

Temptation

Temptation. It's been part of the human experience ever since the serpent struck up a conversation with Eve in the Garden of Eden. And we've all experienced it in one way or another. I know I need to get to work on that project, but there's always another interesting internet article to read. I know I should get up early and pray, but it's so much easier to sleep in. And which is more attractive – another workout, or another donut? Yes, temptations are everywhere.

So, what do we do when temptation comes our way? Well, in the first place, James tells us something we shouldn't do - we shouldn't blame God. In verse 13, he makes it clear that God doesn't have anything to do with temptation.

For how could He, once we understand what temptation really means? After all, the way James uses the word, temptation means something that encourages us to sin. And sin, by definition, is anything that goes against God's will. So, how could God be tempted to do something that He doesn't want to do? How could God be interested in tempting anyone else, trying to get them to do what He doesn't want them to do? No, God isn't trying to get us to sin – that wouldn't make any sense at all.

And so our battle with temptation must begin with the acknowledgment that temptation comes from within us. It is our own desires, James tells us in verse 14, that get us into trouble. So, that prompts the next question – which of our desires are sinful?

I mean, don't we usually think of temptation as wanting to have something bad or to do something wrong? When we think of temptation, we tend to think of a man soliciting a prostitute or a junkie craving a fix or a gangbanger wanting to shoot someone. But temptations aren't always so spectacular, so obvious – at least not until the end of the cycle of sin that James describes in verse 15. Self-destruction or the destruction of others, the desire for death, is generally the final result of sin, not its initial cause.

No, temptations often begin as a desire for something good. For the junkie probably began just wanting some emotional relief – and that's not a bad thing, right? The gangbanger probably began as a young man wanting to belong, wanting other men to affirm him and make him feel competent – that sort of desire isn't wrong in and of itself, right?

No, temptations aren't always desires for bad things. After all, when Satan tried to get Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, was it wrong for her to want to be wise? Was it wrong for her to want to be like God? Of course not – we pray for those things all the time. But it was wrong for her to try to short-circuit the process, to try to get wisdom on her own terms, to try to become like God in her own way. And it was certainly wrong for her to break God's explicit instructions just so she could have what she wanted. It was wrong for her to try to get a good thing in the wrong way.

Or think about Jesus' first temptation in the wilderness, when Satan urged Him to turn stones into bread. Now, it's not wrong to desire food when we are hungry – our bodies are designed that way to keep us from starving. So, why would it have been sinful for Jesus to turn those stones into bread? Well, the Holy Spirit had directed Him to go into the wilderness to fast and pray for a time, and that time wasn't over yet. If Jesus had done as Satan suggested, if He had gone ahead and relieved His hunger when He wanted to instead of when the Father wanted Him to, that would have been a sin.

And isn't it true that so many of our temptations are, at root, desires to speed things up, to get something good that we want ahead of God's timing for us? For example, it's not wrong to have nice things, if you work hard so that you can afford them. But if you try to take a shortcut, lying, cheating, or stealing in order to get what you want, if you try to speed up the process, you'll find yourself in a lot of trouble.

Here's another example: God created men and women to enjoy marital relations with one another – after all, He could have designed us to reproduce like amoebas, simply by dividing. But God has made it very clear that human sexual activity should only take place after a man and a woman make a public, exclusive, permanent commitment to one another and to the children their marriage will most likely produce. Temptations to sexual sin are thus usually an effort to accelerate the process, to skip over the commitment and get to the pleasure. But how many stories can we tell of the pain this sort of impatience has caused?

To sum up, temptation isn't always a desire for something that's bad in and of itself. Instead, temptation is often wanting a good thing in the wrong way, or ahead of God's timing. Okay, so how can we know the right way to pursue God's blessings? How can we know how long we should wait for those good things?

Well, we might want to jump ahead to verse 18, where James talks about the word of truth. And we can certainly learn about God's plans for us in God's Word. From a careful study of the Scripture we can know more about how God wants us to live, and the sorts of things God wants us to do and not to do. Scripture, for example, makes it clear that we should not murder others, so we know that what the gangbangers do is wrong. Scripture also makes it clear that we should not steal in order to get what we want. God's word of truth can thus pull the mask off of many of our temptations, showing us the real direction in which they are leading us. God's word can indeed keep us from being deceived as James says in verse 16.

And James' book is especially helpful as we seek to know more of God's will. For as we study this letter, as James relentlessly shines the spotlight of truth into so many dark corners of our lives, we will be able to discern God's will for us more clearly.

