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THE SOURCE, FORCE, AND COURSE OF TEMPTATION

James 1:13-15

By

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James Lesson 4

The Source, Force, and Course of Temptation
James 1:13-15

A man was on a diet and struggling. He had to go downtown and as he started out, he remembered that his route would take him by the doughnut shop. As he got closer, he thought that a cup of coffee would hit the spot. Then he remembered his diet.

That's when he prayed, "Lord, if You want me to stop for a doughnut and coffee, let there be a parking place in front of the shop." He said, "Sure enough, I found a parking place right in front—on my *seventh time* around the block!" As Robert Orben said, "Most people want to be delivered from temptation but would like it to keep in touch" (*Reader's Digest* [8/86], p. 35).

Allow me to state the obvious: *You will not make it as a Christian if you do not learn to overcome temptation.* In the parable of the sower, Jesus taught that some make a profession of faith and begin to show signs of growth, but the heat of trials or the more subtle thorns of worldly desires cause the plant to die (see Luke 8:11-15). As I understand that parable, it is only those plants that endure and produce fruit that represent true believers. Because the enemy is strong and the lusts of the flesh are so powerful, you must learn to recognize and overcome temptation. If you do not, James says, you are on the path that leads to death.

I think that as he wrote this, James probably had in mind the graphic story in Proverbs 7 of the young man lacking sense, who succumbs to the loose woman's enticement. His first mistake was that he passed near the corner where she lived (Prov. 7:8). As "luck" would have it, at that very moment, she happens to come out of her door. As further "luck" would have it, her husband has gone on a long trip.

"With her many persuasions she entices him; with her flattering lips she seduces him. Suddenly he follows her as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as one in fetters to the discipline of a fool, until an arrow pierces through his liver; as a bird hastens to the snare, so he does not know that it will cost him his life" (7:21-23). Proverbs

7:26-27 concludes, "For many are the victims she has cast down, and numerous are all her slain. Her house is the way to Sheol, descending to the chambers of death."

James gives us a strategy for overcoming the deadly lure of temptation:

To overcome temptation, recognize its source,
its force, and its course.

1. To overcome temptation, recognize its source.

Tempted (1:13) is the same Greek word that is translated *trial* (1:2, 12), but clearly it has two different senses. God tests or tries believers' faith, but He does not tempt anyone into sin. God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19). God tested Job by allowing Satan to afflict him with all of his trials (Job 1:8-12; 2:3-6).

He tests both the righteous and the wicked, to reveal their respective characters (Ps. 11:4-7; see also, Exod. 16:4). With His people, the purpose of God's tests is to refine our faith like gold or silver (Ps. 66:10-12; 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 4:12-14). But because of indwelling sin and the existence of Satan, every test may also become a temptation to sin. Thus, it is important to recognize that...

A. Temptation never comes from God, so we must never blame Him for tempting us (1:13).

Ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin, fallen human nature has been prone to shift the blame for our own evil deeds. When God confronted Adam, he lamely replied (Gen. 3:12), "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." When God confronted Eve, she replied (Gen. 3:13), "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." Both statements are technically true, but they dodge personal responsibility for sin. Adam's answer really blamed God, who gave the woman to Adam. James wants us to see that if we go down that route, we will not overcome temptation, and we impugn the holy character of God.

Proverbs 19:3 insightfully observes, "The foolishness of man ruins his way, and his heart rages against the Lord." The Bible has numerous examples of shifting the blame for sin. One that is humorous (if sin can be humorous) is when Aaron makes the golden

calf. Exodus 32:2-4 reports that he told the people to bring their jewelry. He took it and fashioned it with a tool and made it into the golden calf. But when Moses confronts him, Aaron lamely says that he took the people's gold, "threw it into the fire, and out came this calf" (32:24)!

It's easy to blame God for our own sin. We can even cite Bible verses or theology to back up our case! We rationalize, "God is sovereign over all things, so He has to be sovereign even over my sin. If He predestined everything before the foundation of the world, how could I escape from doing it? Besides, He promises to work all things together for good. He could have stopped me, but He didn't! What could I do? It wasn't my fault!"

