

We continue our verse-by-verse journey through the book of James. James has a lot to say about trials and temptations. In the text of this message, James gives us help to fight off temptations, those internal desires that lead us to sin against God. In the last message of our series on James, our text was about how to fight through trials, those external pressures, and tests that push us, that squeeze us. Kevin helped us understand that James admonishes us to not despair over trials, but to expect them, and to ask God for wisdom to help us through them. And, most importantly, to trust God to get through them.

He says to look at our various trials and consider that there is a reason to feel joy. I mean, who would link the words trial and joy together in the same sentence? James does. Because James understands there are certain intended qualities God wants for his children, which can only be developed by going through trials. He highlights the trait of perseverance. He says perseverance leads to a wonderful result - spiritual maturity.

James tells his audience, and us right here in this room who are going through difficult trials, to trust God. And believe that slogging through these trials produces something redemptive. We may not get to see all that God does to redeem our trials in our lifetime, but we trust that God is in control, that he is good, he is powerful, and personally cares for each of us.

Now in James 1:13, James makes a big pivot from the subject of external trials in our lives to internal temptations in our lives. In verses 13-18, James gives us a powerful battle plan to fight temptations.

In our Men's Fraternity groups this fall, we learned an old story the ancient Greeks told called the story of Ulysses and Jason. In this story, Ulysses and Jason had to sail their boats past these creatures called sirens on their adventures. The sirens were terrifying creatures. They took the form of beautiful women and used their beauty and hypnotic singing to lure sailors to their island. The temptation was irresistible to sailors. They became hypnotized and turned their boats, lured toward the Island of the Sirens. But once the sailors got to the island, the sirens would transform and assume their true form, creatures like ugly birds with sharp teeth that would devour the hapless sailors.

When our heroes, Ulysses and Jason, had to pass by the sirens, they each came up with their own battle plan to fight the powerful temptation from the sirens. Ulysses' battle plan was to pour wax into the ears of all his crew as to block out the sound of the seductive music as they sailed by. Then for himself, he ordered

his crew to tie him to the mast of his ship, and under no circumstances were they to untie him no matter how much he screamed orders to be set loose so he could go to the sirens.

But Jason had another plan. Instead of pouring wax into the ears of his crew and instead of tying himself to the mast of his ship, Jason sought to replace the temptation with something more beautiful. He brought on board a musician named Orpheus, who played such beautiful music that it drowned out the seductive songs of the sirens while Jason and his crew simply sailed passed the temptation.

Both Ulysses and Jason had battle plans. Ulysses got through it, but barely. His plan was full of don'ts. Just say no. Cover your ears. Keep out the bad. Okay, it worked that time. But compare the two plans. Jason's plan wasn't about desiring something less. His was about desiring something more beautiful to their ears. Jason redirected himself and his crew to something more beautiful than the fake image, the seductive lure, the promise of satisfaction that never delivers.

To Fight Temptation, We Need to Reject the Lie and Replace It with Truth

Temptations are always based on a lie, a siren. It promises satisfaction and never delivers; in fact, it devours. So we must reject the lie and replace the song of the lie with the more beautiful song of truth that always satisfies. I know I sometimes lose to temptations. And I'm pretty sure everyone could use a bolstered up battle plan to fight temptations.

Before James introduces his battle plan to fight temptation, he gives the reason why we lose to temptations.

We Lose to Temptation When We Believe a Lie about God When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; James 1:13

Literally, God does not tempt anyone because he is unable to be tempted. Temptation is an impulse to sin, and since God is not susceptible to any desire for evil, he cannot be seen as desiring harm to be brought about in us. God is holy and all He wants for us is Holy. All He does for us is Holy.

When we experience a trial with the right attitude, it leads to traits James wants us to develop - perseverance and maturity. But when we experience a trial with the wrong attitude, the trial turns into a temptation.

James says we seek someone to blame. We make excuses for our failures. We twist our picture of who God is. We go down the wrong road. We question God. We ask, "If God is the one truly in control, then it must be God who puts up obstacles. It must be God who tempts people to fall."

