

James 1:13-15

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 April 2018

Preacher: David MacPherson

- [0 : 00] I wonder how many wrongs are justified with the popular retort, it was just a bit of fun. You've maybe used those words yourself, you've maybe heard those words being used, and sometimes of course it was just a bit of fun, but sometimes we use those words to package or to underestimate the wrong that has been done, to make it seem less serious. It might be unkind banter that has left somebody very hurt, oh it was just a bit of fun, it might be a racist jive, just a bit of fun. It might be sexual harassment of one kind or another, just a bit of fun. Another serious matter that is also often packaged as just a bit of fun is temptation. And we see this in the way that the seemingly playful allure of temptation has provided endless possibilities for advertisers.
- [1 : 23] We have the Nestle Temptations range of ice cream, irresistible. Then there is, if you have a taste for stronger fare, there is absolute vodka marketed as absolute temptation. Or one advert I saw was of a slick Lexus car. Accompanied by the words, it wouldn't be temptation if you could resist it. And so in each of these cases, temptation is presented as something that's fun, something not particularly dangerous, but rather something that we can play with and enjoy almost, enjoy the fight of resisting or indeed enjoy the pleasure of succumbing. And we do it ourselves in our everyday conversation. We speak about temptation in a way that trivializes it. I don't want to make a bigger deal of this than is merited, but I just mention it because it is something that we do. You could imagine yourself, even today, just cast your mind forward a couple of hours and you're at the dinner table. Now, don't remain there because I want you back here for an hour or so, but just for a moment, cast your mind forward to the dinner table.
- [2 : 48] It's Sunday lunch. You've just had a bowl of trifle and then you're offered another bowl. And how do you respond? Well, often the response will be, oh, don't tempt me. And so we use that language even in our everyday conversation. And when we do it, we are, I'm not saying in a very deliberate way, and as I say, I don't want to make more of this than it merits, but we are trivializing this very serious matter of temptation. Temptation, so it would seem, is just a bit of fun. I came across a quote that seems to capture the essence of this trivialization of temptation. And I don't know who the quote is to be attributed to. I don't know who coined it, but I'll just read it out for you. Almost the only time losing is more fun than winning is when you're fighting temptation. And yeah, we can smile and, oh yeah, that's quite clever. But again, it is a trivialization of temptation. What does God have to say on the subject of temptation?
- [3 : 58] Well, on the basis of what we read in James and these three verses that we're going to be considering, we could maybe summarize it with this throwaway line, I suppose.

Temptation is not fun, it's fatal. Temptation is not fun, it's fatal. How does our text end? There in verse 15, when it is full-grown, desires, son, sin.

When sin is full-grown, it gives birth to death. So temptation, from God's perspective, is not fun, it's fatal.

So let's consider these three verses in James. James 1, verses 13 to 15. And we'll consider the verses guided or using a structure provided by the following headings.

First of all, the inevitability of temptation. Then, the source of temptation. Then thirdly, the process of temptation. And finally, the outcome of temptation.

[5 : 08] Certainly the outcome of temptation when it is not resistant. So we'll begin with the inevitability of temptation. And there in verse 13, the very first verse of our text, the very first two words is really where we're focusing our attention just very fleetingly.

There we read in verse 13, when tempted. So James is addressing his audience, Christians scattered around the world and across generations addressing us.

And he says very matter-of-factly, when tempted. He doesn't say if you're tempted, but when you're tempted. And the very language highlights this reality that temptation is inevitable in our experience.

And maybe as we reflect on the inevitability of temptation in our experience, perhaps three words capture the sobering reality of temptation's inevitability.

And the three words are everybody, everywhere, and all the time. Well, that's more than three words, but everybody, everywhere, and all the time.

[6 : 23] We are all tempted. That's further emphasized by James in verse 14, where we read, but each one is tempted when.

And he carefully and deliberately uses language that very explicitly makes this point. Each one is tempted when.

Everybody. Everybody. You're never too old to be tempted. You're certainly not too young to be tempted. You're never too mature or grown up or committed to somehow be immune to temptation.

