

JAMES 1:13-15

WHEN I SURRENDER TO TEMPTATION

“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. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”¹

College boys, and perhaps even college girls, will, on occasion, recite an old saw, “Lead me not into temptation; I can find it myself.” No doubt, college students, and some individuals well past college age, find such sentiments amusing. Tragically, the old saw is not merely amusing; it is stunningly accurate.

Temptation is not sin; yielding to temptation *is* sin. The Christian is taught to master his desires; failure to do so results ultimately in death. At no time are we more susceptible to surrendering to our desires than during extremes the experiences of life. When we are elated, we are susceptible to do what feels right at the moment and getting things wrong. When we are dejected, we are equally vulnerable to embracing our darkest desires, resulting in lingering and perhaps unanticipated costs.

Bear in mind that James was writing to Jewish Christians that were even then experiencing intense persecution. The ill-treated saints were at risk of losing everything normally associated with comfort in this life. Their homes and possessions were seized, they were forced to vacate long-standing social networks to become wanderers, their very lives were threatened, all because they avowed faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Under such extreme harassment, it was no doubt tempting to seek relief through compromise. Perhaps they could find some middle ground that would lessen the hostilities they faced. Because of the danger of seeking compromise in pursuit of righteousness, James was compelled to address forthrightly our response to temptation. What he wrote to these harried and harassed saints of so many years ago is applicable to this day for all who seek to follow the Son of God.

THE GENESIS OF TEMPTATION — “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. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” What does it mean to be tempted? To say that one is tempted implies a choice. Though temptation may indeed have a physical side, temptation always has a moral dimension.

Practically speaking, it is not temptation to be faced with a decision between two equally righteous choices. Youth frequently struggle with whom to marry. Frankly, the Bible views such a decision in a neutral light, so long as the decision facing an individual is to choose between people who are righteous. In other words, individuals have complete freedom in the issue of whom to marry, so long as you marry in the Lord. So long as your boyfriend, or girlfriend, is a believer seeking to serve the Master, you have liberty. Paul addresses this situation in his first letter to the Corinthians Christians. Perhaps you will recall the apostolic instruction provided in **1 CORINTHIANS 7:25-31**.

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“Concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned. Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that. This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.”

He concludes this portion of his letter by advising wives who are freed from marriage through death, to marry only in the Lord [1 CORINTHIANS 7:39]. Of course, the principle would apply in all situations—for males and females, as well as applying to the formerly married and the never married. So the biblical principle promotes freedom in all things where there is no unrighteousness.

Likewise, though there may be consequences of varying natures, where you attend church is a matter of freedom, so long as the congregation honours the Lord and the pulpit and people adhere to biblical truth. In such an instance, the freedom implies that your responsibility is to honour the Lord through seeking truth. In other words, choices that carry no moral liability assign no possibility for temptation.

However, if a choice is between acting ethically or unethically, morally or immorally, then temptation may well be attached to the choice facing the individual. Mankind is ingenious in employing linguistic terpsichore or moral subterfuge to justify unrighteousness. Simply because an action is legal does not make it moral. Slavery was once legal; but slavery is never moral. Abortion is now legal; but slaughter of the unborn is never moral. So temptation is always a solicitation to do what is unrighteous.

Whilst temptation in western thought often attaches to choices relating to sexual activity, or perhaps to ethical decision making resulting in fraud or theft, the Christians to whom James wrote were probably tempted to compromise the expression of their faith in an effort to lessen or halt persecution. This is not the only time such temptation would be presented to people of the Faith; such temptation has been common throughout history.

On January 3, 250 A.D., the Emperor Decius issued an edict demanding that the entire empire worship the ancient gods. Many Christians, and even whole churches, sacrificed to the pagan gods in order to avoid persecution. Church leaders were targeted, and many, such as Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, went into hiding. Many Christians suffered the consequences of refusal to adopt pagan worship merely to avoid persecution. After Decius’ death, numerous Christians that had compromised assumed they could revert to Christianity, only to discover that there was considerable opposition to such efforts. Post-baptismal sin was seen as extremely serious and could not simply be excused. There were consequences attached to compromise.