Critics accuse John Calvin of making God the author of sin, since Calvin emphasizes God's sovereignty over everything. But on this verse (as elsewhere), Calvin strongly denies that God is the author of sin. Even when the Scripture teaches that God blinds or hardens someone's heart, Calvin asserts (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on James, pp. 288, 289), "it does not assign to [God] the beginning of this blindness, nor does it make him the author of sin, so as to ascribe to him the blame." Rather, "in this manner he punishes sins, and renders a just reward to the ungodly, who have refused to be ruled by his Spirit."

James nails that fallacious and sinful line of blame shifting. He says, "God cannot be tempted by evil." It is impossible because of His holy nature. "God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). "Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13a). Since God cannot be tempted by evil, it follows that "He Himself does not tempt anyone" (James 1:13b). If we want to overcome temptation, we must at the outset put out of our minds all shifting of blame, especially, blaming God. Then where does temptation come from?

B. Temptation comes from our own sinful desires (1:14).

James does not mention here the devil as a source of temptation, although he will do so later (3:15; 4:7). Here he wants us to see that to blame God or circumstances or the devil or others for my sin is to dodge the real source of it. To label it as a disease is to absolve myself from responsibility for it. There is no hope for

overcoming it unless I acknowledge, "It comes from my own sinful desires." But, conversely, there is hope for victory when I begin to recognize and be on guard against the monster that resides within.

Lust means *desire*. Sometimes it refers to legitimate desires (Luke 22:15; Phil. 1:23; 1 Thess. 2:17), but usually it means *sinful desire*. Sometimes the same basic desire may be either legitimate or sinful, depending on the situation and how we handle it. For example, hunger is a legitimate desire, but if it tempts us to steal to satisfy our hunger, we sin. God created us with the desire for sex, but if we seek to fulfill that desire outside of the commitment of heterosexual marriage, we sin.

Also, we need to distinguish between the manner in which Jesus was tempted and the way we are tempted. Jesus did not have an innate desire toward sin, as we do. Thus for Jesus, temptation had to come from outside, not from within. He did not have to battle sinful thoughts, such as lust or greed or being jealous of others, as we do. All of these wrong desires come from our sinful hearts, which we inherited because of Adam's sin.

Some teach that salvation eradicates the old sinful nature. They base this on passages such as Romans 6:6, where Paul says, "our old self [lit., *man*] was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin." Or, in 2 Corinthians 5:17, he says, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." Usually those who teach that the old nature is eradicated will admit that we still have to battle the flesh. But I find this to be confusing and misleading. Call it the flesh or call it the old nature, the fact is that all believers have within them powerful desires toward sin. To deny that these desires exist is not the way to overcome them.

I believe that Paul was drawing a distinction between our *position* in Christ and our *practice*. Our position is that we died to sin (death means *separation*, not cessation) and are now risen and seated with Christ in the heavenly places. In practice, we still experience and must battle against powerful desires toward sin. The way to overcome, according to Romans 6, is to "consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11).

This is not a "mind game," where I tell myself over and over that I really do not feel the evil desires that I am feeling rather strongly. Rather, it is recognizing the truths that Paul develops there, that the power of those wrong thoughts to control me has been broken by virtue of my union with Christ. I must count that true and act on it. Acting on the truth of my new position, the power of sin is broken.

To overcome temptation, it is important to realize that although the initial thought to sin stems from my sinful flesh, it is not sin unless I pursue it. For example, if I'm flipping through a magazine and come to a picture of a seductive woman, the thought will probably pop into my mind, "Wow, she's quite a woman!" Right there, I face a critical decision: Will I go farther, entertaining sinful thoughts of what it might be like to have sex with such a woman, or will I turn from the temptation and "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom. 13:14)?

