

Crossroads: 2. Overcoming Destructive Desires

James 1:13-18

August 29, 2021

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In times of stress or in the face of the unexpected, I find that verses of scripture immediately come to mind. And that's because throughout my life, I've committed certain verses to memory. When I was a child, our family would take camping trips and as we sat around a campfire at night, we were asked to recite a verse of scripture that we had memorized during the day. Many of those verses are still within me. Memorizing scripture is all about putting God's Word on the inside so that the Holy Spirit can bring it forth on the outside. From today's reading, let me suggest this memory verse from James 1:17: **Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all.** And that's the kind of good news to hang on to as we face the crossroads of life.

This is our second week in the New Testament book of James. James was the first of the New Testament books, a letter written about 44 AD to Jews who had become Christians and were now scattered beyond Jerusalem. I have been reading David McCullough's biography of John Adams. I've been fascinated by the letters that John and his wife Abigail sent to each other. She was sharing with him the hard challenges of daily life. He was sharing the hope of independence and the birth of a new nation. By merging both perspectives, the author is helping me understand the beginning of the United States in a way I never have. And we discover something similar in this letter from James, the brother of Jesus. Last Sunday I used this picture [*photo of merging traffic*]. Life is challenging. In the midst of daily responsibilities, demands, uncertainty, and stress, life keeps moving. The earliest Christians discovered that believing in Jesus Christ did not change the circumstances of their lives. James will show us how to merge our faith into our daily journey in such a way that it changes how we live through the circumstances of life.

Life is a test. There are trials all around us. In our scripture last week, James tells us there will be things that test us from the outside – those things that happen to us as a result of our actions or the actions of others or they just happen. And our faith gives us a way through the tragedies that we face. In the scripture we've heard today, we turn our attention to testing that comes as a result of our own inner desires. These are the battles we face on the inside – temptations that come from within. Let's begin with James 1:13 **No one who is tested should say, 'God is tempting me!' This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does God tempt anyone.** What are some things that tempt us? Food, money, Internet, alcohol, sex, power, comfort – but the temptation originates on the inside. When you are tempted, it is not coming from God. Verse 14 **Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them.** Each one of you is tempted. Who is James talking about? He's talking to Christians. Having faith in Jesus does not eliminate temptation. You are going to face temptation. The Bible tells us that Jesus was tempted in all things. What temptation have you experienced? Jesus experienced that. But unlike us, Jesus never gave in, and not because he had superpowers. Some people think Jesus was like superman – that he had superpowers. The Bible tells us Jesus set aside all privileges and powers before he came to earth. Because Jesus was tempted in every way, he knew how he could fail to be who God needed him to be, so he lived in total dependence on God. James says the problem with temptation is that it has the power to drag us away. James uses a word that was used in hunting and fishing. I know some of you like to fish. When you use worms or minnows, you don't dump them in the water – that's called feeding. You hide a hook inside the worm so that when the fish bites the worm it gets the

hook, and you drag the fish into your boat. The worm is the enticement. Worms aren't much of temptation for us humans, but television ads are. And after a while, I want something that I didn't even know I needed. Or we see so many movies glorifying extramarital affairs that it looks enticing. And on the inside, desire has taken hold.

Then in verse 15, James describes the cycle of addiction: **Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death.** This is how temptation turns to destruction. First there's enticement – the bait or the lure. Then there is conception. We take the bait. We act on the temptation. And afterwards, we feel guilty about it. We make all kinds of promises: "I'll never do this again. I promise. God, give me another chance and I'll never ever do it again."

Do you recognize this? [*photo of flowers*] One day, I must have been six or seven years old. We were at some park, and I came across these flowers. Have you ever been told – don't pick the flowers? I'd heard that too, but these seemed irresistible, and I was doing a good thing – pick some flowers for my mom. So I picked the flowers. Do you recognize them? Maybe this will help. [*photo of the leaves on these flowers*] Poison Ivy! And it wasn't long until I started to itch – and I scratched where I itched and the more I scratched the more I itched and the more I itched the more I scratched – until that night my mother had me nearly covered with calamine lotion. Don't scratch, she said. Have you ever tried not to scratch when you have an itch? I still have a hard time with this, even though I know scratching will not remove the itch. After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. You keep feeding that itch and it's the birth of a habit. And once a habit, you are a prisoner. The habit has you. And very quickly, you have experienced death. You have become a casualty of war – a war between light and darkness and you are no longer useful for God's purpose.

