

James 1:13-18 Do Not Be Deceived: Truths About Trials, Temptations, Sin, and the Character of God (part 1)

The context of James is still is “trials and suffering.” V. 12 says, “**Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.**” James overall concern is “faith that works,” and his letter is pastoral as he is exhorting suffering believers to “press on,” to remain “steadfast,” to be “patient”; to be godly in all that they do as he gives them truths about God his Word. Vv. 13-18 continue this theme. Here, he changes from the reality of the trial or “test” to the reality of temptation and sin. In the Greek, the word for “trial” in v. 12 is the same word translated as “temptation” in vv. 13-14. But the context is obvious. There is a shift in meaning from the trial itself to the temptation to sin, which comes from the trial. So, James commands in v. 16: “**Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.**” The deception comes as we blame God for our temptation and consequent sin. Now, the opposite of deception is knowledge of the truth. And this is what James gives us this morning. Therefore, we need this passage to help us endure suffering, trials, and temptations, with godliness, right living.

I have 5 truths from this passage that will help us not to be deceived (3 today, 2 next week).

1. God is sovereign over all trials. This is an implication from the text, which is clearly taught throughout the Scriptures. And I begin with this truth because it is SO foundational to a proper understanding and application of dealing with suffering and trials (and everything else for that matter). Calvin in his Institutes begins with these words: “*Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.*” Concerning our knowledge of God he goes on to say: “*No man can survey himself without turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.*” And James echoes this truth throughout the letter. In v. 12 he says, “**Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.**”

Do you remember Paul’s sermon to those in Athens. He says, “**The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place . . .**” (Acts 17:24-26).

Brothers and sisters, God is the Lord. He is sovereign. There is not one square inch in this universe that does not belong to him. This means He is in charge. Nothing catches God by surprise. When someone dies of cancer he is not alarmed. When a child is abducted, he does not say, “*I didn’t know that was going to happen.*” When your parent is hit by a drunk driver, He is not caught wondering “*Why did that happen, I should have prevented that?*” Children when you or one of your friends is bullied at school, God is not surprised. Parents, when you have a rebellious child, God is still Lord! Whatever comes to pass, from one perspective, God allows. And we must see all of life, and especially our suffering and trials through this lens of truth. If

your view of God begins with anything other than his Lordship, then you need to change your view. You need to put on a new pair of glasses. God is the Lord! This means that every attribute God has, is perfect as He is perfect. He himself defines love, for God is love. He defines goodness; for God is good.

Now, when something bad happens, we like to say, “*God allowed that.*” And this language is ok. He could have stopped it, but he allowed it. But when good things come, we use different language. We say, “*God blessed me with that job.*” God “*kept that car from hitting me.*” I remember when Trish broke her hand (actually crushed most of her bones) in Russia and we hurried to the hospital, which was not what we were used to here or in Australia, and in the midst of that experience, God sent a Palestinian Muslim student doctor with an Australian accent named Mohammed to us, to give advice and help as we were contemplating surgery. She always says, “*God sent Mohammed to me.*” She didn’t say, “*God allowed him to come my way.*” Either way, God allows, or God sends, but all things come from him. After Job lost everything and his health he says to his wife, “**Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil.**” This is the kind of person James is encouraging his readers to be.

From this perspective we can certainly say that God tests his people. In Gen. 22:21 we see these words exactly: “*After these things God tested Abraham . . .*” (one of many examples). Whether he sends them directly or allows them, he is still in control of all things. This means all tests, trials, sufferings, etc. fall under the sovereign providence of God. Now, this doesn’t mean that we don’t cry, we just cry differently. It doesn’t mean that we don’t mourn, we just mourn differently. It doesn’t mean that we don’t question, but we do question differently. And the only way we can do these things differently is because of a proper understanding of God’s sovereign lordship. At the same time . . . truth #2,

