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The Letter of James
Temptation
James 1:13-18

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There's a line in the Lord's prayer that has always perplexed me. It's when Jesus tells us to pray that God would not lead us into temptation. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," says Jesus. But are we really worried that God would do such a thing? The way it sounds, it's almost like Jesus is saying that God needs to be reminded not to cause us to be tempted.

But, of course, we know that God doesn't do that. In fact, that's exactly what James promises us in our text for this morning: "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."

If that is true, then what is Jesus doing when he asks God not to lead us into temptation? Doesn't he know the character of God? Well, of course he does! I mean, he is God, after all. But what if, in that part of the prayer, Jesus is actually acknowledging something not about God, but about us. Because not only does Jesus know the heart of God – He also knows the heart of human beings. He knows that we are vulnerable to temptation, and he knows that God is our only hope of deliverance. "But deliver us from evil," he prays. God is the only way out from underneath the weight of judgment we place upon ourselves. The weight of judgment is so very heavy, it is so desperately heavy – we can't carry it alone. So, we try to lighten the load by placing the blame for our temptation on someone else. And if we can't find someone else to blame, then who are we left with to blame but God?

It makes me think of that story when God came to Adam and Eve in the garden after they had disobeyed his command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You'll remember how he asked them about what they had done. God said, "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" Then Adam replies, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." You know, you've got to believe me, God. It wasn't my fault. It was this woman's fault. And by the way, it was you who gave her to me! So really, it's your fault, God.

Then God turns to Eve and asks, "What is this that you have done?" And Eve replies in much the same way that Adam did. She says, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." God, really, it wasn't my fault. It was this serpent which, by the way, you created. Have you ever stopped to think how this might actually be your fault, God? You really shouldn't lead us into temptation like that.

Yes, we're good at blaming God. St. Augustine, in his younger years, was a slave to his temptations. In his aptly titled book, *Confessions*, he confesses his waywardness, but even he puts some of the blame on God. He says, "

“I strayed still farther from you and you did not restrain me. I was tossed and spilled, floundering in the broiling sea of my [temptation], and you said no word. How long it was before I learned that you were my true joy! You were silent then, and I went on my way, farther and farther from you, proud in my distress and restless in fatigue, sowing more and more seeds whose only crop was grief.”¹

Now, you might say, well I don’t really do that. When I’m tempted to have that extra doughnut with chocolate frosting and sprinkles, I don’t find myself blaming God for putting it in front of my face. And you’re right. That would be an odd thing to say. But that’s not really the kind of temptation that James is talking about in our passage this morning. That’s far too small a definition of temptation. That’s temptation narrowly defined as the desire for things that are bad for us. But James is talking about a definition of temptation that is far greater. He’s talking, I think, about a condition of the heart which further separates us from God.

Remember from last week when Bill preached on verse 2: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”

That’s what happens when the human heart is united to God. Trials produce faith. Except for those times when they don’t. Because there’s another possibility when it comes to dealing with difficult circumstances. Sometimes trials tempt us to believe that God is against us. And that’s precisely what James is talking about this morning. The term which was earlier translated as trial, in the Greek, is the very same word translated here as temptation.² The temptation that James is talking about is not exactly the kind of temptation you might read about in a rock & roll autobiography. It’s not only the temptation to make bad choices. No, what he’s really talking about is the temptation to believe things about God that simply are not true. This kind of temptation arises sometimes when we find ourselves in desperate and difficult circumstances. Times when the road gets rough and you begin to question God’s goodness. One commentator says,

For every trial brings temptation. Financial difficulty can tempt us to question God’s providence in our lives. The death of a loved one can tempt us to question God’s love for us. The suffering of the righteous poor and the ease of the wicked rich can tempt us to question God’s justice, or even his existence.³

Now we begin to see what James is talking about, don’t we? The major temptation that James is talking about is the temptation to believe that God doesn’t care about us. That God causes bad things to happen to us because that’s what we falsely believe God is like. When disaster strikes, how do we respond? Do we cling to God in faith, or do we blame God and cling more tightly to ourselves? And even when we try to sound faithful, the deceptive belief that God is to blame sits right beneath the surface. When bad things happen, how many times have we heard someone trot out that old line completely out of context from the book of Job,

“The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”⁴

¹ St. Augustine – Confessions, Book 2.2

² Reformed Expository Commentary - James

³ Douglas J. Moo - Pillar New Testament Commentary – The Letter of James

⁴ Job 1:21

Or that terrible sentiment when a loved one dies, we say,

“The Lord just needed another angel.”

