

Sermon 5: James 1:12-15: What to Think About Temptation

OUTLINE

Think about the crown which is promised
Think about God as holy and good
Think about your hearts as the source of sin

INTRODUCTION

One of the first things to go out the window when we are being tested is clear thinking. When we are in pain; when our emotions are running high; when we are suffering under the waves of loss, grief, tragedy, calamity, bad news, poverty, oppression and any number of combined difficulties, instead of applying the truth we believe we resort to emotional outbursts, self-justifications, pity parties, angry revenge and even take out our anger on God, doubting His goodness, questioning His wisdom, forsaking our devotion to holiness. James knows this weakness in us, so in this next section he is going to help us think clearly while we undergo our trials.

James has three key ideas he wants us to recognize to help us remain faithful under trial. Firstly, in v12 he reminds us of the crown that is promised as incentive to endure; secondly in v13, he refutes false thinking about God who is holy and good; thirdly, he reveals our hearts as the problem and source of temptation.

Think about the crown which is promised

V12, '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 to those who love him.' The main way in which the bible models a way for us to endure our present sufferings is to take an eternal perspective and look forward to the certain hope that lies before us. Whether it is Asaph in Ps. 73 seeing God as his final portion; or David who sees this life as a walk in a difficult wilderness under the Good Shepherds care to finally end being in the house of the LORD forever; or Paul who talks about the glories of what is to be revealed in us not worth comparing with the pains of this life—rejoicing in the hope to come is the learned posture of walking by faith and not by sight. James has encouraged us to persevere, to not cop out but to let steadfastness have its way with us by pushing on in holiness, praying hard for the wisdom to be holy. He now concentrates specifically on the hope that we have to encourage us to the hard work of pushing through.

James gives us a beatitude. A statement of fact about blessedness. The word for blessed can mean how happy, but it also has undertones of being in right standing before God and in God's favour. James is talking about the future joy and favour of God for the believer after they have persevered in this life. James does not talk about any one trial but the issue of trials in general. The word for trial and temptation comes from the same word in the Greek, our English translations have tended to translate them to describe the outward circumstance as trial, and the inner temptation as temptation. This is not a water tight definition because Jesus was tempted, but never from within from a sinful nature because He had no sinful nature, He was only ever tempted from without.

James is reminding us of the happily ever after that awaits the believer. He speaks of it in terms of a running race. The race part is having stood the test; and the finishing part is indicated by receiving a crown of life. Now we have to be clear that when any biblical author uses a competitive metaphor like this, this is not an indication that we are somehow saved by our own works, or that we somehow contribute anything to our salvation. The emphasis should be seen on the good that lies beyond the difficulty of this life, we must not lean into the part of the analogy that denies salvation or even rewards by grace and emphasizes that it all depends somehow on what we contribute.

I know a great many Protestants who are troubled by language like this. We must be clear, our legal standing which secures our eternal life is accomplished by our justification in Christ. The only reason you will finally be resurrected in a glorified body on judgement day, and receive rewards and not punishments is because of what Christ has done as our legal representative. What we do in this life does not contribute to that, it must depend upon Christ's works alone and not ours. For this reason we stress that justification is eschatological in the sense that it is our judgement day verdict brought forward. Judgement day will make apparent the verdict we have received it will not be a weighing of our actions to come to any new verdict. This of course leaves us with some verses that seem to make our works in some way necessary, especially the work of persevering. In what way is persevering necessary if it does not finally contribute to our final salvation. I like to think of perseverance as necessary in the same way that prayer is necessary. God does not need our prayers but has appointed them to be used by Him to bring His purposes to pass. Any virtue in prayer is by Him making the way open; giving us Christ's name, merits and intercessions to make up for any faults with them, He uses them to bring about good in my heart and I make no change to Him or His plans; and any answer is finally because of His gracious condescension not because of any merit in me. God has purposed your perseverance not because they contribute in any way to your final legal standing which determines your final destiny. No, they are appointed as the path along which a justified person must now walk. God purposes to do a work of internal transformation in sanctification so that you, to some extent in this life, have a measure of transformation that agrees with your legal status and that you will have completely when glorified. God purposes to demonstrate His glory through the lives of His saints in this age to the principalities and powers. God seeks to shine the light of the wisdom of His ways; and He seeks to demonstrate the power to change sinners to a watching world, all through your holiness, perseverance and good works. He has appointed them for this end, and for this reason they are necessary, not to save you. If we can make a technical distinction, our works of perseverance have an ordinative necessity not a meritorious necessity; they are an ordained means by which the saint is called to walk for sanctification and the fulfilling of God's purposes in time; not a meritorious means for final justification.

