

6. Taking Personal Responsibility

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

(James 1:13-15)

Temptation

Up to this point, James has been writing about trials and how we should undergo them in the joy and strength of faith. The Lord gives us strength and wisdom in all circumstances, and at the end we may receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. We are to progress so that we may become mature in faith. As indicated earlier, this is the theme of the letter of James: becoming mature in faith.

Now James moves to a related but different matter, namely, temptation. His main teaching is that trials come from God and are meant to bring forth perseverance, but that temptations have nothing to do with God. A trial is a means used by God to refine and strengthen our faith, to lead us to do good, but a temptation is whatever comes to attack us and weaken our faith, to lead us to sin.

This is a very important distinction, as we will see, and it is vital to our understanding of the Lord God and of faith. God gives us many blessings and promises on the route to spiritual maturity, and we may work with these and build on these. But there is something that also involves us very deeply and seriously. We are called by God to take personal responsibility for our sins. When we do so, we will learn not only how sin works and how powerful it is, but also how we can escape its snare.

The Lord teaches us that on the road to spiritual maturity, we must take personal responsibility in dealing with temptations. We will note

three elements: the pretense of temptation, the process of temptation, and the power of temptation.

God is Stronger Than Us

James' language in 1:13 is very strong and clear. He goes right to the point: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me'." This is a very important statement. If it were true that God was the one tempting us, then we would have some basis for declaring ourselves innocent when falling into temptation. If God is behind our temptations, we are dealing with something that we cannot overcome, for God is stronger than man. Then we can say that if God wants us to fall, we will. It is no longer our fault that we fall into sin, but God's fault. We can put all or part of the blame on God, and decrease our own guilt.

This is always the pretense that lies hidden in temptations. "Go ahead, and do it. It is not your fault; actually, it is God's fault because he made you this way. He let you get into this situation, and he does not care, so just do it!" If we get caught, we can always say that we were too weak, that God tempted us, and how could we possibly then stand?

We can blame others, blame circumstances, and blame God. In one commentary, I read this interesting sentence: "There have been two main eras in American history, one is the passing of the buffalo, and the other is the passing of the buck." Our inclination is to not take responsibility or blame, but to always plead innocent immediately, loudly, softly, or subtly. And if we are to blame, it is only partially. Shared guilt is better than all guilt.

The Pretense of Temptation

James writes, "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me'." It could very well be that in the churches of his day there were people who were dissatisfied with their situation, the persecutions and ridicule, and who therefore had gone along with serving idols again. When challenged or admonished about this, they would respond that God was tempting them. This meant they thought it was God's fault that they were doing wrong.

"God is tempting me." Of course, we are not stronger than God and so it may seem that the blame for our falling into temptation must ultimately be ascribed to him. He is not fair. His actions are not above-board. He is playing

a mean game with us. In fact, if we analyze things, God is the real author of our sins.

Let us consider the pretense of temptation. A pretense is a claim not supported by fact. The pretense is ostentatious, which means it is a very impressive claim that nobody will dare deny. People are impressed because they cannot see through the insincerity and inadequacy of the pretense. It is then a false cover-up for sins.

I believe that temptation always has some kind of pretense in it, some false claim that implicates God and which we use to get off the hook. Someone might say, "I know that what I did was not right, but that is how it went, and who can understand God?" The point is not whether we can understand God, but whether we acknowledge full responsibility for our sins.

Satan used this type of approach already in Paradise. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Gen 3:1). He used a truth that was at the same time a lie. And a little later, he used the frontal attack with his assurance, "You will surely not die" (Gen 3:4). Satan tries to tell us that God has evil motives, and that he is keeping us away from our potential. He does not want us to be like him, knowing good and evil. God therefore does not receive the glory, but the blame.

Blaming God

When tempted, we may never say that God is tempting us. James readily admits that temptations will come and have come. He knows that these are very difficult to endure, and that sometimes we fall into temptation. But he warns that we may never use the excuse, "God is tempting me." It is an excuse because it implies that when God tempts us, we must fall for we are not stronger than God. No one is stronger than God, so when he tempts, we all fall down. When we fall, therefore, it is God's fault, not ours. God is then implicated, and the more we can put on his plate, the less we leave on our own plates.