We are all tempted, and that includes you. And we're tempted everywhere. Temptation is no respecter of sacred places or times or occasions.

Temptation is ubiquitous. It's everywhere. I kind of Googled, you know, temptation quotes, which is what I got the one about, the one that I just quoted a moment ago.

[7 : 30] And one that isn't particularly profound, but it seemed to capture a truth. It said, life is temptation. Temptation. And that's a big statement to make. But there's an element of truth in that.

We are tempted everywhere. And we're tempted all the time. Now, often, we're not aware of it. We're not conscious that that's what's happening. And there are many reasons for that that we're not going to go into right now.

But all of the time, we are certainly subject to and prone to being tempted. Temptation is our constant companion from the cradle to the grave.

Temptation affects you, and it affects you wherever and whenever. Now, given that this is so, you'd be well advised to pay careful attention to what God has to say on the subject.

So, that's the first thing I want to stress or draw out from our passage, the inevitability of temptation when tempted. But secondly, let's focus in on what James has to say about the source of temptation, or perhaps to put it another way, who is responsible for our temptation?

[8 : 42] Because really, that's the manner in which James tackles this question of the source of temptation. He really answers the unstated question, who's responsible?

And he answers that question, who's responsible, both negatively by identifying who isn't responsible, and positively by identifying who is responsible.

Well, who isn't responsible for your temptation? Well, in a word, God. There in verse 13, when tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me.

God is not responsible for your temptation. Now, we could ask the question, why is the charge leveled in the first place? Presumably, when James says, no one should say, God is tempting me, he's anticipating that that is what some people might say.

Or he's maybe recognizing that that is what some people are saying. And he's saying, look, those of you who take this view, you're wrong. You shouldn't be saying that. God is not responsible.

[9 : 49] But why would some believers have come to that conclusion, that God somehow was responsible for their temptation? Well, it may be that some believers were drawing false conclusions from the reality of God's absolute sovereignty.

And they said, well, we've been taught that God is sovereign over all, and so he's sovereign over the circumstances of my life, and so if I'm being tempted, well, that must be his responsibility.

Isn't he in charge of everything? And so they came to this conclusion, perhaps, on those grounds. Or maybe some were a little confused, as we can be, on what we might call the gray area between testing and tempting.

Tempting is almost a subset of testing. And as we go through the Bible, we find that God does test his people. That's stated very clearly and explicitly. There are many examples.

And maybe some Christians were thinking, well, if God tests his people, is temptation not just a kind of test. And so I guess God must be responsible. God is tempting me.

[10 : 53] Or so some were concluding. But James rejects this conclusion on two grounds. It's really one ground that he develops in a necessary way.

His main argument for saying that this is not so is grounded in the character of God. He says God cannot be tempted. For God cannot be tempted by evil.

God, by his very nature and character, cannot be tempted. Temptation is an enticement to sin. And God, who is altogether pure, cannot be enticed to sin.

Now, I appreciate that maybe some of you, the questions already are rising in your mind. I appreciate that this raises questions concerning the temptations that Jesus faced. But we'll have to leave that discussion, important and fascinating though it is, for another day.

The basic fundamental point that James is making concerning the character of God is that God cannot be tempted. But from that, he draws a necessary implication.

[11 : 58] So it's not really a second reason for saying that, you know, to say that God's tempting you is wrong. Not a second reason, but an implication of the main reason. And the implication of this truth that God cannot be tempted is that he cannot tempt others.

Given who he is, he won't, we might indeed say, he can't tempt or entice anybody to sin. That would go against his character.

And God will never act in a way that goes against his character. He never behaves out of character. He is always consistent with who he is.

And so, he cannot be tempted, and he will not and cannot tempt others. God is sovereign over our temptation.

He can use the circumstances that we find ourselves in. He can use them. He's sovereign over them. But he is not responsible for our temptation.

[13 : 03] Who is responsible? So the question is, that's the question, the unstated question that James is answering. Who is responsible for temptation? And he says, first of all, it's not God. Well, okay, it's not God.

Who is it? Who is responsible? And the answer is as simple as the previous answer, and it's simply this. I am. Each one is tempted when?