2. God is not the author of sin. Look at v. 13: “**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.’**” Now, the word for “tempt” is the same word for “trial” from v. 2. And, as we’ve seen, God does test his people. This is done externally through what comes our way in life. But in vv. 13-14, the context changes from “external” tests to “internal” tests, which is why the word is translated as “temptation.” Now, the clear meaning is “temptation” to sin. And God never tempts anyone to sin. He could never do that; it is contrary to who He is as God (as we will see next week in vv. 17-18). And apparently, there were those who called themselves Christians who were blaming God for their sinful reactions to trials and sufferings. And that’s not all. If you remember from last week in cp. 5, some of James’ recipients were sinning by grumbling and complaining against one another (5:9). And, there were others, who were “doubting” the character of God; they were double-minded and unstable (1:6-8). I believe there were some who were experiencing trials and suffering, and in the midst of it all, they were blaming God not only for their trials, but for their own failures, and for their sinful actions.

Does this sound familiar? “*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate*” (Gen. 3:12). In reaction to his sin Adam blames God. He says “*you gave her to me.*” In the same kind of way, we may do the same with our trials and sufferings. We say “*God, they come from you. After all you are sovereign and in control of all things. If it weren’t for your sovereign trials in my life, I wouldn’t sin like I do.*” The examples here are endless. For example,

“God, of course I’m angry, you gave me this rebellious child.” Or, “Yes, I sinned in anger against my husband, but you are one who gave him to me.” “God, I lost my temper because of that crazy driver you created and put in that car.” More fundamental blaming may sound like this: *“God, I know you are the creator. And you say you are all good. But, everywhere I look, I see evil. If you’ve got the power, why did you not stop sin from coming. So, you are to blame for the sin in this world.”* This type of reasoning permeates the world. Financial difficulty may tempt a person to question God’s providence. The death of a loved one can tempt us to question God’s love. The suffering of the righteous poor and the ease of the wicked rich can tempt us to question God’s justice. These are the trials of life that bring temptation to sin.

And James is writing to combat this kind of thinking; that God could be the cause of our sin. At the end of the day they misplaced the source of their sin. And in so doing, they try to cast off responsibility for their sin, which brings us to our final truth this morning.

3. We are responsible for our own sin. James is clear. God cannot be tempted. God cannot tempt. God cannot sin, and God cannot cause us to sin. Instead, sin comes from us. Look at vv. 14-15: **“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”** Here, we have a couple illustrations. The first is a fishing illustration. Apparently, a lot of money is spent every year in this country on fishing lures. And there are always new and “better” lures, right? A lot of thought and engineering and money goes into inventing the best fishing lures. There is no end to the shapes and sizes and colors and types of lures. Why? Blaine tries to think like a fish, but he still has a hard time. But we do know, (at least when they are biting) that they like certain lures. They are drawn to that purple worm. But, once they take a bit of the lure, they find something beneath the lure that grabs them. It is the hook. And then, the fish can be pulled into the boat. In the same kind of way, the Bible says that we are lured by our own desires. Our desires “take the bait.”

And here James uses another picture. It is the picture of conception and birth. He says that once our desires take the bait, it is “conceived” which leads to birth. And what is born? Sin. And then, what happens? Our sin leads to death. **“For the wages of sin is death”** (Rom. 6:23). This entire passage is comparing sinful man with a holy God. We give birth to sin. God gives birth to life (vv. 17-18). (This is our topic next week as we continue.) But, for now, I want to spend the rest of our time talking about desire and what James means by “desire.” And then I want to apply this to our lives.

I believe James is using the word “desire” in the context of that which is evil; or sinful desires. We see the same word in James 4:1-2: **“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.”** In 1 Pet. 2:11 we see the same word in a similar context: **“Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”** Also in 1 John 2:16-17 we see “desire” associated with ungodly, worldly desires. **“For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”** These are the kinds of desires that lead to sin and death.

As Christians these kinds of desires and sins are easy to identify, at least outwardly. Paul calls these sins as “works of the flesh.” Gal. 5:19-21: “**Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.**” This is the context in which James writes. He is saying that these sins begin with desires, and they lead to death, ultimately separation from God. Now, after hearing this list, you might say, “*I am not involved in such things.*” “*I wouldn’t dare commit such sins.*” But, I think James’ desire is for us to move to the heart. With these words he is moving from mere “sins” to the motive behind our sins, which are our own desires.

