

The True Source of Good and Evil (James 1:13-18)

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If you have a Bible, open it the book of James, chapter 1. We are continuing our sermon series entitled, “A Faith that Works.” The burden of this entire book is that we would not be apathetic, lukewarm Christians who know what is true, but live with a divided heart that fails to put our faith to work by obeying the Lord in the trenches of real life. Active, wholehearted, obedient faith – that’s what James is after.

For that reason, he never addresses our faith in the abstract. He’s a good pastor. He knows it’s easy to be a Christian on paper. It’s easy to give all the right answers, especially if you grew up in the church. I’m an incredibly patient and loving dad when I’m out in the woods by myself for a week. What’s hard is following Jesus amidst “trials of various kinds,” the real context in which our faith plays out as long as we live in a fallen and broken world.

No one gets to follow Jesus in a vacuum. Being a Christian means trusting and obeying him in the middle of troubles great and small. That’s what it means to be steadfast. James 1:12, “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.” If you’re willing, the Lord will use the “testing of your faith” to prepare you for glory by making you more like Jesus.

His faithfulness to give us all we need to trust and obey him is not in question. What is determined anew every day of your life, friend, is whether you will choose to persevere. Today, this week, this month, will you remain steadfast, fight to live his way and become more like Jesus through trials of various kinds? Or will you throw in the towel, choose the path of least resistance, and do whatever you feel like doing?

If we’re going to remain steadfast under trial, there’s something we need to know, a spiritual reality we must keep in view and never forget. The greatest struggle, the most significant challenge you will face in the midst of any trial, isn’t a problem outside of you. It’s a problem within you.

How many of you enjoy watching Star Wars movies? Well, since I can’t see your hands right now, I’ll presume it’s a decent number. The basic context of every movie is exactly the same. You have “the force,” a spiritual power of good, and you have “the dark side,” a spiritual power of evil. The movies always begin with the dark side having the upper hand and end with the force emerging victorious. But the dark side is never completely vanquished because it’s what keeps Disney in business.

Star Wars reflects a spiritual notion of reality where there are two forces in the universe locked in eternal tension – good and evil. Both are external to us and we have to choose which one we’re going to follow. Will we go with the Force? Or will we surrender to the Dark Side? We’re like Kronk in the movie, *The Emperor’s New Groove*, with an angel on one shoulder saying, “Go



this way!" and a devil on the other shouting, "No! Go that way!" and we're the poor guy in the middle, trying to choose how to respond.

It's an attractive worldview because it reinforces our belief that nine times out of ten, if we do something wrong, it must be someone else's fault. In a culture intent on undermining moral absolutes, victimhood is the new high ground, the coveted status where my actions are unassailable because I'm offended. "Ok, maybe I shouldn't have said that or done that, but the only reason I did it is because of what that guy said or what that girl did." We like to think the problem of evil is largely outside us.

The Bible paints a very different picture. There are two spiritual forces in the universe, good and evil, but we are not innocent bystanders. Scripture repeatedly locates us within the problem of evil. Hear the Word of the Lord from James 1:13-18.

"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. 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 full grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good and 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 firstfruits of his creatures."

Trials always come with temptations. One of the most insidious is blame-shifting. If God wants me to stop spending all my money on myself, he should give me a better job so I can be generous. If he doesn't want me to look at pornography, he shouldn't have given me these sexual desires. If he doesn't want me to get angry, he should stop my spouse from criticizing my every move.

What's the defensive tactic? Hide my refusal to take responsibility for my actions behind a supposedly "high view" of God. If he's so sovereign and mighty and all the rest, then he decides what temptations come my way, and how I'm going to respond, right? So then it's his fault I'm living the way I am. He got me into this mess. And if what Christianity says is true, that he's the "only Savior," then it's on him to get me out. And until that happens, stop judging me and saying I'm the one who needs to change.

Friend, blame-shifting is the opposite of remaining steadfast under trial. Remaining steadfast under trial requires two things. First, remembering the most important battle in every trial isn't outside us. It's within us. Second, the hope and help we need to persevere comes from God because he is the source of every good thing. We have to keep both of those spiritual realities in view in order for trials to have a sanctifying effect on our souls.

1) OUR SINFUL DESIRES ARE THE SOURCE OF EVERY TEMPTATION



James speaks directly to our tendency to excuse our own sin by blaming God for our actions in verse 13. "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God.'"

"I'm not saying I don't have any responsibility here, but let me tell you, if God would just give me reasonable parents who know how to mind their own business, I wouldn't be so angry all the time."

