119 MINISTRIES

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Living Faith: Tests and Temptations (James 1:13-15)

Welcome back to our study through the Book of James. In this teaching, we will be going through James 1:13-15. Where does temptation come from, and what happens when we give into temptation? In this teaching, we will explore the progression from desire to sin to death and discuss some ways to resist temptation to sin.

But before we get into that, here's a quick summary of what we discussed last time.

1) James exhorts both the poor and the rich to view their circumstances through the lens of eternity: the poor are to boast in their exaltation through steadfast faith, while the rich are to boast in their humiliation, recognizing the fleeting nature of wealth.

2) Persevering through trials produces spiritual maturity and results in the "crown of life" promised to those who love God.

3) Earthly riches are temporary and unreliable; believers must place their hope in God rather than possessions.

Having just reflected on how trials refine our faith and lead to the crown of life promised to those who love God (James 1:9-12), James now turns to the topic of temptation. He warns believers not to attribute temptation to God:

James 1:13

> 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.

Here, James confronts a potential misunderstanding that people may have when they encounter trials: they might mistakenly believe that God is the one tempting them. James flatly rejects that idea: "God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."

In Greek, the word translated as "tempted" is πειράζω (*peirazō*), which comes from the same root as

πειρασμός (*peirasmos*), the word translated as "trial" in the previous verse: "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under **trial [πειρασμός]**…"

This wording forms a type of linguistic bridge from verse 12 to what follows (Douglas J. Moo, *James*, TNTC (IVP Academic, 2015), 97). The point is that trials can often open the door to temptation. However, even though God may bring *trials*, he is not the source of that *temptation*. The temptation to sin—whether in the midst of trials or at any other time—comes from another source. It comes from one's own inner desires, as we will explore in a moment (James 1:14-15).

Recognizing this distinction between *external* trials and *internal* temptations is important for resolving an apparent contradiction in Scripture. James explicitly states that God "tempts no one," and yet the Hebrew Scriptures contain several instances of God testing his people through various situations. For example, God "tested" Israel by leaving pagan nations around them in order to see "whether they will take care to walk in the way of the LORD [YHWH] as their fathers did, or not (Judges 2:22). While God may indeed place his people in circumstances that test their faith (James 1:3), his goal is that they grow in spiritual maturity, not that they sin. But the choice is up to them.

This teaching from James is reminiscent of a similar teaching from the Wisdom of Sirach, a collection of Jewish wisdom sayings written in the early second century BC:

> Do not say, "Because of the Lord I left the right way"; for he will not do what he hates. Do not say, "It was he who led me astray"; for he had no need of a sinful man. The Lord hates all abominations, and they are not loved by those who fear him. It was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination. If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water: stretch out your hand for whichever you wish. Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him. For great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything; his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every deed of man. He has not commanded any one to be ungodly, and he has not given any one permission to sin.
>
> —Sirach 15:11-20, RSV

In any case, as we discussed in a previous teaching (**Living Faith: Ask In Faith Without Any Doubting [James 1:5-8]**), a person who receives wisdom from God (James 1:5) will discern God's hand at work in the midst of their trials and respond righteously. Consequently, they will grow in spiritual maturity and be rewarded in the age to come (James 1:4, 12). Someone lacking this wisdom, however, will often respond to trials unrighteously. One such unrighteous response is to try to justify giving into temptation by placing the blame on God. But as James forcefully objects, God "tempts no one." Those who fail the test and who give into temptation have no one but themselves to blame:

James 1:14

> …but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

So, God is not to blame for temptation; temptation, rather, comes from one's *own* desire. In Greek, the word translated as "desire" is ἐπιθυμία (*epithymia*). This word is often used in a negative context. For instance, Paul uses it when describing wicked people who engage in all sorts of sinful behaviors:

Romans 1:24

> Therefore God gave them up in the **lusts** [ἐπιθυμία] of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.

However, this word is also used in a positive context. For example, Yeshua uses this term to speak of his strong desire to eat the Passover:

Luke 22:15

> And he said to them, "I have earnestly **desired** [ἐπιθυμία] to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.

The word "desire" essentially refers to a strong longing or craving (BDAG 4th ed., 328), and that longing can be directed toward good things or toward sinful things. So, desire itself is not inherently sinful. Sexual desire, for example, is natural and good when it is directed toward your spouse. However, it is sinful when it is directed toward someone who is not your spouse. For more on this, see our teaching, "**Looking With Lustful Intent (Matthew 5:27-30)**."

