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The Anatomy of Sin

James 1:13-18

By Matt Hook

“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.

Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not chance like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.”

Many of us read Jonathon Swift’s novel, Gulliver’s Travels. If you remember, one of the islands Gulliver visits is Lilliput, occupied by tiny people. The Lilliputians were powerless to capture Gulliver as he stayed on their island. But on one occasion, in an unguarded moment, Gulliver fell asleep, and they began to wrap tiny threads around him – one by one like a web – until by the time he awoke, he was trapped, unable to break free. Any one of those little strands, which they stretched across his body, could have been snapped easily. Gulliver was caught in the simplest of traps, not because of one thread that encircled him, but because of the combined strength of all those tiny threads that wound around him.

Now we don’t like to talk about it. But it is very likely that some of you this morning find yourself in a similar position, like Gulliver, trapped, not on Lilliput, but on your own version of Temptation Island. You don’t want to admit it, you dread being discovered, you feel foolish to be stuck where you are, but there are some areas of your life that have become ensnared, trapped by multiple threads of temptation. Whether it’s sex, food, money, power, or prestige, chances are you’ve had your set of travels there too.

People have been dealing with temptation throughout history. The Roman Emperor Tacitus said, “Things forbidden have a secret charm.” George Washington said, “Few men have the strength to withstand the highest bidder.” Actress Mae West was known to say, “I generally avoid temptation, unless I can’t resist it.” Perhaps most importantly we need to ask, “As Christians, how can we deal with temptation?” These are the kinds of questions we need to wrestle with, because, as James knew, we have a problem.

James, the half-brother of Jesus, doesn’t mince words. He offers no excuses. But in this brief passage, he dissects sin and temptation for us.

He goes directly into the nature of temptation. (inevitable and continual)

First, James says “Temptation is inevitable.” In verse 13 and 14 he states *“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.”*

James doesn’t talk about the *possibility* of temptation. He doesn’t say we *might* encounter it. He doesn’t *pretend* it doesn’t exist. He just says “When” it happens.

Second James says “Temptation is constant.” James uses the present tense of the verb, because no matter how far along you are in your faith, temptation happens over and over and over. As a Christian, you never arrive at a place where temptation leaves you alone. In the burbs, the country, and the city, in the office, at home, on the road, inside, and outside of the church, you will continually face temptation. Like trials, temptations come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and places and no one is immune to them.

And like trials, temptation is not sin. But it is the beginning of the path that leads to sin. And if we don’t recognize temptation for what it is, we inevitably fall into sin. Like they say, if you lie down with frogs, you wake up with warts.

James also goes into the source of temptation.

First, God is not the source of temptation! James shows us how we get that wrong. “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” Sin doesn’t come from God! James brings up the blame game. God does *test* us to strengthen our faith, but God never *tempts* us to promote us to sin. There is nothing in God or God’s character for sin to even gain a foothold on God. There is not even an indirect link between God and temptation. But we try to forge one, don’t we? We try to blame God in several ways:

1. Some say “God is sovereign. He is in control. He plans all things, and he has planned I should give in to this temptation, or I wouldn’t be doing it, would I?”
2. Others think “Look, I have been driven to sin, forced because of the circumstances of my life. If God hadn’t allowed all this to happen I wouldn’t have sinned.
3. Still others reason “Hey, what’s the big deal? God made me this way. My desires are strong, so I have to live this way. I can’t help myself.”
4. Perhaps the most popular is “God led me to this place and I know that this is His will for me.”
5. God forgives everything when we want him to, so what’s the big deal?

After hearing James’ argument, it is clear to see that thinking is flawed. James says “Forget it.” Our collision with sin comes from somewhere else. So if it’s not God, then where? The Church Lady from Saturday Night Live would say “I wonder who it could be? Oh, let’s see, could it be Satan?” Lots of people say “The devil made me do it” and laugh it off. (Wasn’t that Flip Wilson?) But James doesn’t mention the Satan. Many of us blame “Them.” The perpetual “Them.” The people who ruin everything because they dress differently, speak differently, and look differently than us. But James and the rest of the Bible makes no distinction between good people and bad people. Scripture says that “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23).

So what *is* the source of temptation? James says it in verse 1:14 “*but each one is tempted when by his own evil desire...*” The little word “by.”... Our struggle with temptation, as intense as it may be, comes from within ourselves, “by our own evil desire...” The Greek word for “evil desire” comes from the word “to set your heart on something so that you long for it, you covet it.” It’s not just sexual desire, although for some that’s exactly what it is. It is also any craving like power, money, influence, ambition, and fame.

Do you see? The problem comes from within our own hearts! Charles Wesley called this a “bent to sinning.” That’s the way it works. Sin always starts with a temptation, a thought, or a desire.