Before we allow ourselves to commit a certain sin, we often rationalize it, which means that we give certain reasons for it. One reason is that God put us in this trouble, and he is not getting us out of it, so we had better do something about it ourselves. If God allows us to come into a certain situation, he should not be angry if we succumb to the temptation of that situation. Another reason is that we are not our own makers, and we cannot help being the way that we are. Since God made us this way, it is his fault that we act as we do. Many

explainers point here to a poem of the famous Scottish poet, Robert Burns, whose life was very sinful and who excused himself as follows:

Thou know'st that Thou hast formed me
With passions wild and strong
And listening to their witching voice
Has often led me wrong.

Burns runs away from his own responsibility. It is very convenient to do so and put all the blame on God. He put us here, he made us this way, he allows things to happen, he is tempting us, and therefore what can we do against it? We feel that we are just pawns in God's chess game with the devil. Even when we blame other people, we still blame God. Look at the example of Adam who, when questioned by God about his first sin, replied that it was the fault of "the woman *you* put here with me" (Gen 3:12). Ultimately the blame must go to God, for he is the Almighty Creator who determines all our circumstances and situations.

A Foolish Way of Thinking

That is the awful pretense underlying our self-defense. James shows us how foolish this way of thinking is. He writes in the second part of 1:13, "For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone." God cannot *be* tempted. To be tempted, that is, to be inwardly inclined to a certain evil deed is already sinful and God is without sin. A person can only be tempted if he has an inward disposition to sin. The LORD is a holy and righteous God in whom there is not even the slightest hint of evil.

Since he cannot *be* tempted, it follows that he does not tempt anyone. Tempting is leading another to sin. Only a sinner will seek to lead another to sin, even the same sin. Sinners love the company of sinners (see Psalm 1). Share the pleasure, then share the blame. But God does not cause anyone to sin. He detests sin, forbids it, prevents it, cursed it on the cross, and has conquered it in Jesus Christ, his Son. Would he then ever tempt anyone? The very thought is absurd and deeply offensive to the Lord God.

The pretense of temptation, that God is somehow to be blamed, is utterly disgusting. And yet we so easily fall into this. We may say, "I sin so much. I guess God does not really want me to be saved." Do we know how much grief we cause God with our sins? We may also say, "I have tried so often to break with a sinful habit, but God does not help me." Do we know how often God

reaches out his hand to us and comes to us with his Word, but we reject both?

We have to stop blaming God or the circumstances that he allowed. We have to stop blaming the people God placed on our way. Instead, we must blame only ourselves and acknowledge what we do wrong as our sin, and ours alone. We must take responsibility for our deeds, each and every one. That is the first step to the spiritual maturity of faith. A child often says, "It's not my fault, I couldn't help it; he did it, too, and his sin was even worse!" But a mature adult should say, "I did it, yes, I *alone* am to blame."

The Process Begins in the Heart

What about mitigating circumstances? Perhaps there are some. We may speak about the devil's instigation. He certainly tempts us. Other people can lead us astray. We must therefore be on our guard at all times. And we must never ourselves cause another to sin nor place blame on God for anything, especially our sins. We should develop a very strong awareness of the process of temptation. How does it operate? There is a pattern, as James writes in 1:14: "...but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed."

Notice how James does not start from the *outside* and then work his way in, but he starts with the *inside* of a person. This is what the Lord Jesus himself said: "What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'...For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander" (Matt 15:11, 19).

Yes, there are external factors. There are things or persons who can have an almost magnetic attraction to us, but these external factors can only influence us because our inside, our heart, is kindly disposed towards them. James writes about our "own evil desire". Let me emphasize the word "own", for it is decisive. Our hearts reach out to things that we desire, and a process is started that, if left unchecked, will lead us to do what lies deep within our heart.

The entire process begins in the heart, deep within us. We are inclined to follow our heart in taking things and doing deeds that we know are forbidden by the Lord God. This evil desire is always present in us. It can be controlled, as we will see further on, but it is always there in this life, waiting for time and opportunity. The moment we are not watchful, it comes into action to trap us.

Dragged and Enticed

James uses two interesting words: “dragged” and “enticed”. Various explainers show that these two words are taken from the language of fishermen. Often predator fish, such as bass, have a certain lair or area which is theirs, and they guard it carefully. Anything that comes near is devoured. Knowing this, fishermen run their lure along the lair of a bass to get it to leave its territory and follow the bait.

The word “dragged” indicates how the fish finds itself going after the lure. Yet it does not bite right away. It follows the lure closely, becoming fascinated by the movements, and so is enticed to strike. Too late, the fish realizes that it is the one caught, rather than the lure. Ancient Greek apparently used precisely these two words to describe how a fish is pulled from his hiding place to follow bait and grab it.