There are certain times in our lives when we are especially vulnerable to temptation. First, when we experience loneliness. In Luke 4, when Satan wanted to attack Jesus, he picked the time of isolation when Jesus was in the wilderness for forty days all by himself. Maybe you are so busy doing something – maybe traveling all alone or working long hours or maybe you live alone and you don't have people around you who know you, support you, and can see how you are doing and what you are neglecting and how you have let go of healthy support systems. Some of you are introverts, and you can be lonely even in a crowd. You've got to recognize the signs of loneliness as a time of vulnerability – and be intentional to keep people around you who will hold you accountable.

Another time of vulnerability is after a success. One of the great examples in the Bible of someone who fell after a great victory was Elijah. He had this incredible victory against the prophets of Baal, and then he sunk into a deep depression. And what he forgot, and we often forget, is where success comes from. James says, "Don't be misled." Here's the memory verse: **Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all.** But after some success, you can start thinking that you did it. You deserve it more than others. How often do we hear about the mighty and the successful that fall, thinking they are entitled instead of being an example of humble service?

Then there is idleness. The biblical example of this is King David. 2 Samuel 11, we learn that when everyone else went to battle, David stayed home – and with nothing to do, he eyes wandered and then evil desire took hold and he acted by taking a married woman. Idle hands are the devil's playground – have you heard that? There's truth in grandma's words.

And one move vulnerability – when we begin to question or doubt God's purpose for our lives. Remember the story of Eve? God placed her in paradise – a garden with everything. Only one thing that God withheld and that was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God had already promised goodness. It was evil that God didn't want her to know, but when she ignored God's direction and ate the fruit, she heard the voice of evil and began to think, "I can be God for myself. I can decide what is right and wrong for me. I no longer need God's will." Are we listening to James? *Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death. Don't be misled.*

I think we can see the problem, and where it is headed. An alcoholic struggles to stop drinking, an obsess person bounces from one diet to another, the public figure who collapses under the battle with his hidden sex addiction. And yet, the real demon is not the habit but the desire for unfulfilled need. The power of any destructive behavior is its ability to provide temporary escape from the pain or the emptiness inside. Maybe you've heard other say: "Just make a decision and stop giving into temptation, stop scratching where you itch, stop using the destructive habit." If you want to change, it's really a matter of will power. Just say no! But if that's true – and I don't believe that it is – then why would we even need God? I was talking to someone recently who had seen a therapist – and the therapist told him to replace his destructive behavior. Just put your focus elsewhere. Replace a destructive behavior with another that is less destructive. In other words, you will never be free!

Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Paul says, **If anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!** In and of itself, the problem is not alcohol or food or the Internet or television or sex or money or power – none of these are necessarily evil. The problem is that we have not fully accepted the answer to the deepest need, the deepest longing and desire of the human heart. Only Jesus Christ can do that. We still struggle. James is saying that none of us is immune from the temptations. But there is a way out of the cycle. What I have to do every day is begin with self-awareness. Name the broken places – own up to the demons inside. We cannot deal with temptation on our own.

In Michael Slaughter's book, *Momentum for Life*, he offers a five-step plan that I've found effective in my life. He calls it DRIVE. First, **Devotion to God**. Having a focused time to being fully present to God's presence – every day. God is always present, but when in your day are you fully present to God? If you don't already know when that will happen tomorrow, then make the decision now. For me, I'm awake by 5:00, and I use the first hour to be present to God. You don't need to do what I do, but you need a time – the GPS is meant to be a beginning – 5-10 minutes. If you don't have a time for devotion with God, you are living dangerously. Second is **readiness for lifelong learning**. Are you growing as a disciple? What are you doing to fill your mind? What are you reading? You say you don't like to read. Look up Hebrews 12:11. Third, **invest in key relationships**. After God, Amanda is my priority. My relationship with her is vital. And it is not about what I'm getting from the relationship but what I'm giving. How I'm listening and serving. What are doing to invest in your key relationships? If you don't have any significant relationships, you've come to the right place. Joining a Faith Group is a great way to begin. Fourth, **visioning for the future**. God is not finished with you. I have a life mission. It's not my job, it's not about getting to retirement. God wants to use me. Keep that vision alive. And finally, **eating and exercise**. Our physical health is connected to our spiritual health. If we are not committed to healthy physical practices, it will be reflected in our spiritual health. DRIVE: merging faith with our daily lives. Making ourselves available to God every day.