So let me ask, “What is a desire?” A desire is what you want. A desire is what you crave. A desire is what you wish for, what you hope to get, what you feel you need, what you long for? “*I really want an unsweet tea from McDonalds.*” “*I would really like to have a new car.*” “*I would really like for my hair to behave and do what I want it to do.*” “*I would like to have more money, to be more important, to have a better reputation, more success, more love from my spouse, more obedience from my children.*” “*I want more affection, more control, more comfort, a more hassle-free life. I want my family to keep our house clean.*” Now, from this list (endless), which of these are sinful? In and of themselves, none of these are sinful. According to James illustration, they haven’t been lured to take the bait yet. They haven’t been “conceived” and “birthed” into sin and death. So, what is the heart of evil desire that becomes sin?

I think it has to do with the object of our worship. Given, . . . desires can be evil: to kill someone, to steal, to control the drug trade in NC, etc. But, often the object of desire is good, and the evil lies in the lordship of the desire. Instead of having a desire that has the motive of loving God, worshiping God, pleasing God, our desire moves to what WE want, what WE desire for our own sakes. Our will replaces God’s as that which determines how we live. When we do this, our desires become sinful. Our desires are lured by our own will, and when this happens, we replace the giver of gifts with the gifts themselves. This is why in v. 17 James says, “**Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above . . .**”

This truth is so complex. Why? Because of the human heart. The Bible says that we don’t even know our own hearts; only God does (Ps. 44:21). What makes a desire evil may not be in the desire of what we want, but in the fact that we want it too much. David Powlison says, “*evil lies in the ruling status of the desire, not the object.*” Let me try and give some examples.

Example: What if you want to progress in your company at work? Certainly nothing wrong with that desire. But, what if it doesn’t happen like you think it should or as quickly as you want? Well, this “desire” may cause you to be depressed or anxious, or angry with your family, or cause you to be sinfully competitive with other employees or be unkind to those who are getting the breaks. Do you see the sins that come from a “good” desire?

Example: Parents who wish desire their kids to get into a good college. Certainly nothing wrong with this desire. But, when it doesn’t happen as planned, anxiety, anger, worrying, even bribery can happen.

Example: Mothers or Fathers, what if you want to keep your house clean, but your family isn't as helpful as they ought. (And, I would add, there is nothing wrong with a little righteous anger and discipline to help your kids with cleanliness.) But, what if your schedule at the moment doesn't allow for such a clean house? Or maybe it never seems clean enough for you? Well, there is nothing wrong with this motive. But, when you want it too much that you can feel the anger and anxiety all the time, sin is conceived.

Example: A wife is unfaithful to her husband. She repents and after great efforts, the marriage is saved. Well, say a year later, the husband has a great desire for his wife to be faithful. So he begins to control her every move; to her it feels like she is being watched by the FBI. Well, nothing is wrong with his desire for her to be faithful, but this desire rules his life. And, all kinds of sins follow.

Brothers and sisters, the examples are endless. The moral issue of a desire always turns on whether the desire has a ruling status in the heart. This is why the first commandment rules all others. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. You shall have no other gods before Me.

So, how do we change? Well, first and foremost we must look to Christ and the Gospel of God. Our ultimate allegiance and motive must be to the sovereign Lord of all. As Christians, we must remember what we were like before. Eph. 2:1-3 says, **“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”** Then . . . comes the grace of God: V. 4: **“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ . . .”** If you are a Christian, your desires have changed. Yes, you still battle. But, Christ is now the Lord of your desires. If you are not a Christian, your desires have not been redeemed. And outside of Christ, the power of sin over your desires is ever present. So, look to Him.

And, if you are a Christian, how do you change? Well, God is changing us through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are being sanctified. But, we also work. And one of the ways we change is by changing our desires to what God wants. We must learn to reorient our desires to think like God thinks and want what God wants. We must “put off” the old self and “put on” Christ. In Eph. 4:20-24 Paul says: **“But that is not the way you learned Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”**

We need to stop for today. I look forward to continuing this theme in vv. 16-18 next week. Let's remember: 1) God is sovereign over all trials; 2) God is not the author of sin; and 3) We are responsible for our own sin.