While desire is not inherently sinful, it can progress toward sin if a person allows it to. James says that a person is "lured and enticed" by his desire, similar to how a fish is lured and enticed by bait. As Douglas Moo writes:

> [D]esire is like the hook with its bait that first entices its prey and then drags it away. If the superficial attractiveness of "desire" is not strenuously resisted, a person can become "hooked" on it, unable to escape from its all-powerful lure.
>
> —Douglas J. Moo, *James*, TNTC (IVP Academic, 2015), 100.

Ultimately, James's point is that a person cannot shift the blame for their sin onto God. Sin arises when someone chooses to act on an illicit desire within themselves. Yeshua taught the same thing:

Mark 7:21-23

> For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.

James goes on to illustrate the progression from desire to sin by comparing it to the stages of conception, childbirth, and ultimately becoming full grown. Here is what he says:

James 1:15

> Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Essentially, the picture James presents is of "desire" acting like a temptress who draws a person into a sexual relationship. From that union, "desire" conceives and gives birth to sin, which is the offspring or fruit of yielding to one's illicit desires. When this offspring becomes fully grown, it ultimately brings forth death.

This depiction of "desire" acting like a temptress resembles the portrayal of the "forbidden woman" in Proverbs 5-9. The forbidden woman in Proverbs serves as a personification of folly, contrasted with Lady Wisdom of Proverbs 8. The forbidden woman flatters and entices, promising pleasure but

ultimately leading to shame, regret, and death (Proverbs 5:3, 5, 11-14; 7:9-10, 23; 9:17-18). Lady Wisdom, on the other hand, speaks truth and righteousness, gives discernment and knowledge, and promises life and favor from God (Proverbs 8:7-8, 10, 35). James highlighted the importance of wisdom earlier (James 1:5), so he may well have this teaching from Proverbs in mind as he sets side by side the life promised to those who remain faithful in trials (James 1:12) with the death that awaits those who yield to temptation (Douglas J. Moo, *James*, TNTC (IVP Academic, 2015), 100). For James, how we respond to trials is a matter of life and death.

In summary, James urges believers to wrestle honestly with the true source of temptation. Trials may come from God, but temptation does not. God's purpose in testing is always to strengthen the faith of his people and bring them into maturity, not to lead them into sin. Temptation arises from within a person, from desires that—when left unchecked—entice and lure a person toward sinful actions. James makes it clear that sin is not an external force imposed on us but the result of decisions we make when we yield to illicit desires. And sin, if allowed to grow, leads inevitably to death. By tracing the path from desire to sin to death, James is calling upon his readers to be aware of their weaknesses and to take responsibility for their own choices. Only then can they walk the path that leads not to death, but to the "crown of life" promised to those who love him.

Resist the Blame Game

James 1:13-15 touches on a very common human tendency. When we do something wrong, our first instinct often is not to take responsibility. Rather, it is to shift the blame.

From the very beginning, humans have struggled to accept responsibility for our choices. The pattern shows up immediately in Genesis, when God confronts Adam and Eve about their choice to disobey him by eating the forbidden fruit:

Genesis 3:12-13

> The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD [YHWH] God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate.".

As we can see, instead of taking responsibility, Adam blames Eve—and implicitly blames *God* for giving her to him. Eve, in turn, blames the serpent. Neither owns their sin.

In this passage, we see the same human tendency that James addresses: the refusal to acknowledge that the root of our sin lies not in someone else, but in our own desires. Blame-shifting is humanity's oldest instinct when confronted with the reality and consequences of our bad choices.

Now, although many of us know better than to point the finger at God or the people around us, we often repeat the same pattern as Adam and Eve—just in more subtle ways. We might not say, "It's God's fault," or "It's their fault," but we do say, "I wouldn't have reacted that way if my circumstances had been different."

However, this too is an attempt to escape responsibility. It's still blame-shifting. Only now the blame is placed on a situation instead of a person. Nevertheless, James does not allow us that escape route. As he makes clear, trials press on us from the outside, but temptation arises from within. We are lured and enticed by our *own* desires. How we choose to respond to the pressures and difficulties of life is ultimately our responsibility. Our circumstances may explain why a moment was difficult, but they

cannot excuse our own sinful choices. For instance, if a person robs a bank out of financial desperation, the law does not excuse the crime just because he was in a difficult situation. Similarly, God does not excuse sin simply because the path to righteousness was hard.

In every situation, our desires, our decisions, and our responses are ultimately our own. And so, James calls us to honesty and personal responsibility. When we give in to temptation, we cannot shift the blame to God, to others, or to our circumstances. Instead, we must guard against the illicit desires that entice us, resist them with the wisdom that comes from God, and take full ownership of the choices we make. That is part of what it means to face trials faithfully so that we may become "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:4).

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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