Before I invite us into our closing prayer, let me say this: We all fail, and some of you who are listening today are ashamed because of a wrong relationship you're involved in, or maybe it's an eating disorder or it's alcohol or some kind of compulsive behavior that is always done in secret. You didn't choose to be where you are, but it was a gradual process. Do you remember that children's song: *Be careful little eyes what you see?* It's not just children, but if we are in a place where we would not want our children or grandchildren to see us, then we stand in need of repentance. Let's pray:

Lord Jesus, we cannot walk this walk by ourselves. There are things in our lives that we are powerless to overcome. But Lord, right now we are giving you permission to do in our lives everything you desired for us in your Word. And so we pray, 'not my will but your will be done.' We pray, Lord, that we never stand as an embarrassment to ourselves, to our families, and most of all to you. Forgive us. Cleanse us. Love us. Make us whole. Lord, we want to make you proud of us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 29, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Dear Lord, you know the temptations that we face. Your Word offers a way out of temptation. Grant us the wisdom to walk away when tempted and the clarity to see the way out that you will provide. Thank you, God, that you are a faithful deliverer in whom we can trust at all times of need. Amen.

Monday, August 30

Scripture: James 1:12-18

Those who stand firm during testing are blessed. They are tried and true. They will receive the life God has promised to those who love him as their reward.

No one who is tested should say, "God is tempting me!" This is because God is not tempted by any form of evil, nor does he tempt anyone. Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them. Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death. Don't be misled, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good gift, every perfect gift, comes from above. These gifts come down from the Father, the creator of the heavenly lights, in whose character there is no change at all. He chose to give us birth by his true word, and here is the result: we are like the first crop from the harvest of everything he created.

Observation: According to this passage, it is clear that God doesn't cause temptation in your life; but it can be reasoned that God does allow it to happen. Just as trials and persecution forge character and strength in your life, temptation can do the same if you don't give in to its deceit and destruction.

Application: Temptation is constant, unavoidable, and leads to sin. What are some things that tempt Christians living in today's world? What is the source of the greatest temptation in your life? James lists the three stages of sin: evil desires, sin, and death. Where do you see sin's destruction in the world around you each day?

Prayer: Merciful God, help us to see the path each day that you desire for us. Then prepare us to remain strong and true to your path even when faced with distractions. Amen.

Tuesday, August 31

Scripture: Luke 22:31; Hebrews 4:15-16

“Simon, Simon, look! Satan has asserted the right to sift you all like wheat.

because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

Observation: Just as one would sift the wheat, Jesus made it clear to his disciples that they were being tested. The letter to James makes it clear that even Jesus was tempted – and now as our high priest, we can approach him as one who understands and has mercy.

Application: In order to successfully confront and combat temptation, you must consistently make an honest moral inventory, paying attention to the warning signs of weakness and susceptibility in your life. Knowing your weaknesses drives you to depend more and more upon God, and helps you see places of trouble before you fail. And even in times of failure, by not giving up or giving in, you turn to God's mercy and grace to strengthen you for the next challenge. Since we all fail in life, name how you failed recently. What did you learn from your failure?

Prayer: Thank you, God, that you never give up on me even when my failings are repeated. Let each fall also become a reminder that I cannot be the person I want to be without your constant presence to guide me. Amen.