Sin *always* begins in the mind. No one ever falls into adultery without first entertaining it in his (or her) thought life. If we judge these sinful thoughts the instant they pop into our minds, we will not head down the path toward outwardly sinful behavior. If we do entertain such sinful thoughts, sooner or later Satan will present the outward opportunity to sin, and we will fall. But in such cases, the actual sin has been going on mentally for some time. If we make it our habit to take "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5), we will not sin in thought or deed.

We differ from person to person with regard to the things that tempt us. Men differ from women, but also men differ among men, and women among women. Pride leads us to judge those who yield to sins that have little appeal for us: "How could they do such a thing?" But the same pride lets us excuse our "weakness." "That's just the way I am!" Humility says, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

Also, when we yield to a particular sin, it becomes a point of vulnerability for future temptation. For example, you could leave me in a room with a bag of cocaine, and it would not tempt me in the least. I've never yielded to that sin, and it just doesn't have any appeal to me. On the other hand, in certain circumstances I am

tempted to look at pornography, because as a young man I did yield to that sin. So I now have to be on guard against every form of that temptation.

So James' first point is that to overcome temptation, we must recognize its source. It does not come from God. It comes from our own sinful desires.

2. To overcome temptation, recognize its force.

Wise parents do not let their children play with dynamite, because they know that it has a powerful, destructive force. James shows three ways that temptation is powerfully destructive:

A. The force of temptation is that it dwells within our hearts.

This is not an outside enemy, but one that lives within us. In-dwelling sin lurks there until the day we die and go to be with Jesus. I read of a pastor who was chatting with a godly, 78-year-old friend. The older gentleman recounted a recent trip to the city, where he realized that he was going to have to park and walk through a red-light district. So he pulled the car to a stop and prayed that God would protect him from temptation as he walked past all of the pornography stores and massage parlors.

The pastor interrupted, "Wait a minute! I don't mean to offend you, but you're 78 years old. Are you telling me that you're worried about sexual temptation at your age and after all these years of walking with the Lord?"

The older man replied, "Son, just because I'm old doesn't mean the blood doesn't flow through my veins. The difference between we old men and you young men is this: we know we're sinners. We've had plenty of experience. You kids haven't figured that out yet" (in *Leadership* [Fall, 1992], pp. 74-75).

He knew that this powerful enemy still lived within, even after years of fighting against it. Charles Simeon (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], XX:31) uses the analogy that we are carrying about within ourselves much inflammable material. If we are not careful, temptation can strike the spark that causes an explosion. John Calvin (*ibid.*, p. 290) says that James' object is "to teach us that there is in us the root of our own destruction." If we ignore

the danger within, or think that it has been eradicated, we are in a most precarious position!

B. The force of temptation is that it has a powerful and deceptive emotional element.

James (1:14) says that each one “is carried away and enticed by his own lust.” The words he uses come from fishing. The fish sees the bait and it lures him toward it, thinking that he will get a meal. Instead, he gets hooked and carried away, where he becomes the meal. The temptation to sin is like that. We think that sin will satisfy us and get us something good that we’re missing. But instead, it hooks us and drags us to destruction.

There is always that deceptive element to temptation. It is strengthened by the powerful emotions involved. As believers, we are not to live by our feelings, but by faith and obedience, based on the knowledge of God’s word of truth. We need to follow it, no matter how strongly our feelings pull us in a different direction.

One time Marla and I were hiking off trail up on Mount Agassiz. It’s an area where we’ve hiked often, but we’ve often gotten turned around. On this occasion, we came out under some power lines, and I sensed that we needed to go uphill to get back to where we started. But when we had crossed the lines the first time, I had looked at my altimeter. When we crossed the lines again, my altimeter said that we were 500 feet higher. So, I trusted the altimeter, not my feelings, and we went downhill. Sure enough, we came to where we needed to be. God’s Word is like that altimeter. Temptation makes us *feel* like heading toward sin, but we need to follow God’s Word, no matter what we feel.