Why do we do that? Why do we try to sound pious when what we’re really saying with those holy-sounding sentiments is that we believe it’s all God’s fault. We’re doing exactly what James says not to do: “Let no one say when he is tempted [or *trialed*], ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”

Why do we believe that God is causing evil in our lives? Maybe we believe it because we’re afraid. We’re afraid of his wrath. But you might say, well isn’t the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom? Yes, but that good fear is the fear of awe and reverence at his holiness, not the fear of receiving evil from his hand. That bad kind of fear comes from a misunderstanding of who God is. It comes from believing that God is so furious with us because of our sin that he cannot contain his wrath. Remember Adam and Eve,

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” ¹⁰ And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”⁵

Or like Isaiah, when he comes before the presence of God in a prophetic vision:

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. ⁵ And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”⁶

Or when Peter first met Jesus and saw the miracle he worked with the large catch of fish, he was terrified at Jesus’s holiness. Luke says,

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”⁷

The real question – the real source of our temptation to attribute evil to God when we face trials – is the question of the nature of God. What is God like? What is his character? Is he a God who delights in punishing us? Or is he a God who cares for us, especially in our trials?

Moments after Adam and Eve hide from God, what does God do? He clothes them. Or what about when Isaiah shrinks from God’s righteous presence? What does God do? He cleanses Isaiah’s sin with a burning coal. The angel says, “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.”⁸ And finally, what does Jesus say when Peter urges him to depart from his sinful presence? Jesus says the words we all long to hear: “Do not be afraid.”

⁵ Genesis 3:8-9

⁶ Isaiah 6:5

⁷ Luke 5:8

⁸ Isaiah 6:7

Do we think that God sends bad things to us because that's what he's like? Do we think he deals with us according to our sins – that he can only ever be against us? Thanks be to God that the Gospel speaks another word. James says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.” Friends, the truth our hearts need to hear is that our God is not against us – he is for us! And he has proven that he is for us once and for all in his son, Jesus Christ. Karl Barth, that great theologian, says,

*“If we fix our eyes upon the place where the course of the world reaches its lowest point, where its vanity is unmistakable, where its groanings are most bitter and the divine incognito most impenetrable, we shall encounter there – Jesus Christ... The transformation of all things occurs where the riddle of human life reaches its culminating point... and He becomes to us the veritable and living God. He, whom we can apprehend only as against us, stands there – for us.”*⁹

In one of his sermons, Paul Walker, an Episcopal priest, relays the story of a friend who had recently been diagnosed with cancer. And it's the story of a profound moment in her life when she had an undeniable experience of the love of God. She says,

*“Around 6:15 Friday evening, home alone and putzing in my pantry, I noticed a tightness in my lower back, so I started walking toward my living room to lie down on the floor and take care of it. In the passage between the two rooms, I felt my heart crack wide open, and I was overcome with love. I have no other way to explain it. I was flooded with an overwhelming sense of joy, love, being completely and fully held... In that moment I believe that I experienced the infinite possibility of love. I got myself down on the floor, on my back, arms outstretched and soaked it in. I was sobbing, not out of fear or sadness, but out of gratitude for what is coming my way.”*¹⁰

Our God is for us. Our God loves us. He does not send evil to punish us. He does not tempt us to distrust him. Where we expect punishment, he extends grace. Where we would give him blame, he takes instead our guilt. In his Son, Jesus, he takes our temptation and our sin and our guilt and our punishment and even our death, and in return he gives us the gift of new life in Christ. Thanks be to God.

⁹ Karl Barth -

¹⁰ Paul Walker – Faith Once Delivered – p.94