As Paul says, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22-24).

We must be clearheaded and open-eyed as to the realities of the tempting situation. We cannot be led astray into thinking that God does not love us and is holding out on us. Instead, let us renew our minds with the truth that God is the generous giver of good gifts to his children.

Many of us think that God meagerly measures out his gifts to us, a teaspoonful at a time. We need to see that his gift-giving is more like a fount of blessings that he pours out upon us like a waterfall that never ceases. God is not stingy. He is a generous and loving Father, sacrificing everything to mold us into his image. God gives us everything we need in life. He holds nothing back. And everything he gives is good and perfectly matches our need.

Though God is the creator of the heavenly bodies, he does not act like the sun which changes from hour to hour, bringing shifting shadows. God's goodness toward us never alters or changes in intensity. It cannot be interrupted, extinguished or eclipsed. There will never come a time when we go to God and find that he is unwilling, unable or unavailable to meet our need.

The fact that we suffer trials and face temptation does not mean that God has turned away from us or is no longer concerned about us. God is always present, and his love is unconditional. Not even our sin causes him to change toward us. He is constant, steady, dependable and trustworthy. He gives us the gift of life through the word of truth.

James puts it this way:

**He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. (1:18)**

God in his gracious and generous mercy has given us the word of truth that we might become a kind of firstfruits in his redemptive harvest that will eventually encompass all of creation.

God spoke the word of truth to our dead spirits and imparted new spiritual life. As Peter says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you... For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Pet 1:3-4, 23).

Everything we need to resist temptation is found in our new life in Christ.

Our text this morning is a tale of two births. Our destiny begins at the birth of our choices. We can either choose to entertain evil desires that rise within us, and give in to the temptation that brings sin and death, or we can choose to believe the word of truth and become the firstfruits of God's creation, enjoying the gift of abundant and eternal life.

Are you feeling the lure of temptation? Are evil desires dragging you away from God, deceiving you into believing that he is holding out on you? The message to us this morning is to not retreat from the Lord's presence when we are enticed to sin, but to go to him because he is the source of all good. He is the source of our salvation. His word, through the presence of Jesus Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit, is the source of all life. Paul reminds us, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1 Cor 10:13).

The word of truth is our way of escape.

Every lie has a soft, unprotected underbelly and is susceptible to defeat by the truth. We are to fight temptation at its place of origin, in our hearts and minds. We must remember that God loves us and wants what is best for us. Let us aggressively and ruthlessly defend ourselves against temptation with the truth of God's character and his word.

We must be vigilant, watchful, alert to the deceptions of our heart. The way to fend off every lie and temptation is to meet it at the front door of our heart before it gathers momentum and strength. I believe it was Thomas à Kempis who said, "Temptations are more easily overcome if they are never allowed to enter. Meet them at the door as soon as they knock, and do not let them in."

There is a crown of life for those who love God with their whole heart. Yet we find that our very heart is oftentimes our biggest obstacle, our greatest foe toward a life of righteousness. What should we do? Let us give ourselves over to the

transforming work of the Lord in our heart through his word. As the Psalmist says,

**How can a young man keep his way pure?  
By keeping it according to Your word.  
With all my heart I have sought You;  
Do not let me wander from Your commandments.  
Your word I have treasured in my heart,  
That I may not sin against You. (Ps 119:9-11)**

Listen to these words of David Roper: “This is exactly the strategy that Jesus used when confronted with Satan’s temptations. The devil tried to taunt and deceive him into acting disobediently, but with each assault our Lord seized upon a specific text in scripture and responded, ‘It is written...’ In each case he countered Satan’s deceit with a corresponding truth and humbly submitted himself to it.”<sup>1</sup>

Hear the words of Paul, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:4-5).

Temptation is a villain that has no power over us. Here is our chance to be the super-heroes we always wanted to be. Let us meet tempting lies with the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,” which our Heavenly Father has given us.

When tempted to follow along and not stand up for what is right, we can respond with the word of truth: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous hand” (Isa 41:10). KAPOW!

When tempted to sin sexually, we can respond with: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body” (1 Cor 6:18). BAM!

When tempted with greed and covetousness, we can respond with: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Tim 6:10). POW!

When tempted to keep our faith hidden, we can respond with: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). CRUNCH!

When tempted to gossip or lie, let us remember: “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech” (1 Pet 3:10). WHAM!

When tempted to be envious or spiteful, we can respond with: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). SLAM!

This “word of truth” is how God initiates, sustains and completes abundant and eternal life to his people. May we “treasure it in our hearts.”

1. David H. Roper, *Growing Slowly Wise: Building A Faith That Works* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 2000), 55.

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