Similar persecutions brought about widespread compromise at various times throughout history, but perhaps nowhere has such overt pressure to renounce faith and compromise godliness been witnessed more than in various Communist countries during the twentieth century. Soviet Russia and her satellites, Communist China and Viet Nam have been especially egregious in compelling Christians to compromise in my lifetime.

In modern Canada, we do not face immediate physical persecution if we fail to compromise, but we do nevertheless face threats and pressure to compromise. Consequently, many churches and many Christians readily compromise the Faith in order to have a better standing in the eyes of peers and in the estimate of social leaders. Contemporary Christians succumb to subtle pressure to be likeable, to avoid offending prevailing social attitudes, to increase the numbers attending services through affirming people in their sins—and the appeal to make such compromise is almost irresistible.

To be certain, we must be cautious not to give offence flagrantly, but we must also be aware that Christ is “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence” [1 PETER 2:8]. Teaching the Word of God and preaching the message of Christ will prove offensive to the unregenerate. If the people hearing Jesus in His days on earth “took offence at Him” [MATTHEW 13:57], we should not be surprised that our commitment to Him will prove equally offensive. After all, He warned that “a servant is not greater than his Master” [JOHN 15:20].

Temptation arises from within as the focus of life shifts from honouring Christ to seeking personal ease. Inevitably, temptation is a moral issue as an individual is faced with the choice to either continue honouring God or to serve his or her own interests. When a congregation values social acceptance over sound biblical doctrine, that church has succumbed to temptation; they are dishonouring the Lord. When a Christian chooses to resort to political means to obtain results that he or she imagine to be vital to the welfare of the congregation, that Christian has surrendered to temptation. You see, despite popular sentiment to the contrary, ends do not justify means, but rather righteousness is demanded if we will honour the Lord in all things.

There is an old saw that is often quoted in the southern United States; it cautions, “It is never right to do wrong to do right.” God is not glorified through misguided efforts to embrace error in order to advance His Kingdom. Conservative Christians often attempt to carry out the work of God through earthly means. They assume that organising noisy marches, participating in boycotts, urging letter-writing campaigns and other such activities are necessary to advance the cause of Christ. However, we have no mandate to politicise the biblical call to be righteous. Our mandate is unchanged: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” [MATTHEW 28:19, 20a].

When we attempt to make the world to love us through endeavouring to do the work of God using the methods of this dying world, we have succumbed to temptation, and God must cease blessing us. Churches are particularly prone to make the decision to employ the world’s methods to fulfil the commands of Christ. We adapt our music to the preferences of the world, choosing tempo over theology, or selecting syncopation over sanctification; then we marvel that we are unable to build strong saints. We preach to felt needs instead of confronting our fallen condition, and then we marvel when believers compromise their witness during times of hardship.

I want to spare you sorrow, so I warn you against those individuals who conclude that God is blessing them merely because no one speaks against them and everyone appears to love them. Jesus warned, “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you” [LUKE 6:26]. This is but one in a series of warnings provided in the Word of God. Listen to some of the other warnings against surrendering to the temptation to be liked.

Speaking to His disciples, Jesus warned, “If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” [JOHN 15:19]. To seek approval from the world is to seek what cannot be given to the child of God. Again, in His High Priestly prayer, Jesus confessed to the Father, “The world has hated [My disciples] because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” [JOHN 17:14].

In just a few chapters beyond our text, James will confront the temptation for Christians to seek accommodation with the world when he writes, “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” [JAMES 4:4]. His words anticipate the words John would write near the end of that first century of the Church Age, “[Those imbued with the spirit of antichrist] are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them” [1 JOHN 4:5].

