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James 1:12-18
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“Have We Trials and Temptations?”

Grace and peace...

It’s Lent now and that’s usually a time to focus on the spiritual disciplines—like prayer, fasting, meditating on the Word, worship of God, service toward others. These are biblical things to do that are always in season, but especially so in Lent. This was striking to me, but every single one of the five spiritual disciplines are shown in the temptation of our Lord. All five! There in the wilderness Jesus prays, he fasts, he speaks the Word, He worships properly by refusing to bow the knee to the devil, and He serves all of humanity by undergoing the trial *for us*. All five spiritual disciplines, for Jesus, are showcased here in his temptation. If this is His experience, then maybe we would do well to consider his example for the times when we are tempted.

They say opportunity knocks once, but temptation leans on the doorbell. We know temptation is there, but we don’t have to be Jesus to defeat temptation. We’re not fatalists, we don’t wring our hands as if we have no choice with temptation. We’ll win some, we’ll lose some, but in the big picture, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. We have the privilege of

claiming Christ's victory, dialing it in to our lives and following His example so we can be steadfast under trial too.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, writes, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised those who love him" (1:12). This crown is given those who endure through temptation and tribulation (see also Rev. 2:10). What kind of crown is it? It's not the gold kind, it's not the Burger King kind, but it's the Olympic kind. It's in reference to the kind of crown used during the ancient Greek games. This crown was a wreath or garland of leaves placed on a victor's head as a reward for winning. So here we see how enduring through trials and temptations has a very positive outcome for us. Just think how frustrating that must be for the devil. He wants to destroy us so he tempts us and God uses turns right around and uses that same situation to bless us!

It matters how we deal with our trials, how we see them. The same situation we find ourselves in can be used in different ways. The classic distinction to make of our trials is this: The Evil One tempts us to destroy our faith. But God tests us to strengthen our faith. Verse 13, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one." God doesn't tempt us, but He does test us.

Why? Doesn't He know the outcome? Of course He does. But we don't. It's the process of going through it that is telling. Sometimes we like what we see, other times, it's disappointing. But this letter from James is helpful because it identifies the origin of temptation.

Verse 14, "Each person is tempted when he lured and enticed by his own desire." See, we're the problem. The threat comes from within. Watch how temptation grows. "Desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown, brings forth death" (v. 15). It starts in our mind. We visualize sin before ever acting on it because we think about it first.

I have a friend named Connie back in Olympia. Connie is a Mary Kay rep. She had a line that was meant to be motivational in terms of sales and reaching new levels of success. She said, "You bring about what you think about." Her point was whatever you are envisioning, whatever is occupying your mental energy, that's what you tend to seek out and accomplish. Now, she meant this as a visionary statement, but I also think it works in the spiritual sense, for better or for worse. That's why Paul says, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, **think on these things**" (Phil 4:8). That's how you guard your heart and mind. But if we think on

the things that have the potential to harm us, then we are more likely to act on them. And in that moment, the temptation becomes sin which unless it's corrected, leads finally to death. And it looked so good at the beginning, right? So James says, "Don't be deceived, my beloved brothers" (v. 16). As much as we can, we keep in mind the final outcome, not just the present moment. Something that seems like a small thing can grow to a size where it's harder to control.

So what can we control?

We can control the situations we put ourselves in. We can win a lot of victories by having good boundaries and control of the parameters. Our own Vice President Pence has a rule when it comes to dining out with women or attending events where alcohol is served, he's not there unless his wife is. As a result, she must get invited to a lot of parties! People and the media mocked Pence mercilessly for having this boundary. But last I looked, no one has accused him of any impropriety in this regard. Being above reproach means not even putting yourself in that situation.

Or it may mean removing the temptation itself from you. Dietary coaches tell people it's a lot easier to eat right when there isn't junk food in the pantry. Just get rid of it. Don't allow it to linger. I'm recalling a scene about the sister Kate Pearson on *This Is Us* (played by Chrissy Metz). She's obese so she worked

up the determination to throw out all her junk food. But even that wasn't enough for her because she knew herself. It was still there. She knew she might retrieve it from the garbage can at the end of her driveway. At that moment, she sees her neighbor walking the dog and it's pooping in the yard. She goes over and asks the neighbor for the dog poop and drops it in the same garbage can with the junk food. We call that reinforcing a boundary.

Whatever the nature of the temptation is, whether it's a substance or an image, know what your weakness is and put safeguards around it. A filtered internet, have an accountability partner, don't pay for garbage on TV, don't subscribe to sin.

However great the temptation is, know this: it is limited. 1 Cor 10:13 says, "God is faithful and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation, he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." The point is God always provides a way out. Look for it!

Another thing to appreciate (!) about temptation is that it can be a blessing if it draws us closer to God. Luther said, "The devil and temptations also afford us occasion to learn and understand the Scriptures, by experience and practice. Without these, we should never understand [the Scriptures], however diligently we read and listened to them." (Of God's Word, *Table Talk*)

There could not be a greater contrast in James 1 with how the enemy works and how God works. God plants in our hearts new desires that are godly and good. He brings those desires about by speaking the Word of truth. And as that Word is planted and grows, the result is it brings new life. The contrast between God's will here and human desire in verse 15 is unmistakable. The devil intends to bring about death. But God brings about life. Whereas human desire gives birth to sin and death, God's will gives birth to life and new creation: we are "born again." "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (v. 18).

God is called here the Father of Lights and what that means is we can trust God. There's no shadows with Him. There's no changing or shifting. There's no deception. Everything God gives us is good. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Satan doesn't ever give good gifts. He can't. It's not in his nature. He doesn't know how to give good gifts.

But God gives good gifts because that's His specialty! So delight in those gifts—whatever they may be! Your spouse, real food, real grace, all the things of creation. God as the giver knows we have needs and He wants to have those needs met in a way that reflects His goodness.

So have we trials and temptations? Yes. But we also have the victorious example of Jesus, the five spiritual disciplines and don't forget the dog poop! There is always a way out. Through the strength and promise of God who implants the word of truth in us, even unsought temptation can become a blessing which will one day be very evident by the crown of life upon our own heads.

In Jesus' name, Amen.