James will have none of that! Why not? Because "God cannot be tempted with evil." In God's eyes, there is absolutely nothing attractive, nothing desirable, nothing of any worth or value in sin. Can any one of us say as much? When we resist temptation, isn't it usually because we know it's wrong, even though it looks so good? Or because we're afraid of the consequences? Who among us can say, "I'm not even *tempted* by sin"?

Not so with our God and King. The reason he never sins, unlike us, isn't that he just has some kind of supersized self-control. No, he never sins because in his divine nature, he can't be tempted by sin. Every part of it is abhorrent to him. Habakkuk 1:13, he is "of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong." Proverbs 15:9, "The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD." Jeremiah 9:24, "I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight."

We can't blame God for our temptation to sin because sin is contrary to every fiber of his being, and because no part of sin is desirable in his eyes, he will never lead, draw, or entice anyone to pursue it. As James says at the end of verse 13, "he himself tempts no one." Does God allow temptation? Yes. Does he ordain and permit evil in the mystery of his sovereign will? Yes. Does he cause evil or bring it to pass in any way, temptation included, such that he is morally culpable for it? Never.

So if God isn't the source of our temptation, what is? Look at verse 14. "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire." In the midst of a conflict with another person, what do we say to ourselves? "The reason I'm being tempted to get angry, to sin right now, is because they said...or because they did....or because God failed to..." James firmly says, "How about you turn that finger around?"

Their harsh words create a trial, a test of faith. But the temptation to sin never comes from God or them, for that matter. It comes from your heart. It's rooted in your "own" evil desires. Why do you lash out angrily out at someone with your words when they hurt you? Because you desire something. You want something. You want justice NOW. You don't want to wait for God to vindicate you. You want to do God's job for him. You want to make them pay for what they've done by launching a full-scale verbal assault.

How about the temptation to disobey or grumble against the human authorities God has established in your life? Does it come from the fact that they've recently made some poor or really bad decisions? No. That's the trial. That's the circumstance that's sorely testing your



faith. The temptation comes from the fact that you don't want God or the authorities he has sovereignly established to be in charge. You want to be in charge. You desire to be God.

How about the temptation to work an excessive number of hours at your job at the expense of your mental health and the spiritual well-being of your family? Does it come from the fact that you're experiencing a lot of pressure from upper management to hit a sales quota? No. That's the trial. The temptation comes from the fact that you desire the approval of man more than you desire to please God. Or you desire to create your worth and value through your own performance instead of resting in the worth and value God has already given you as his beloved son or daughter. Or you would rather keep the responsibility for providing for your family on your shoulders instead of entrusting it to the Lord.

James isn't denying the influence of the world or the devil in creating temptations to sin. He's simply saying that even those forces would never find such a ready foothold in our hearts absent the sinful desires that dwell within us. The ultimate reason we do what is wrong isn't found outside us. It's found within us. Whether because they are categorically wrong, like a desire to steal, inordinate, like a demand to be respected by your children, or premature, like a desire for vindication here and now, temptation always begins at the level of sinful desires. It doesn't start outside us. It starts within us.

The progression James describes in verse 15 adds an important clarification. "Desire, *when it has conceived*, gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." Are sinful desires, our craving for something God has forbidden or refusal to do something God has commanded, always wrong? Yes. Do our lingering sinful desires point to our collective depravity and need for God to make all things new? Yes. But is there a critical difference between the internal corruption that desires what is wrong and the act of sin whereby we actually think, feel, or do what is wrong? Yes.

Until Jesus comes back and his sanctifying work in the hearts of his people is complete, we will always be tempted by sin. The sinful desires we all experience in different ways will never go away completely. Our goal in this life, therefore, is not to escape temptation altogether, but rather to learn how to resist it more effectively for the sake of God's eternal glory and our eternal joy. As Douglass Moo says, "Christian maturity is not indicated by the infrequency of temptation but by the infrequency of succumbing to temptation."

Desire "conceives," as it were, whenever we welcome temptation instead of resisting it. And if we fail to resist, refuse to fight our sinful desires, and passively succumb to temptation, our spiritual end is guaranteed. Verse 15, "Sin, when it is full grown brings forth death." Why? Because the wages of sin is death. God will not leave the guilty unpunished. Either Jesus dies for your sin on account of your obedient trust in him or you will die for your own, my friend. The choice is yours.



What we cannot say, what we must never say, is that the sovereignty of God over all things in some way excuses our sin. Don't be deceived. Don't be deceived into thinking (1) someone else, including God, is on the hook for your temptations, or (2) that your sinful desires, left unchecked, won't end in death. They will, friend.

Remaining steadfast under trial requires two things. First, that our sinful desires are the source of every temptation. The most important battle in every trial isn't outside us. It's within us. Second, the hope and help we need to persevere in the midst of the fight comes from God.