But it doesn’t stop there. You see, it doesn’t take much for the seed to grow. Sin always starts as a desire in the mind; just a harmless little thought; just a seemingly insignificant suggestion. It’s much like how a worm gets into an apple. Since it’s apple season, let’s vote: How many of you think the worm burrows in from the outside? No, scientists have discovered that the worm comes from inside the apple. But how does he get in there? Simple! An insect lays an egg in the apple blossom. Sometime later, the worm hatches in the heart of the apple, then eats his way out. Sin, like the worm, begins in the heart and works out through a person’s thoughts, words, and actions. Just as Jesus said, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Matthew 12:34) I don’t know about you, but I find that my temptations always involve something I really

want. I have never been tempted by something I didn't want. For example, which is more tempting to you, Brussels spouts or Oreos? How about this: Australian Rules football or Temptation Island? Let's be honest, usually we really want the thing that is tempting us.

What potentially destructive desires have you been nurturing? What seemingly innocent thoughts or deeds have you been entertaining? Don't let what you perceive as a harmless thought, word, or action, develop into a sin that destroys you. Our neighbors Lee and Pat Knapp had a little weedy maple tree that they let grow for a number of years. Pat was telling me how painful and how expensive it was to pay to have that cute little tree removed this summer. Had they pulled it up 15 years ago, it would have cost them nothing. But the longer we wait, the tougher it becomes.

James takes us through how that temptation grows. Verses 14 and 15 "*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.*"

The stages of sin are:

1. Innocent attraction. This is not sin, but unless we consciously move on, we move to stage 2.
2. Curiosity. We investigate it, and explore it. "I wonder what it would be like..." Which leads to stage 3.
3. Temptation. "Wouldn't it be nice..." We're well on our way.
4. Lust. We begin to dwell on it and desire to see it come to be, which leads to Stage 5.
5. The Act. This is where the sin is committed.

It began in the Garden of Eden. Did you ever wonder why Adam and Eve, who had the whole garden to play in, were standing right near the one tree God told them to avoid? Couldn't they think of anything better to do? They were naked, for crying out loud! But *it was there*. And so were they.

We were made in God's image, but after the fall, we were made in Adam and Eve's image as well. God has not promised to remove temptations from our lives.

You may be facing a lot of trouble right now because you are expecting God to do something He has not promised to do. We must avoid walking into the teeth of a particular temptation and then saying "Lord, do something!" God is not going to do for us what we could do for ourselves. If you are weakened by certain kinds of music, don't listen to it. If you are weakened by certain movies or videos or internet sites in front of your eyes, don't even go there. If you are weakened by certain relationships with certain people – maybe they lower the bar for you morally, maybe they entice you to pursue materialism or power or ego as your goal in life, maybe they build up negative emotions in you, like anger or hatred – you must choose to walk away.

You know, I'm fine not eating junk food when I'm at the grocery store. I see all the other good choices, and I see the price tag. But you get it into the house and I have zero self-control! Just last night I was begging Leigh to tell me where the chocolate chips were. And this wasn't a midnight snack, this was 15 minutes before dinner! I'd moved from sneaky to shameless.

Sin grows like an embryo in the womb. But at some point, the growth will stop and there will be a delivery, not of life – but of death. Not necessarily physical death, or none of us would be here, but of a type of spiritual death, where you become a hard-hearted person, not really living, but merely existing: alienated, frustrated, guilt-ridden, or insatiable, always living for the next thing to buy, the next "fix," or the next thrill. But most troubling is that this person finds God distant in his or her life: forgotten or removed. It is a grisly, empty way to live. The person's conscience doesn't even bother them anymore.

That's all the bad news about the anatomy of sin and temptation. Now hear the good news: James says it does not have to be so. "*Don't be deceived, my dear brothers* . This literally means, "Don't wander.

Don't go astray. It's still there. Don't miss the point and don't miss what comes next." It's as if James is saying to us, "Don't get so overwhelmed with the bad news of your sin that you miss the good news of God!" The Bible confronts the bad news of our condition but doesn't leave us there. It always leads us to the good news of Jesus Christ

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In her book, Making Your Faith Your Own, Teresa Vining wrote, "No discussion of the fall is complete without a discussion of redemption. Somehow in the same way Adam and Eve's sin gave us death, Jesus' death gave us life. Ironically, the evil choices of people played a key role in the events that led up to Jesus' crucifixion."

Perhaps you have been struggling with a temptation for many years. Chances are it may always be there. But don't give in to it. It may look attractive or even harmless, but in the end it will destroy you. We must remember Mark Twain's advice, "It is easier to stay out than get out."

On the TV show "Hee Haw," Doc Campbell is confronted by a patient who says he broke his arm in two places. The doc replies, "Well then, stay out of them places!" He may have something there. We cannot regularly put ourselves in the face of temptation and not be affected. When faced with the problem of temptation, we need to take the good doctor's advice and "stay out of them places." 1 Corinthians 10:13 "*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.*

We've looked at the anatomy of sin and temptation: its nature, its source, and its growth. Maybe it's gotten hold of you. You're flirting with something. Or maybe you've been holding on to something to the point where it is holding on to you. It's a trap. It leads to death. But thanks be to God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden. God wants to cleanse you and your thoughts. God wants to free you. God wants you to hand over that temptation to him. We've planned extra time now, because God wants to deal with you. Some of you can give this to him from where you are. Some of us may want to do it from our seats. But some of us need to make the stand of coming forward to the steps and kneeling before the Lord and getting right with God. Isn't it time? God is giving you this opportunity to let go of your sin and claim him. He is still all you need.