C. The force of temptation is that it has a life of its own.

James pictures lust and sin as having the ability to conceive and give birth. While the Bible is strongly against aborting babies, when lust conceives, we need to abort as soon as we can! We’ve all seen a tree growing out of a concrete sidewalk, where it has split the concrete. It began as a tiny seed, falling into a crack. But that seed had life in it, and the power of that life produced a tree that broke up the sidewalk. Temptation has that kind of destructive life in it. Don’t let it take root in your life!

To overcome temptation, recognize its *source*—your own sinful desires. Recognize its *force*—it dwells in your own heart and is a powerfully deceptive emotion with a life of its own. Finally,

3. To overcome temptation, recognize its course.

James shows that sin is never stationary. It moves steadily in its course toward its ultimate, hideous end—death. Sin is like a small crack in a dam. At first, it doesn't seem threatening. But if it is not repaired quickly, it can lead to the collapse of the entire dam, causing terrible destruction. *Death* (1:15) stands in contrast to the *crown of life* (1:12). They are two totally separate destinies. At first, the two paths may seem like just a small fork in the road. But follow them out to the end and you're in two very different places: life or death.

At the outset, temptation *always* promises excitement and fulfillment. It *never* comes along with the pitch, "Would you like to destroy yourself and your family? Would you like to disgrace the name of your God?" Rather, it comes on with the enticement, "This will be fun! This will meet your needs. This will get you what you have been looking for. What can it hurt to try it?"

If you take that bait, you're on the course that leads to death. If you do not repent and get back on the path of righteousness, it may indicate that you never were truly saved (as with the seed on the rocky or thorny ground).

Someone has said, "Watch your thoughts, they become words. Watch your words, they become actions. Watch your actions, they become habits. Watch your habits, they become character. Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny."

Conclusion

I close with four practical ways to overcome temptation:

(1) *Study and know yourself.* Know where you're vulnerable and devise strategies to protect yourself. Others may be able to handle situations where you will fall. Don't go with them if it is a source of temptation for you. Develop a deep distrust in yourself that drives you to a desperate clinging to the Lord.

(2) *Avoid tempting situations.* If you are vulnerable to lust, don't rent videos that are rated R or even PG-13 because of sex. Don't

go into bookstores where there is pornography. Don't have unaccountable access to the internet. If you do, you're just pouring gasoline on the fire.

(3) *Have a predetermined commitment to follow Christ and to flee temptation.* You have to decide this *before* you get into a tempting situation, because when temptation hits, your emotions and the deception factor kick in. As we saw in our last study, those who receive the crown of life *love the Lord*. Keep your love for Christ fresh and the lure of the flesh and the world will not seem so attractive.

(4) *Keep before you the gruesome end of temptation—death.* The world glamorizes sin. Movies and magazines portray beautiful people enjoying illicit sex or living in selfish luxury as the ultimate in pleasure. Skeletons or rotting corpses would be a more accurate picture! I've counseled with many that have fallen into adultery, but I've yet to find one that is really happy. But even if they professed to be happy now, they won't be when they stand before God!

This is really serious because, as I said, *you won't make it as a Christian if you do not learn to overcome temptation!* Recognize its *source*. It does not come from God, but from your own lusts. Recognize its *force*. It dwells within and it is powerfully deceptive, with a life of its own. Recognize its *course*. If you do not abort it, it leads inevitably, not to life, but to death. The Puritan Thomas Manton (*Exposition of the Epistle of James* [Sovereign Grace Book Club], p. 86) put it this way, "Either sin must die or the sinner."

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to recognize the source of our sin as being our own lusts? Why does knowing this give hope for victory?
2. A popular author emphasizes that we are not sinners, but saints who occasionally sin? Is this helpful or harmful? Why?
3. When the powerful emotions of evil desire hit us, should we just deny them? What about "letting go and letting God"? See Titus 2:11-12; 1 Pet. 2:11.
4. A person who claims to be a Christian is constantly defeated by sin. How would you counsel him [her]?

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