But God has no evil intent. In fact, he wants us to turn to him in times of temptation. Paul helps clear this up for us.

"No temptation has overtaken you except what is common for all people. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. And when you are tempted he provides you a way out." 1 Corinthians 10:13

Think about Adam and Eve. Back in Genesis 3, God had blessed Adam and Eve with everything they could have ever want. They lived in the goodness of God. But with that blessing, they also had a test. They could respond to the test with the right attitude of love for God, or not. God said, don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Any other plant or tree in the garden you can eat from.

You know the story. Eve was tempted to eat from the tree. Satan presented doubt about God, openly questioned God's goodness to Eve because God withheld the fruit of that one tree from them. I think we blame the supposed "power of Satan in this world." I have never read in the Bible anywhere that Satan has the power to force anyone to sin. I wonder if Eve even needed an urging from Satan to question God's goodness and then sin against God. The point of the story is that Eve was tempted, and she bit.

And then Adam also ate the same forbidden fruit, and immediately God made his presence known in the garden and questioned Adam about it. Here is how Adam responded. With fruit juice running down his chin, he said, "*The woman, the woman you put here with me. He lectured, – she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it*" (Genesis 3:12). Way to go Adam! You blamed your wife. So much for marital bliss. Did you know that Adam lived for 930 years? That's a lot of anniversaries ahead. I hope they got some marital counseling after the garden. But really, Adam blamed God. He said to God, "This woman you put here with me. God, you should have given me a better wife. God, it's your fault."

One of the ugly truths about our brokenness is that we are not inclined to take responsibility for our actions. And that ugly trait is revealed when we make our excuses after we fall to temptation. So if God doesn't tempt us, what is the source of these powerful forces of temptation?

The Source of Our Temptation

... but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. (James 1:14)

We are dragged away, not by God, not by others, not by Satan, but by our own evil desire. The words James chooses for "evil desire" and "enticed" here are graphic. He uses the same words as if he were talking about sexual lust, like a sailor who falls to his own lust, and is tempted or enticed to sin, dragged away by his own lust into the trap of a siren.

The Greek words for "dragged away" are words used in the action of fishing. It means to go for the lure, get hooked, and dragged away to be gutted and fried. For the lie to work, it must look like truth.

Twenty years ago, my dad and I took up the hobby of fly-fishing. We were fair spin-casting fishermen, but we wanted to learn the art of fly-fishing. We read books, watched videos, bought all the equipment, the waders, vest, forceps, net, polaroid glasses, and a box of flies. In his swimming pool, we practiced the 10 o'clock, and 2 o'clock of casting.

On our first real fly-fishing trip, my dad and I took my oldest daughter Kate who was six-years-old at the time. She had her Barbie pole and some salmon eggs. The plan was that she was going to fish from the shore while we fly-fishermen waded into the middle of the river. My dad and I got our gear on. It took us an hour to get ready as we pulled up each other's waders. I think Katie even helped us pull up the tight neoprene and get dressed for fishing. So we waded into the water and began to cast. We caught rocks. We caught trees. We must have scared every trout away for a mile as we slapped the water, stirring up clouds of dirt in the water while we stumbled around. There was no way we were going to catch anything unless I accidentally hooked a fish in its back as it was trying to flee the commotion.

After a couple of hours of this thrashing around, I hear, "Daddy? Daddy?"

"Yes, Katie, what is it? Can't you see Daddy is fly-fishing?" as I am trying to free my line from a tree branch.

She said, "Look what I caught." And she held up her Barbie pole.

I said, "What? I can't see it. Hold it up." Well, she couldn't, it was too big. My six-year-old had caught herself a fourteen-inch rainbow trout on a salmon egg two feet from the river bank. Later that afternoon, I tried fishing with her Barbie Pole and salmon eggs, and I still didn't catch anything.

But over time, my dad and I learned to fly-fish. We learned that good fly-fishermen blend in. That bait must look real. It must look enticing. It has to look so much like the real thing that it fools the fish. Fly-Fishermen cast out a lie, hoping that the fish can't tell the difference, and its natural impulses take over. It bites, gets hooked, and dragged away.