There are some interesting aspects to this choice of words. Temptation as a process usually comes to us. Satan presents his lures. We do not have to go looking for the devil, because he is coming to look for us. We make it much easier, of course, if we go to places where God is not served and associate with people who do not worship God according to his Word. The devil will then say, “You are already here, so you saved me some work. Welcome, welcome!”

This same choice of words makes clear that once we make the initial decision to go after whatever tempts us, it is so hard to turn back. We become more and more fascinated by the lure, and it consumes our time and thoughts so that we forget where we came from and only lunge forward to get what might slip away from us. In every temptation there is a moment, I would say even a conscious moment, where we decide to commit ourselves one way or the other.

The Example of Israel at Baal Peor

Temptation is a process that takes a certain amount of time, and during that time we are faced with decisions to be made. The maturity of our faith is challenged. The working of God’s Word and Spirit in us warns us not to proceed. There is also the voice of our conscience, telling us whether the way we are following or what we are planning to do is right or wrong. We also know that God is not tempting us, but that we are following the evil desires of our sinful heart.

In this connection, let me refer to I Corinthians 10. We read there about the sin of Israel at Baal Peor, where the Israelites had a feast with the Moabites that turned into a drunken orgy. The Israelites were severely punished. Look

at verse 11: “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warning for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.” We are warned not to look down on those Israelites, but to make sure that we do not commit the same sins or worse, because now we live in the last ages, the time of Christ’s resurrection and ascension.

Then Paul writes, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” We must not overestimate our ability to resist. Young people can sometimes be so brash. They have not yet matured in faith and do not know the full power of sin. But older people sometimes have not matured in faith, either. They think they are standing firm, but in reality they are staggering. We must not underestimate temptation. Paul adds to this the important statement that we should not overestimate temptation, either. The Corinthians must take into account that there is no need to fall into temptation and be ensnared by sin.

Now look at verse 13, which is very powerful: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” There are several elements to look at in this verse. First, it is not at all inevitable that we cannot stand against temptation. We should not take a fatalistic attitude and think that we cannot fight temptation and so should just give in. The devil does not want us to know this, but he is resistible. If we resist him, he will flee from us. Second, everyone faces temptation, and in that respect dealing with temptation is common to man. The one does not face more temptations than the other. “Do not think,” writes Paul to the Corinthians, “that you are a special case with extreme temptations that others do not have.” The devil’s temptations are always variations on a theme. And lastly, if God allows the devil to tempt us, we must remember that the Lord is faithful and he will provide a way of escape.

The Power of Temptation

What, then, is the way of escape? Certainly it is the way of faith, obedience, and prayer. It is also the way of divine intervention. This is made more clear at some times than at other times. Sometimes we may have committed ourselves to a certain sinful act, but God changes the situation so that we cannot carry out our wicked plan. Looking back, I can see how often the LORD has kept me from falling. The process of temptation does therefore not lead *a priori* to our falling and failing. We must stand firm. We must say *no*. We must

not go where temptation is most evident. And we must always work with the Lord, not against him.

This will require from us extreme effort and total involvement. Our responsibility remains. We must know the power of temptation. There is first of all the desire. It is not anything that God put in us, but our own evil nature that we acquired through the fall into sin. And if we allow the process of temptation to go its way freely, it will consume us powerfully.

James compares it to a process of birth. The desire gives birth to sin, which is the actual deed. The desire grows within and consumes us, finally culminating in the act of the sin itself. And James adds, "...and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death" (1:15). Desire, sin, death. James means here eternal death. We cause our own undoing and bring God's righteous curse upon ourselves by letting our sinful desires have their way with us. Once in the grip of desire, we will come to the sin itself, and when we have been snared by the sin, it becomes a way of life. We continue in that lifestyle without remorse and it leads to eternal damnation.

The power of temptation is great. It can take us captive and bind us to a life of sin. Then we are doomed to die. But we know how it works. We also know that this power is limited. It is not omnipotent. Only God is all-powerful, and he is faithful, providing the way of escape. In fact, the way of escape is the way of Jesus Christ. He obeyed God's commands, even in his most severe distress. Temptations that were not so common to man overcame him, yet he stood firm against them all and in the end the devil had to flee. Even the cross and the agony of hell could not break Christ's resolve. By the power of his divinity, he overcame the power of temptation.

Now he says to us that there is a way to battle temptation. He says, "I did it. I showed you the way. Follow me now, and we shall arrive safely in the Jerusalem of God." Let us put other words into the text here: "After faith has conceived, it gives birth to obedience. And obedience, when it is full-grown and mature, gives birth to eternal life."