But let's face it. Although Scripture can help us learn the general principles of Christian living, and although Scripture can help reveal temptation and sin for what they really are by showing us how our lives fail to live up to God's standard, it's the particulars, the specifics that continue to bother us. How can I know what God wants for me in my life today? How can I know what God has planned for me, here and now? And how long will I have to wait for those good things?

And no matter how carefully we study this letter, or any other book of the Bible, we just aren't going to find such particular answers. The Scriptures, after all, have been written for the benefit of all mankind throughout all the ages, so there's just no way they can tell Mike Herrin what he will receive on August 1, 2016. The Bible just isn't going to tell you how long it's going to take to get what you want, or all the steps you need to take to get it, although God's Word can help you narrow down your options and analyze your motives.

But there's another reason that the Scriptures don't even try to answer our questions about God's specific plans for all the details of our lives. For if we think about it, we'll realize that asking such

questions actually indicates a continuing spiritual problem. For if we insist on knowing exactly what we will get and when we will get it, aren't we really trying to be in control of what is happening? Aren't we, in fact, expressing a lack of trust in God to be in charge of our lives?

To answer this question, let's adopt the opposite attitude. Let's say you are ten years old, and your Dad is your hero. You trust him implicitly, you know he has your best interest at heart, and you are convinced that he cares deeply about you. You love just being around him.

Okay, so let's say that your dad has planned a trip for both of you to take, but it's going to be a surprise – you won't know where you are going until you get there. Would you get in the car with him? Sure you would. Oh you might be curious, and you might ask him where you are going (maybe more than once). But you wouldn't really care how long it took to get there, would you? You would enjoy the trip as much as your eventual destination because you are with your hero, your dad.

Okay, so if temptation is grabbing what we want right now, true faith waits for God to give us what He wants us to have. If sin insists on knowing how everything is going to work out, true faith waits for God to give us things according to His schedule.

So, how can we avoid temptation and instead be content to wait for God's gifts? James gives us two strategies in verse 17. On the one hand, he tells us about what sorts of gifts we can expect from God – good gifts. And can't we be honest? Aren't God's good gifts often different from so many things we think we want? In fact, don't many of the things we crave actually turn out to be harmful to us or to others? But God's gifts are really good. They are really the things that we need, beneficial things that will really satisfy us. So, shouldn't we wait for God's good gifts? Shouldn't we trust Him to know what's best for us?

But more than that, James tells us that God's gifts are perfect. This means they are finished and complete. How many times, when we finally get something we desperately wanted, we find ourselves frustrated, somehow wanting even more? So why shouldn't we wait instead on God's perfect gifts that won't leave us dissatisfied?

But how can we be sure that God's gifts really are good and perfect? It's because of the second reason James gives us to wait for them: because of who God is. We should wait for God's gifts because He is the Father of lights. His purity and truth can illuminate the darkest, the most sinful corners of our lives, giving clarity to our murkiest motives. His perfect wisdom can give us direction in the midst of our most profound confusion, showing us the way we should go. Why should we continue to flounder around in the darkness of our own desires when we can have the light we need to see clearly – if we'll just wait for it?

But there's something else James tells us about God – there's no variableness, no shadow of turning with Him. That means we can trust that God never changes – when He says something, He means it. When He predicts something, it happens. When He promises to give us something, He never goes back on His word. We can wait for His blessings, we can trust His goodness because He is faithful to keep His promises.

And what has God promised us? At the beginning of the passage, we recall that God has promised a crown of life, abundant life today and eternal life with Him forever. And at the end of the

passage, we are reminded that God's word of truth has begotten us, has given us new life so that we might be the firstfruits of His new creation.

And why did God make us these promises? Why has God given us this new life? Why did God choose to bless us? This may be the greatest reason of all for us to wait for God's blessings: James tells us at the beginning of verse 18 that God chose to bless us of His own will. That means it was because He wanted to.

We must never forget this amazing truth, especially when we are tempted, when we want things that God doesn't want us to have in that way or at that time. It was because God wanted us, because God loves us that He gave His only Son to save us. It was because He wanted us, because He loved us that Christ went to the cross to redeem a people to be with Him forever. So, shouldn't we trust God? Shouldn't we wait for His blessings? Shouldn't we put our own selfish desires aside? For God's greatest desire, God's greatest love, is for us.