By his own evil desires. Verse 14. Each one is tempted when? By his own evil desire he is dragged away and enticed.

Note that James identifies both the when and how of our responsibility. Each one is tempted when? By his own evil desire.

This evil desire, it's in here. We often imagine that the source of temptation is external or out there, rather than internal or in here.

[14 : 07] But what does James say? Well, James says that fundamentally the source of temptation is inside us. It's in here. The key word is desire.

The word there that we find in verse 14, by his own evil desire. It's really just one Greek word that means desire.

The word is neutral. It's morally neutral. And the nature of the desire is a function of the context for us to determine. And desire, of course, is something that's internal to us.

It's clear that in this occasion, or on this occasion, James is considering evil desire. And here we have, in what James is recognizing, a profound and accurate insight into human nature.

We are all possessed of an innate tendency towards sin. We find sin attractive. We are drawn to sin. We desire sin.

[15 : 12] And we can protest and say, oh, that's not true. And maybe we can identify some sins we're not drawn to. And we feel very pleased with ourselves. Well, I'm not drawn to that sin. Well, maybe not to that sin. But there's another one that you are drawn to.

That is who we are. That is part of our spiritual DNA. It's a consequence of the fall. We are fallen creatures. And there is in us this innate tendency towards sin.

Evil desire is part of who we are. And it is the cause. It is the source of temptation. So, fundamentally, the problem of temptation is internal.

But temptation is also, in a real sense, out there. I kind of pose the false contrast between in here and out there. In a way, it's both. Fundamentally, it's in here.

But, of course, out there is also irrelevant. Over the years, I've often heard it said that there are three sources of temptation. I don't know if this is something you've heard said.

[16 : 17] You know, the devil, the world, and the flesh. And it is the case that each of these agents, if we can call them agents, can be involved in our experience of temptation.

But their power to tempt is greatly reduced by the absence of evil desire. So, if there weren't evil desire in us, then Satan would find it very difficult to tempt us.

The world would not be as alluring as it might otherwise be or those things that are sinful in the world. If we think of each of these three in turn, the temptations of Satan. James acknowledges that Satan is part of the panorama.

In chapter 4 and verse 7, he says, Submit yourselves then to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. He's not excluding Satan from being involved in our temptations.

But he's homing in on the key element. And so, if we think of the temptations of Satan, what does Satan do? Well, Satan seeks to exploit that evil desire that is already in us.

[17 : 22] Now, Satan can try and work on what might be called legitimate desires and try to twist them. But it's so much easier for him when the desires are already evil. I don't know if this is true, but I have a suspicion that Satan is seldom involved in our temptations.

For the simple reason that our own evil desire is more than sufficient to make us fall, and he can occupy his time in other ways. What about the world as a source of temptation?

Well, the sinful allurements of the world are only allurements because we find them alluring. Now, that's not very deep, but it's true. And so, even when we think about the world as a source of temptation, it only has power in the measure that it finds in us evil desire that it can play on.

As regards to the flesh, Jesus himself did say in connection with temptation that the spirit is willing, but the body or flesh is weak. But even a weak body can be controlled in one of two directions by our desires.

If we are to have any success in resisting temptation, we need to acknowledge and take ownership of our own evil desires. We'll come back to that for a moment at the end, but this is crucial.

[18 : 52] James Holmes in on this. Our own, his own, her own, your own evil desire is the key problem. The third thing we want to think about and draw out from what James has to say is what we're calling the process of temptation.

And James uses two pictures to present in very vivid language the process of temptation. The picture of hunting or fishing, that we'll think of it in terms of fishing, and the picture of childbirth.

First of all, the picture that he uses or the language that he uses, certainly for his original readers, would have conveyed to them the scene of a hunter or a fisherman.

Let's think about a fisherman. And a fish being lured, being enticed by the bait and dragged away. Imagine a trout swimming happily in the River Dee. And as it swims along the River Dee, not a care in the world, what crosses his path but this very attractive, glittery fly on a hook.

And the trout says, ooh, that looks nice. And says, ooh, what will I do? Will I bite it? Will I not? Will I swim on? And what does the trout do? Well, hopefully for the fisherman, he bites the fly, and then he's reeled in mercilessly by the fisherman.