This verse is not intended as a burden to scare you into persevering but rather an encouragement to keep on persevering. It does this by reminding you that the difficulties of this life will come to an end, and will give way to glory. There awaits a crown of life for all. Here is a way that the racing metaphor breaks down, where only one usually gets first place, every believer gets the prize, the prize consists in life, eternal life, a life free from satan, sin and death. Life in the presence of God. We are encouraged to keep on persevering based on the fact that God is a promise keeping God. He did not lie when He promised a resurrection, a new creation, a time when every tear will be dried and all

enemies gone, all lack supplied, all wars ended, even His very own self to be our God to every one of His children. James also encourages them to steadfastness by reminding them that persevering is what those who love God do. Do you love your spouse? How do you show it? You show it by forgiving them, by not giving up on them, by standing by them when things are hard. James is encouraging these troubled saints to show their love by persevering, as true love does.

Think about God as holy and good

V13, '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.' Blaming God for our own sin is as old as humanity, as we see in Adam, Gen. 3:12, 'The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."' Adam made his sin God's fault. James is aware that when we are in pain and sin, we look to blame and accuse others, believers are sometimes guilty of blaming God. God is the only one who can never sin, angels could sin, men could, but God never can. He cannot deny Himself. James rushes in here to clarify based on the one irrefutable fact that we can never overturn, God is holy and cannot sin. For this reason He would never seek for you to sin. Please notice that our translations have changed from testing to tempting, though it is the same Greek word. The OT recognizes the sovereignty of God. It does not have the philosophical categories of first and second causes that we so often use to explain how God is sovereign. It usually just asserts God as the first cause even when the secondary causes are the devil, man, etc. It also openly states that God puts people to the test, we see this with Abraham, Gen. 22:1, 'After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."' Also in the time of the Judges, 2:22-23, 'in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not.' ²³ So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua.' So as far as the external ordering of events go, God is in control. But James is insisting that this is not the same as saying that God is trying to get you to sin. We have already shown the distinction between the devil and God in Job's situation. Both willed that Job lose his possessions, God was testing Job and willing it for good and holy reasons; the devil was tempting Job and hoping to make him sin and force God's judgement upon him because he was powerless to harm him.

James begins where we should always begin, with who God is. God does as He is. He is unlike human beings who can be bad and do a good deed, or good and do a bad deed, God is good and does good, and He is unchangeable in His perfection. James argues from the greater to the lessor. If God cannot be tempted by evil, why would we assume that He has a desire to make us do evil? Calvin anticipates that there would be those who point to God acting in justice to harden sinners hearts by handing them over to their debased desires, as we see described in Romans 1. But he also helpfully points out that God does act judicially by passively allowing the sinner to pursue what is in his own heart. God does not put it into the heart of man to sin, that comes out of man's own heart. Whether it is the sin committed by satan and the fallen angels; or the sin committed by sinless Adam and Eve, or the sin committed by sinners after the fall, the sin is from us not God, as the 1689 chap. 5. Para. 4 says, 'the sinfulness of their acts proceedeth only from the creatures, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.' In truth we must remember that in every situation God in His good providence leads us into that 1 Cor. 10:13 is always true, 'No temptation has

overtaken you that is not common to man. 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.' Praying for wisdom is one way you can always face temptation.

We must be aware of this tactic to make God out to be bad to justify our sin. Just think of the temptation of Eve in the garden and how she was deceived. "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" The temptation comes in two parts, the first begins with subtlety the second is more blatantly direct. Satan begins with a question. This question challenges the truthfulness of God by attacking His word, His command. The question pretends inquiry but is just an indirect statement. It then exaggerates God's command, casting the prohibition in a bad light instead of wondering at the goodness of God's commands, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden.' In truth they had access to every tree apart from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil now; and upon their obedience the tree of life. Every single other tree, with its perfect and abundant fruit was free for them to enjoy as part of God's blessing and bounty to them. By this slight of hand an insinuation of a God who loves to prohibit and not be liberal is introduced. Instead of the truth of God's magnanimity in condescending to bring His creatures into such close relation to Himself and to bless them with so much. Instead of a recognition of His great power that made all things; and the right He has to rule by virtue of being the Creator, and more than that being the best of all beings. Instead of the truth of His holiness, and righteousness, and goodness, Eve allows Satan to indirectly cast doubt of the truthfulness of who God is. At this point, the truth about God; the facts of the matter themselves; the good of God's law; and the appropriateness of whatever God imposes in His holy goodness was her defense. But her response reveals she has opened a door to lies. We can defend our own hearts against this tactic if we remind ourselves of God's goodness and allow no doubt on this front.