I have focused on the more realistic temptation we Christians face. I know that there are all sorts of temptations to gratify sexual lusts—we live in a world that worships at the shrine of Eros. I know that we are tempted to cover over our sins—when our children are promiscuous and our daughters get pregnant, we are afflicted with daddy’s daughter syndrome and we are willing to condone abortion in that very special instance. Or we convince ourselves that we can approve of a little social drinking because it will make people think well of us. I know that we are tempted to cheat on our taxes, believing that the government will misspend what they take in any case. However, in my estimate the graver danger facing Christians in this day is the unremitting pressure to become acclimatised to and adjusted to the expectations of the world in a vain effort to be liked.

You will notice that I have emphasised that temptation comes primarily from within; primarily, temptations arise because of we have taken our eyes off the Saviour and we imagine that we can create a more comfortable existence immediately. It is almost as though we believe that we will be able to usher in the Millennium through our own efforts. However, choices have consequences, and the consequences of surrender to temptation are far more serious than any of us might imagine.

THE ALLURE OF TEMPTATION — “Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” Temptation arises within the individual. You cannot tempt me to murder unless I first permit myself to hate another individual, or I at least diminish that person in my mind. You cannot tempt me to steal unless I first permit myself to think that I deserve what another has, or unless I first begin to think that I can advance myself at the expense of another. You cannot tempt me to view pornography unless I first convince myself that I deserve more than the wife God gave me. If I keep my focus on the Saviour, finding fulfilment in His presence, I will not be tempted.

James emphasises the truth that temptation arises internally, and we are voluntarily, though vigorously, led on by our own desire. Let’s return to some thoughts that have been presented in previous messages. First, the individuals to whom James was writing were indeed enduring trials. However, the trials they were enduring, though permitted by God, did not in themselves constitute wickedness. Testing could only become temptation when one began to rely upon his or her own ingenuity to affect deliverance. Testing can only become temptation when the individual begins to seek relief through gratifying intense desires that are resident in each of us as mere mortals.

Trials, though not originating with the Father, are permitted by Him in order to impel us toward maturity. James encourages believers to focus on the result of the testing we experience, which is maturity [see JAMES 1:2-4]. As we pass through times of testing, we are encouraged to ask for wisdom, which we may anticipate will be given as required [see JAMES 1:5-8]. When we have withstood the tests that challenge our faith, we are assured that God will reward us, part of that reward being the maturation we have obtained. Arising out of the times of testing, however, we may find ourselves tempted.

The word translated “trials” in verse 2 and the word translated “tempted” in our text have the same root in the original language. It is as though James is teaching us that the event can only become sin if we permit ourselves to be taken captive by the thought. You have perhaps heard the old adage, “Sow a thought, reap a deed.” That old proverb cautioned that only as one entertains a thought can it grow to fruition in one’s life. Usually, and appropriately, that saying was quoted as a caution against dwelling on unwholesome thoughts. It was not so very different from Jesus saying, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [MATTHEW 6:21].

Follow the progress of temptation as James develops the thought. First, the individual is lured, his or her inner desire acting as bait, for that is the meaning of the word used. The bait captures attention; and then if the individual bites, he is hooked. The word translated “enticed” speaks of being ensnared by a hook. The word is somewhat rare in biblical literature, being used only three times in the Bible. It is used here, and it is used twice by Peter in his second letter.

“[The false prophets of whom Peter warned are described to] have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They *entice* unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet’s madness.

“These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they *entice* by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error” [2 PETER 2:14-18].

The bait attracts attention and places the prey in a vulnerable position, for when it takes the bait, it is hooked and captured. Our desires work in much the same manner. Temptation comes when we begin to think that satisfying our desires is the most important function of life. Turning from pursuing God, we begin to chase ardently after the elusive dream of fulfilling our own desire.

Let me provide a biblical example of such bait. Given a choice of continuing with his uncle Abram, the friend of God, or fulfilling his own desire, we read that “Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar.” The Word continues, “So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD” [GENESIS 13:10-13]. Lot’s desire overwhelmed his knowledge of what was right and thus led him to take the first steps that would ultimately lead to the ruin of his family and the loss of every possession.