[20 : 09] Maybe he ends up in a frying pan for tea that night. I don't know. Well, this is the picture that James is using to describe how a man or a woman, how you and me, how we are lured or enticed by attractive bait, and unable or unwilling to resist, bite.

And we're dragged away powerless into the clutches of sin. But pictures are limited. And in this case, there is one crucial difference between the picture of the fisherman and of the fish and our situation, one crucial difference.

In the case of temptation, the agent and the victim are one and the same. You see, the agent of temptation is our own evil desire.

It's not somebody else with some attractive bait. No, our own evil desire lures us. To use a popular expression, we really are our own worst enemies.

Our evil desire, that we're responsible, is that which lures us into a sin. So, fishing is one picture that James uses, but he also uses the picture of childbirth.

[21 : 23] He goes on to say there in verse 15, Then after desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin. James pictures this very somber family tree that covers three generations.

You have desire as the patriarch in this family tree. And desire conceives a child, and the child is sin. The sinful act, the sinful deed, if you wish.

And, of course, we should note that very often the desire itself is sinful. Certainly, if it's an evil desire, it's sinful. But there are, of course, desires that are not sinful.

But often they are. Even the desire is already sin. But here the picture being painted is of that desire leading to a sinful act of one kind or another.

Well, it's at the end of it. We've fallen in our trap. We've sinned. We just need to try harder next time. Well, if only it were that simple. Sin that has conceived grows, James tells us.

[22 : 24] It begins as a seemingly inoffensive newborn child. Maybe even just a little cute, playful thing. But it grows into a stropky teenager and then into an obnoxious adult.

And we see that in real life as sin draws us in. From what we think of as little sins to becoming bigger sins and greater sins and more hurtful and damaging sins.

And there's so many examples we could give. But let's think of online porn as one example. It starts small. Just some innocent titillation. There's nothing wrong with admiring the human form.

Surely God has created us. We should admire beauty, should we not? But then you're hooked. And you want just a little more. And then a little more. And then just a little more.

And we could develop that in ways that probably wouldn't be very edifying. But you know the picture. You know the process. And of course that's not true just of that example. It's true with lying.

[23 : 24] It's true with coveting. It's true with slothfulness. And we could go on. The baby grows. And when the baby is full, grown, what does James say?

When sin reaches adulthood to continue using his picture. It in turn conceives a child. The third generation in this somber family tree. The grandchild of desire.

And that leads us to our fourth heading. The outcome of temptation. And the outcome of temptation of course is death. Verse 15. And then after desire is conceived, it gives birth to sin.

And sin when it is full grown gives birth to death. Temptation kills. It's not fun. It's fatal. A failure to resist temptation brings death.

At so many levels. It deadens our consciences. It kills relationships. It kills our joy. And ultimately it leads to spiritual death. An eternal lostness or perdition.

[24 : 24] Temptation. Temptation is a matter of life and death. And James does us a great service. By presenting what we might call a clinical presentation of the nature.

The workings and the consequences of temptation. But we can't leave it there. In the light of what we have discovered. What must we do?

What must you do? What must you do in the face of temptation? Of course an obvious answer would be resist temptation. But some of you are maybe thinking, well yes, I've tried that and I didn't go very well.

Well let me just suggest three things that you can do in the face of temptation. And maybe taking a step back not only in the face of temptation that you are facing or are about to face.

But also in the light of temptation where you have failed and you have been lured in. You're maybe right now in that spiral from something that seems so innocuous to something that's becoming a lot more uncontrollable.

[25 : 29] Three things that you can do. Three things that you must do. First of all, you must repent. If you have indeed, as I'm sure you all have, in one way or another or in one occasion or another, been lured by your own evil desire to sin, then you must repent.

You must come to God acknowledging your sin and asking for Him to forgive you. And of course the glorious promise of the gospel is that He will forgive you. In Jesus we have a Savior who has died for us, who has lived a perfect life, who was tempted in all ways as we are, yet without sin.