Think about your hearts as the source of sin

This is where James goes next. V14-15, 'But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.' James does not lay out a full theology of temptation but he does give us some broad brush stroke headlines. Firstly, you will notice that 'each person' is tempted the same way. Because you and I are sinners all descended from Adam, we all experience sin and temptation the same way. We are tempted not by God putting desires into our hearts, but by our own sinful responses to the external situations we find ourselves in. Our hearts are the source of sin not God, as Jesus teaches in Matt. 15:19, 'For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.' The word 'desire' can be neutral word describing strong desire, but more often than not, and in this context it refers to sinful desire. This is the main point that James is wanting to make. We need this clarity. The trouble is that when we are tempted and we equivocate and reach out for any convenient lie to justify our sinning, even God can become fodder for our excuses and we see Him as the villain and not ourselves. If there is a lesson here, I think it is a most important one for our time: don't trust your heart, for out of it come all sorts of temptation and sin.

Secondly, James again uses picture language this time he uses the language of hunting and fishing. The word 'lured' is the same word used to describe prey

being caught and dragged in a net. The word 'enticed' describes the effect of bait used to entice a fish. It has been suggested that you can see this as the overt and covert temptations we face; the bold and in your face and forceful; as well as the deceitful, subtle and inviting. Paul paints a similar picture in Eph. 2:1-3, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.' We are willing followers of sin. The devil has a willing follower in us. This is where we need the clear light of God's commands to light the way. The power of sin and the deceitfulness of sin is something we are all familiar with. Sin can entice us through truth or lies. Sin takes good and true things that God has made like anger, sexual desire, food, etc and tempts us to use legitimate things in illegitimate ways. But sin also lies and promises satisfaction and pleasure and identity and fulfillment when it cannot deliver. We have hearts that are self-deceiving and willing believe lies. We need the cold hard facts of God's commandments to help us when we are seeking to equivocate, when we are wanting to make things grey so we can merge with the darkness.

James is comparing two paths. There is the path of testing that is responded to with resolve and steadfastness, there is a leaning into holiness through prayer for wisdom and the end result is spiritual maturity. Then there is another path. This is the path of temptation which is responded to with doubt, and blame, and instead of leaning into holiness in prayer it uses worldly wisdom to justify its sins. James points out this path will not finally end in spiritual maturity but is the path that will end in spiritual death.

One more thought. James 1:14-15 has recently become a hotspot for thinking about the issue of same sex attraction and whether same sex attraction is sin. Some point to the wording to say that sin only comes after temptation using this as a way to say that the desire is not sinful, only the action is sinful and so therefore Christians can define themselves as SSA or Gay Christians. Does 1:14-15 help with this question? This question also proves to be a difference between Catholic and Protestant conceptions of sin. Catholicism sees desires that are unbidden and against God's law as an effect of the fall but not sin, where Protestants call them sin and in need of confession, mourning and prayer for renovation. John Calvin says it well regarding this question: 'It seems, however, improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture, to restrict the word sin to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins. But as the use of a word is various, there is nothing unreasonable if it be taken here, as in many other places, for actual sin. And the Papists ignorantly lay hold on this passage, and seek to prove from it that vicious, yea, filthy, wicked, and the most abominable lusts are not sins, provided there is no assent; for James does not shew when sin begins to be born, so as to be sin, and so accounted by God, but when it breaks forth.'¹

Let us conclude, when we are under pressure we are tempted to sin in several ways. In order to persevere we need to remember the crown of life God has promised those who love Him; that God is holy and not the source of our sins;

¹ http://www.ccpca.net/news/ccp_study_committee_report_on_2018_revival_conference.pdf p7.

and that our hearts are deceitful above all things and a constant source of temptation.