David saw a beautiful woman bathing. Watching her bathe, his desire to possess her body became more important than honouring God. Undoubtedly, had he been able to see the consequences of feeding his own desire, he never would have committed adultery. Before his desire had finished, it would be the cause of death for a loyal and brave soldier, Uriah; it would cause the death of an innocent baby; it would cause the rape of his daughter Tamar, and ultimately even become justification for the rebellion and death of his son, Absalom. The bait was his own desire, but the hook was gratifying his desire.

In a church I pastored, some members became focused on promoting their own comfort instead of seeking the glory of God through righteous lives. I preached a hot message that stirred up great animosity toward me. Even as I was delivering the message, I was given by the Spirit what I thought would be a safe illustration of a deacons' son fooling around with the preacher's daughter in the basement of the church, emphasising that tolerating such a situation would disqualify both the deacon and the preacher. Since I was new at that particular congregation, I had no way of knowing that precisely such a situation had led to the resignation of the previous pastor.

The leadership of the church, in a bid to maintain the status quo without offending prominent members chose to turn a blind eye to the actions of the youths. It was as though I had lanced a boil as the unwitting exposure ensured that the putrefaction of months of concealed wickedness gushed forth. Today, that congregation is dead and the people are not certain why they died when they had once been the largest congregation in the area. The bait of respectability concealed the hook of sin that ultimately would lead to the demise of the congregation. As Moses warned the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh, "Be sure your sin will find you out" [NUMBERS 32:23].

The church that exalts its own desires over fulfilling the will of God will shortly discover that they have taken the bait that ensures their captivity. Though they may appear momentarily to prosper, they are in the throes of death and ignorant of their peril. Likewise, the individual who surrenders to his or her own passions—whether physical or emotional—will discover that though the passions of mankind are a gift from God to be enjoyed through honouring Him, those same passions are hard taskmasters.

THE GROWTH OF TEMPTATION — "Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." The imagery shifts rapidly to a picture of birth as James speaks of desire conceiving only to give birth to sin, and of sin growing to maturity when it brings death. Lot would lose his wife, impregnate his daughters, and end his life living in a cave. David would cause all who were close to him to taste the bitterness of death before sin was finished with him.

Death inevitably results when an individual permits desire to conceive—physical death for the child of God, and spiritual death for the outsider. I warn you as a father would warn his child, if you exalt your desires to prominence in your life, you are unleashing a force that will ultimately destroy you. Whether you feed your sexual passions through surfing pornographic sites or through adultery, or whether you gratify your desire to control the people of God, you are moving inexorably toward death. Whether you permit yourself to indulge in gossip, or surrender to your dark desire to injure another through slanderous speech, you are embracing a vicious beast that will rip your life from your body and can only result in death. Whether you indulge your propensity to avoid worship, you are surrendering to a trend that will lead to death.

Just as individuals seek to gratify their own desires and die, so churches can make similar choices that lead to death. The history of the Faith is littered with the accounts of churches that surrendered to the desires of a few members. Thus exalting their personal desires over God's will, these churches died. In most cases, the desire of a few prominent members was accepted by the many, resulting in spiritual death for the Body.

Perhaps a few members wanted to be seen as respectable in the community, and so they argued for just a little compromise in order to become acceptable within the community. The concern was sincere, but the result was death. Perhaps they wanted to promote a particular view they imagined to be more acceptable to their denomination, and so they forced their will on the church; the result was death. Perhaps they wanted to ensure that they were not made to feel uncomfortable, and so they insisted upon services that pandered to their flesh. Others acquiesced to their desires with the result that the congregation died. Dear people, we are not immune to just such death if ever we depart from the Word of God and begin to elevate our feelings above the obedience to the Word.