And He died in our place. He's paid the price of your sin. And so if you have fallen in sin, then come in repentance and faith and ask to be forgiven.

He will forgive you. But the second thing you need to do in terms of your current situation is you anticipate temptation around the corner. The second thing you need to do is you need to take responsibility.

Stop blaming everything and everybody other than yourself. We live in a society that is obsessed with some kind of no-fault philosophy where there is a morally neutral explanation for our every misdemeanor.

[26 : 49] Whenever anybody does anything wrong, there's always an explanation. Oh, this is the cause or this is the cause. Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't investigate and explore these things.

But I think we've reached a sorry past where we are unwilling to acknowledge that we are responsible for our actions, for our sins. It's our evil desire that led us to do what we did.

And so we have to take responsibility. Now, it's been said, and this is pretty sexist, but it makes a point that temptation is a woman's weapon and a man's excuse.

But the reality is that we are all experts in finding excuses and pointing the finger elsewhere. And in the matter of temptation, the key thing to do is to not do that, to take responsibility.

You need to wake up and smell the coffee. It's your fault. You're responsible, and you need to take responsibility. But there's a third thing that we need to do, and that is you need to work on your desires.

[27 : 59] This is the key. We've already seen that James identifies this as the core issue. It's our evil desire that begins the process, that lures us into sin. And so if we're going to attack temptation at its root, we need to attack the root, which is our evil desire, our desires.

This is the key. This is the master's weekend. I don't know if you're interested in golf or not, but this is the master's weekend, and it would seem appropriate to quote the great Tom Watson. Sadly, not the golfer, but the Puritan theologian Thomas Watson, who puts the matter memorably.

He says this, Satan loves to fish in the troubled waters of a discontented heart. Now, we've already noted in the light of what James has to say that our principal enemy is not, in a sense, Satan, but ourselves.

Our evil desire does the fishing. That said, what Watson does identify as the key matter, he does rightly so as the state of our heart.

The issue is our heart. The issue is our desires. We need to desire what God desires. We need a pure heart with pure desires. You can ask God to create in you a pure heart, but you need to cooperate with God in cultivating a pure heart with pure desires.

[29 : 26] But how do we cultivate pure desires? Let me give you an example from our family circle. A few years ago, one of the members of our family, who shall remain nameless, but if you want to try and guess, well, that's up to you, one of the members of our family decided to lose weight.

And to be fair, was quite successful, which narrows down the options of who it was already. But anyway, so this family member cut out all the fattening stuff, including crisps.

Crisps were removed from the diet. They liked crisps, but they denied themselves this pleasure, given the greater goal.

Now, a few months later, having been really pretty successful in their objective, they had a mild craving for a packet of crisps and indulged.

But the really cool thing was this, and I sadly am just an observer of this process. The really cool thing was this, that they ate a couple of crisps, and they just didn't want to eat any more.

[30 : 37] It was so fatty. It was so disgusting. There was no pleasure in it. You see, what had happened was that the taste buds had been educated.

They had been cultivated in such a way that that which was harmful was no longer attractive. Now, that's where you want to be in the matter of sin. The more that sin becomes less attractive, the more your desires are focused on that which God approves of and is God-pleasing, then the more the power of temptation is weakened.

We need to cultivate our desires. God has promised to give us a pure heart. We are encouraged to pray for a pure heart, but we are to cooperate with God in the cultivating of our desires.

We need to desire what God desires. We need to desire God. We need a contented heart, contented in God himself. And this must be your first line of defense against temptation, cultivating your desires.

But will you do that? Will you put in the hard graft of cultivating a pure and contented heart? The alternative is a very somber one because as we've seen, temptation is not fun.

[32 : 03] It's fatal. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the very realistic way in which it deals with and identifies the human condition.

And we see ourselves in the mirror of your word. We are those who are tempted. We are those who are possessed of evil desire that lures us and entices us to sin with all its painful and hurtful consequences for ourselves and others.

And we do pray that you would be the one who would create in us a pure heart, a right spirit within us, and help us to be willing to cooperate with you in the cultivating of desires that are pleasing to you and that weaken the power of temptation over us.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.