2) OUR FAITHFUL GOD IS THE SOURCE OF EVERY GOOD THING

Look at verse 17. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." We like to flatter ourselves, don't we? We say, "Ok, maybe I'll admit I have some sinful desires. But it's not like I only want to do what's wrong. There are good desires in there too. No one's perfect. We're all a mixture, right? Which means the goal of life is to nurture the good in everyone, myself included."

Here again, the Bible tells a different story. All that is truly good and beautiful in our world ultimately comes from God, not us. He is the one who causes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good. As our Creator, he is the one who gives us the ability to cultivate and create, to fill and subdue, to serve and sacrifice, to love and lead. James doesn't say some things come from God and some from us. He says "every good gift" and then repeating himself for emphasis, "every perfect gift" is "from above."

God is the wellspring. God is the source. His mercy and unmerited favor is the explanation. But didn't I make wise choices? Didn't I work hard? Isn't that why (at least in part) I enjoy some of the blessings in this life? Absolutely, friend. But even those abilities, those "means" as it were, are empowered and animated by God.

- Have you surpassed your peers in financial prosperity? Deuteronomy 8:17, "Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth..."
- Have you worked hard to follow Jesus from a young age, working out your own salvation with fear and trembling? There is but one explanation. Philippians 2:13, "For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."
- Do you feel like you've made a lot of sacrifices to serve the Lord, investing untold time and treasure in advancing his kingdom? 1 Chronicles 29:14, "All things come from you, and of your own have we given to you."
- Do you fancy yourself an exception to the universal rule laid down by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?"



Friend, do not be so arrogant as to nourish the lie that says, “See that achievement, relationship, blessing, or good thing over there? That came from me. I’m the cause. I’m the source.” No, you’re not. Whatever reflects the glory and goodness of God within you or around us doesn’t come from you. It comes from him. He’s the source. He’s the “Father of lights,” the one who made the stars, the one who created all things, sustains all things, and in whom all things hold together.

Beginning with creation, God has only done what is perfectly good and will always do what is perfectly good. Why? Because he doesn’t change. Everything in our world changes. Our God does not. There is no variance in his character, no shifting in his personality, no wavering in his purposes, no diminishing of his power, no lapses in his wisdom, no exceptions to his rule, no uncertainties in his plan, and no reduction in his glory, and no evolution in his perfection.

And if your mind hears all of that and screams, “How can this be so? I know of no such existence!” could it be because you are trying to create a god in your own image instead of bowing before the Lord of Glory who created you? The fact that all good things come from him and only good things will ever come from him is humbling.

But it’s more than humbling, my friends. It’s incredibly comforting, for there is one particular “good and perfect gift” the Lord has given us as his people that guarantees our reception of all others. It’s the gift of himself, the life and death of his only Son, Jesus. When we’re tempted to question his goodness, when unanswered prayer lingers, when we wonder if God has forgotten to be gracious, this is where we look. This is where his grace and goodness are known in the trenches of real life.

Verse 18, “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” What’s the word of truth? It’s the gospel. And it is the point of greatest contrast between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of this world. What do our sinful desires produce? Death and judgment. What does the will of God bring forth? Life and salvation.

Ephesians 2:1–8, “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. 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—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God...”



The goodness God displays in creation culminates in redemption, in the salvation Jesus won for us through his life, death, and resurrection, that we might be set free from sinful desire and its inevitable end to know God, enjoy God, and serve God with all that we are and all that we have. The spiritual life God has brought forth in you, Christian, is a down-payment, the “firstfruits” of what the cosmos will eventually experience when Christ returns to renew all things and we experience eternal life with him in the new heavens and the new earth.

If you keep the gospel, all that God has done for you in Jesus, in view in the midst of your present trial, Christian, it will guard you from a thousand ills and deliver you from innumerable temptations. What do our sinful desires say? Doing life our way is best. The “good” we work for ourselves is superior to anything God has to offer. What does the gospel declare in response? 1 Corinthians 2:9, “No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.”

CONCLUSION

Life in this world, for every one of us, is filled with trials. Remaining steadfast, persevering in trusting and obeying Jesus, in the midst of them requires remembering two things. We have to remember the location of the most important battle – the sinful desires in our hearts. And we have to remember the source of our hope and help – the glorious truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Be humbled – our sinful desires are the source of every temptation. And be glad – our God is the source of every good thing. No matter the trial, we grieve and strive to repent of the lingering works and effects of sin, and at the same time rejoice in the abundant and overcoming goodness of God. Always sorrowful and always rejoicing, humbled by what we see in ourselves, glad in what we behold in Christ – that, my friends, will keep you steadfast no matter what trial comes your way.