Let me speak to the future of a congregation that is just beginning the process of maturation in Christ. Make certain that the foundation of the church is solid. Ensure that the teaching of the Word of God is central to all worship; base all practise of the congregation on the sure Word of the Lord. Insist upon commitment from those coming to unite with the congregation, rather than being content with mere names on a roll. Insist that those joining the congregation sign the Covenant of the church, accepting the responsibilities of membership. Renew that covenant of membership regularly, insisting that those who would be members sign on a renewal Sunday each year, committing themselves afresh to the responsibilities of membership within the Body of Christ. It is not membership rolls that will impress the world, but it is the labours of the Body working in unity that will prove attractive to the watching world.

Then, exercise church discipline. Plead with those who will not abide by the Covenant of the church to accept the responsibility they previously accepted openly. However, if they will not fulfil their commitment to serve Christ, do not hesitate to hold them accountable; their actions acknowledge that they have removed themselves from the privileges of membership since they no longer accept the responsibility of commitment.

There will perhaps be some who argue that such strictness will hinder growth. Is it not more realistic to expect that fulfilling the teaching of the Word we will accelerate growth? Is it not more likely that in honouring the Master through taking seriously the responsibilities of membership in His Body we will adorn the doctrines of Christ? I suggest that accepting the commitment of membership will ensure continued growth.

Did you notice that James does not permit us to blame Satan for our sinfulness? Nowhere is the Evil One named. Rather, it is our own desire that is fanned into flame which consumes us. We would like to blame the Devil for our foibles. We refuse to accept responsibility for our own choices by saying that the Devil tempted us. However, it is our own desires that served as the bait that attracted us. We cannot blame the Devil for surrendering to our own desires.

In a similar manner, whenever a church is in conflict, you will almost invariably hear that the Devil got into the church. I have news for you! The Devil has always been in the church; he didn't get into the church. What happened was that the desire of a few individuals was exalted over the collective will of the congregation with the result that righteousness was trampled and the church took the first steps that will lead to death.

There are, then, five steps in the sequence leading from desire to death: (1) desire; (2) conception, when desire gives in to temptation; (3) birth to an act of sin; (4) growth, that act of sin continually being committed; and (5) death, the sin will ultimately result in one or another form of death.

If you will avoid surrender to temptation, you must recognise that desire is a normal part of life. In fact, your desires were given by God to enhance your life. However, you must realise that desires are to be mastered and brought under control of your will as you submit to the will of the Father. If you master your desires, you will never need worry about succumbing to temptation. However, when your desires begin to master you, the inevitable march toward death has begun. That daunting march toward death can be terminated. All that is required is confession and repentance.

At any point, you can repent of sin, confess your wickedness, seek forgiveness and discover God's mercies in a new and fresh way. God promises to forgive when we confess our sin. John writes, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" [1 JOHN 1:9].

Though you may have fed your passions, it is not too late to find freedom. Confess to God that you have begun to feed your passions and again discover freedom to walk in righteousness. If you have sinned through surrender to temptation, confess the sin to God and if necessary, confess to those against whom you sinned, and you will find restoration to fellowship with the Master. When sin gains mastery over you and the desires grow into habit, it is still possible to find deliverance through confession. Though repentance may be out of favour among religious luminaries today, repentance is still the way to receive forgiveness from God and restoration to fellowship with Him.

James gives rich encouragement to those who stand firm and rescue others by delivering a promise from God as he draws his letter to a close. "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" [JAMES 5:19,20]. His words anticipate the promise of God through the Apostle John. "If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that" [1 JOHN 5:16].

Are you a Christian? Have you surrendered to temptation? Know that your surrender must lead to death—death that must assuredly have an impact on all about you. Repent and receive the restoration that God alone can give. Are you struggling against sin? Seek the strength of the Master and of His people as you turn fully to Him.

Perhaps you have listened to the message this day only to realise that you have never been born from above. Now is the time to receive the life of the Master, discovering the forgiveness of sin permitting full acceptance as a child of the Living God. The message of life for you is to believe that Christ the Lord died because of your sin and that He was raised from the dead for your justification. As the Word of God declares, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." That Word continues by promising that, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. This is our prayer for you this day, that you will believe this message and be saved. Amen.