Why do we fall for the lies that are cast our way? So the root of our problem is our own sin. Paul tells us in Romans 5:12 that we all sinned in Adam, which means we are all tightly linked and in such lockstep with Adam that we actually sinned when he

sinned. And, of course, we have verified our sinful state in our own lives a million times over. That means we share the same sin sickness as Adam and Eve. We lust for what satisfies the flesh. We lust for what pleases the eye, and for what gives us pride in this life. We crave pleasure; we crave significance, and we crave control. We are enticed because of what is in us. And don't just say, "The devil made me do it." James wants us to know that we are the source of our own temptation.

So there is a downward spiral or downward course to temptation. It starts and has a finish.

Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:15)

James uses the language of childbirth to explain the life cycle of temptation. There are two births here. The first birth is our evil desire gives birth to sin. The second birth when that sin takes over. The idea that is so alarming is sin grows rapidly, and the second birth doesn't give birth to life. It gives birth to death. The life cycle of sin is death.

James goes on to say,

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. (James 1:16)

Literally, do not allow yourselves to be deceived by the lie. Take responsibility for your sins. Don't blame God. Temptation that leads to sin comes from an impulse inside you. Think about it, if God Almighty chose to tempt you to sin, how could you possibly resist his powerful temptation? But God doesn't tempt us. Instead, He gives us a battle plan to resist temptation.

There is a sense of urgency to James' language here. He is concerned about their spiritual welfare. He loves them as Jesus loves his church. He says you have to be discerning. You have to become clear-headed; you have to be honest; you have to be open-eyed to the realities around you. You need a battle plan. You don't need more wax in your ears or to be strapped to a mast. To resist the sirens, you don't need less desire; you need more desire. You need more desire for the right things. James ends with this in verses 17-18.

We Win Over Temptation When We Believe the Truth about God.

Here is the hope. Since God is not responsible for producing anything evil, then it logically follows that what he is directly responsible for producing can only be good. His word is good, his promises are good, and his gifts are good. James knows that for us to overcome temptation, we must be continually showered with the truth about God's goodness.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17)

This verse describes an unending succession of good gifts. The giver of everything good is described as "the father of the heavenly lights." This is a reference to God as the creator of all the lights in the universe. He created the billions and billions of stars. He created the physical laws to keep them in place. He created all the natural beauty around us, and then he paused and looked at what he had created and said, "This is Good." It's good because God is good.

This term, "father of lights," also points to his essential nature as light. In the Bible, light is seen as the source of all moral good. The Apostle John said, "*God is light. In him there is no darkness at all*" (1 John 1:5). Jesus said, "*I am the light of the World*" (John 8:12).

Then we see that next phrase. God "does not change like shifting shadows." When we lived in Wisconsin, where we actually experienced weather, we had this corny saying, "If you don't like our weather wait an hour." Winds shift, temperatures shift, snow comes and goes, ice forms and melts, rain turns everything green, and drought turns everything brown.

But the goodness of God is not like the weather. The goodness of God never changes. God does not change like shifting shadows. God is not relativistic. We can't debate or doubt the goodness of God. We bank on it. God's goodness is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We Fight Temptation with this Truth: God Gives Us Everything Good.

And whether we want to believe it or not, every good thing comes from God. The warning for us is this, don't forget the goodness of God. In our battle plan over temptation, we need to remember that whether we are confidently winning the fight or struggling to get our footing for the fight, or discouraged because there is that one area of temptation that seems to trip us up, we can never question this truth. God is good. God is for us!

So James goes from this Macro example of his goodness in the universe to a micro example. A personal example to all of us of his goodness.

We Fight Temptation with this Truth: God Gives Us New Birth.

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. (James 1:18)

Back in verse 15, James gave us the "death cycle." Evil desire gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death. Now, in verse 18, James gives us the "life cycle." He chose out of his own goodness to give us birth. What kind of birth is this? The key understanding of this passage is the term "firstfruits." The term "firstfruits" is a designation for Christians in the New Testament. Instead of giving birth to spiritual death through sin, this is new birth to spiritual life through the word of truth.