Wednesday, September 1

Scripture: 2 Samuel 11:1-4

In the spring, when kings go off to war, David sent Joab, along with his servants and all the Israelites, and they destroyed the Ammonites, attacking the city of Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. One evening, David got up from his couch and was pacing back and forth on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone and inquired about the woman. The report came back: “Isn't this Eliam's daughter Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” So David sent messengers to take her. When she came to him, he had sex with her. (Now she had been purifying herself after her monthly period.) Then she returned home.

Observation: In recognizing your own vulnerable places, you also need to recognize vulnerable seasons in your life. Just as David became vulnerable to temptation through boredom, there are several key seasons of vulnerability to temptation and sin. The first is loneliness or isolation, when you lack your regular support and accountability systems that help you stay real and transparent. The second season is after a period of success when you might let down, be fatigued, or begin to see yourself in a prideful light. The third is idleness – not serving God which gives you an edge in spiritual strength and dependence upon God. The fourth is questioning God or God's purpose for life, living outside God's plans and values.

Application: When are you most vulnerable to temptation: during times of loneliness, after a season of success, when you are idle, or during times of questioning about God and God's purposes? How have you fought this particular season of weakness? What have you learned that will help you in this fight?

Prayer: Generous God, even your Son Jesus faced temptation when he was isolated and alone in the wilderness. Help me to form the relationships with others that will draw me close to you. Use me to come alongside others. Amen.

Thursday, September 2

Scripture: Luke 4:1-12; 2 Timothy 2:22

Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and afterward Jesus was starving. The devil said to him, "Since you are God's Son, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread.*" Next the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. The devil said, "I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It's been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here; for it's written: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus answered, "It's been said, *Don't test the Lord your God.*"

Run away from adolescent cravings. Instead, pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace together with those who confess the Lord with a clean heart.

Observation: To overcome destructive desires, you must also commit to no compromise or shortcuts. Just as Jesus was tempted to take shortcuts to both gratification and influence, you are tempted to subvert God's created way of both provision and affluence. You are not to count on easy self-satisfying miracles and undeserved popularity to become the person God has called you to be. But you are called to live a disciplined lifestyle of sacrificial servanthood, always checking your motives and heart. If you will commit to living in this way, you will be able to fight those temptations that lead to sin, self-destruction, and moral failure.

Application: In what areas of your life are you tempted to take a shortcut to reach your goals? How do you stay on the path of a disciplined lifestyle? Do you struggle with self-focus or self-serving motives? Where do you need to say, "Here I am God, use me?"

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for showing how it is possible to resist those temptations that surround me. Just as you turned to scripture, let me hear your voice calling me to choose what you want for me. Amen.

Friday, September 3

Scripture: James 1:14-15

Everyone is tempted by their own cravings; they are lured away and enticed by them. Once those cravings conceive, they give birth to sin; and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death.

Observation: James is very clear that sin leads to severe consequences. The consequences can include destruction and/or death of relationships, reputation, and career, as well as disconnecting from God and God's purposes. It has happened so often that we are no longer surprised when we hear the report of another public figure who has compromised their morality

and fallen to temptation with devastating consequences. But it is not just public figures who fall! You are called to put away temptation before it leads to such life self-destruction.

Application: Where have you seen the consequences of personal sin in our world this week? When do you think you are most susceptible to temptation or spiritual sabotage?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you taught your followers to pray – “lead us, not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” You promised a power greater than any and all temptation. Help me to trust in your faithfulness each day. Amen.

Saturday, September 4

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3:12-14

So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

Therefore, as God’s choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Observation: Be vigilant. But we do fall or fail. God is present to catch us and restore us. We don’t take that for granted in such a way that we give ourselves permission to fall again. Rather, once you meet Christ you are a new creation, redefined as a child and heir of Christ. Your past no longer has control over you. You might find yourself trapped in the role others have defined for you. But as a follower of Jesus, you now can be free from those things and walk new in God’s power and life.

Application: Paul invites you to clothe yourself in the values that are shown in Christ. Let those be the values that define you. How have the ways others defined you as a person affected or influenced how you have lived your adult life? How does Jesus define you?

Prayer: Thank you, God, that my worth is defined by you and your unconditional love. Help me to reflect your love into the world in ways that will lift others up. Amen.