What is the word of truth? It's the gospel message of Jesus. It's the sweetest message, the sweetest song that drowns out the temptations of the sirens.

The gospel is the message that the Son of God came to earth, lived a sinless life, died on a cross for our sins, and rose again on the third day. The gospel is the message that says, you can be spiritually born again, that God will enter your heart if you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord over your life. And Jesus said, "I love you so much. Whoever believes in me will have a new spiritual birth, and I break the power of the sin cycle of death in your life. Believe in me and receive this word of truth into your heart."

Without the beauty of Christ in your life, oh, you may be able to fight off the temptation to sin here and there through sheer determination. You can try to fill your ears with more wax and strap yourself tightly to the mast like Ulysses, but real victory over temptation won't come through wax and ropes. Real victory over temptation comes after we become born again spiritually. Victory over temptation will not come without God's Spirit taking up residence in you and changing you from the inside out. One needs to know, love, and chase after the greatest thing, Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can drown out the sirens in your life.

Some of us have known Jesus for a long time. You have heard the beautiful song of the word of truth, the gospel. But for whatever reason, you doubt God's goodness at this moment. Some of us feel hopelessly trapped by a sin cycle, and you feel trapped in a very dark place. Others of us realize that something isn't right. God has revealed that you are slipping. You are in danger of chasing the song of the siren, and you need to be reminded about God's goodness.

What to do?

Confess your sin. Admit your struggle with the temptation. Agree with God about it. We serve a God of grace. He forgives again and again.

Identify the lie. Ask yourself, "What is it that I have been chasing instead of God? Am I chasing pleasure apart from God's plan? Am I chasing significance in my life without Christ at the center? Am I trying to control all that is going on around me instead of humbly giving up control to God?"

Renounce the lie and replace the lie with the truth of his Living Word. Whether you read one verse or an entire chapter of scriptural truth each morning, God's word is like a personal customized text message from heaven sent just to you for what you need that day. Rely on the community around you. Find a trusted

Christian friend to share your struggle with. So much good happens when sins, temptations, and strongholds are brought out of the darkness and into the light. Ask God to fill you with only desires for him. God is what sets us free.

Some of us here have never experienced the beauty of Christ. All we have known are sirens. The harsh reality is we have no power to resist temptation without this new birth that God gives us, as described in verse 18. I trust there are some reading this who want to know the beauty of a relationship with Christ. Here is how you can have the beauty of Christ in your life. It's very clear and straightforward. God doesn't make it complicated.

- 1.You need to believe that God loves you, and he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to make a relationship with God possible.
- 2.You need to know there is a problem. It's a sin problem. Without Christ in your life, your own sin has separated you from a real and personal relationship with God.
- 3.You need to accept God's solution. God demonstrated his love for us in this. While we were sinners, Jesus Christ, the sinless one, died for us a criminal's death. Jesus took all of our sins on himself. The sinless One became sin for us. Jesus paid the penalty for your sins so that you wouldn't have to. He died in your place. And you need to believe that his sacrifice, once and for all, was enough to save you. And that His shed blood on the cross covers every sin of yours. And you need to believe that Jesus came to die for you to be your personal Savior.
- 4.You need to respond to what Jesus did for you. And you respond to him on faith. You must trust in his goodness. It's a simple conversation with God. Confess to Jesus, you are a sinner and need him to save you from your sins. Then invite him to come into your life and give you new a new spiritual birth. At the moment you ask Jesus to come into your life, your sins are immediately placed on Jesus who died 2000 years ago and rose again. He then sends to you his forgiveness, and he sends to you the gift of eternal life. And also, he sends the Holy Spirit to come into you to live in your hearts. That's the gift of a birth through the word of truth that he promised.
- 5.Thank him. Our new spiritual birth isn't anything we earn or deserve; its only because of his goodness that he shares his grace and mercy with us. Thank him for saving you.

Lord, we commit or recommit to following you because we know you are good. Teach us to battle temptation with your truth. Teach us to build new habits and practices to keep your truth in our hearts and minds, renewing us daily. We pray for greater victories over temptation in our church family. Grow our desire for more of you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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