

James: The Practical Christian

Overcoming Temptation God's Way

James 1:13-18

Rev. Freddy Fritz

September 25, 2005

Overcoming Temptation God's Way

Scripture

The death of Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal this week has reminded us of the heroes of the Holocaust. Therefore, I was disappointed to read a postwar account of Oskar Schindler, whose exploits during World War II were made famous in the movie titled *Schindler's List*. Oskar Schindler was the daring German hustler and hero who risked his life daily employing his wealth and wiles to save the lives of twelve hundred Polish Jews.

After the war, however, this courageous man abandoned his wife, became a womanizer and a drunkard, and fell into destitution and dependence on others. For some schnapps he even pawned the commemorative gold ring that had been fashioned for him from the false teeth of those he had rescued.

In his book *Holiness by Grace* Bryan Chapell asks how one so noble could fall so far. His answer is sobering: "Because there is no temptation *out there* in the world that does not find common chords of resonance *in every human heart*."¹

The fact is that you and I struggle with temptation on a daily basis. No one is immune to temptation.

That is why today's text is so helpful. James teaches us how to overcome temptation God's way. So, with that in mind, let's read James 1:13-18:

¹³ When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. ¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the

¹ Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 95-96.

**heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸
He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we
might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. (James 1:13-18)**

Introduction

His name was Mark Antony. He was without question the most eloquent of all the Roman Emperors. In his day Mark Antony was known as the “silver-throated orator of Rome.” He was not only a gifted speaker, but also a philosopher, scholar, student of nature, statesman, and soldier.

Mark Antony joined the Roman Cavalry. He demonstrated his talents as a Cavalry Commander and distinguished himself with bravery and courage. He went on to win many battles.

Although he was outwardly very strong, inwardly Mark Antony had a very serious moral weakness. It was detected early in his life. He continually fell into one moral failure after another.

His personal tutor became so exasperated with his ongoing moral failures and their devastating results that one day, in desperation, he shouted into Antony’s face, “Oh Marcus, colossal child! Able to conquer the world, but unable to resist temptation!”

That indictment is timeless. For it applies not only to Mark Antony but, in one way or another, to each one of us today. We regularly face temptation. The problem, however, is that many of us do not know how to overcome temptation.

Temptation is not only alive and well in the area of the sensual or sexual. You can be tempted by certain possessions just like you can be tempted by certain people. You can be tempted by big things as big as a home or by small things as small as a ring. You can be tempted by something brand new like a new car or by something hundreds of years old like an antique desk. You can be tempted to gossip, steal, lie, slander, anger, bear a grudge, etc.

You can be tempted by a position or by pride as much as you can be tempted to perform some immoral act. You can be tempted to want the title of “Doctor” or “President” or “CEO.” You can be

tempted by things commonly considered respectable, but your driving desire for these things can become as lewd as your drive for some illicit sexual conquest.

Temptation is a very real and serious problem. I realize that as I preach this message today, I am probably talking to someone right now who is engaged in a compromising situation. You may be single or you may be married, and you are flirting with a sinful relationship. You may be in a position of authority, and you have the opportunity to steal from your employer. You may spend lots of time alone, and you feel powerfully drawn to internet pornography. You're told that you have a temper, and you want to use that as an excuse for all kinds of destructive behavior.

Lesson

Today I want you to consider James' counsel on temptation. In James 1:13-18, James gives you four facts about temptation that you must understand if you are going to overcome temptation.

I. Temptation Is Inevitable (1:13a)

First, temptation is inevitable.

James says in verse 13a, "**When tempted. . .**" Notice that James does not say, "**If tempted. . .**" Temptation is always present in life. Last time we saw how James taught that trials were inevitable. Here he adds temptations to that list. Just like death and taxes, trials and temptations are inevitable in this life.

You will *never* be without temptation. Never! If you become a Christian thinking that all your old struggles and temptations will be automatically left behind, that all the alluring, enticing voices will be silenced, and that all the desires of your sinful nature will just go to sleep, then you will end up bitterly disillusioned.

The *normal* Christian life is a life of conflict. There are opposing forces constantly trying to draw you in the opposite direction of the life that God wants you to live. There is a war raging

against you. And even though you strive to follow Christ, there are powers that will always try to drag you down.

Though the people around you may not look like it, they wrestle with temptation just like you do. Temptation plays no favorites. It can attack a President or a prison inmate. It can strike at the heart of a corporate executive or a bum on the street. It can assault the career-minded woman in the business world or the homemaker at home all day with her children. It can hit a salesman on the road or a seminarian in the midst of his theological studies. It can assail a University professor or a University student.

So, the first fact is that temptation is inevitable.

II. Temptation Is Inexcusable (1:13b, 16-17)

Second, temptation is inexcusable.

In verse 13 James writes, **“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”** Although temptation is inevitable, you must be careful *not* to conclude that it is excusable.

Let me explain what I mean. James is calling you to assume personal responsibility for handling your temptations. He does this by warning you against shifting the blame or responsibility for your fall to temptation to God by saying, **“God is tempting me”!**

It’s an old line. You have all used it at one time or another, consciously or sub-consciously. You learn creative ways of shifting the blame, of coming up with excuses for giving into your temptations, so you can avoid the pain involved in taking personal responsibility.

The words are different but the underlying issue is the same. Some say, “I just couldn’t help myself. It was beyond my human will to resist.” Or, “The devil made me do it.”

Whatever the words, yielding to temptation is seen as something caused by some outside pressure or source. And that source may be a person, the devil—or even God himself.

This line has been going on since the beginning of the world. When Adam ate the fruit in the Garden of Eden, God asked, “What is this you have you done?”

Do you remember what Adam said? He said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12-13). What was Adam saying in effect? “God, you set me up! Here I was enjoying the beauties of the Garden, and along came this woman you brought into my life. If it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t have been tempted.”

That thought is exactly what James is challenging. He is saying that God is not the one to be held responsible for your sin. James is saying that no one ever twists your arm behind your back to trick you into sin. Certainly not God! God is just not like that.

James describes what God is really like in verses 16-17: **“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 change like shifting shadows.”** Why is God not the author of your sin? Because of his unchanging, holy character. God is too holy to be tempted himself. And he is too loving to tempt anyone.

Now, there is an important difference between *trials* and *temptations*. *Trials* are ordeals, tests of your faith. A trial is a hardship. It is a difficulty. God will test you. He will stretch your faith. God has created you and is now recreating you in Christ to be like his Son. He wants you to be holy as he is holy. And he uses trials to bring about that holiness of character in your life.

But when it comes to *temptations*, God is never the author of that. He permits temptations, to be sure, because he is sovereign over the entire universe. But he never causes it. God never directs you into sin. James teaches that instead of tempting you with evil, God always faithfully gives you **every good and perfect gift from above**. So don’t ever blame God for your yielding to temptation.

So, where do temptations come from? Temptations come from one of three sources: the world, the flesh, and the devil. All of your temptations come from one of these three sources.

You must realize that nothing outside of yourself—not even Satan—is strong enough to cause you to sin. Sin takes place when you desire the temptation and give in to it. It takes agreement on your part. Not until you involve yourself by yielding to the temptation does sin take place. Up to that point you are safe and pure.

But if you give in to a temptation, it is *never* God's fault, but always your own fault. God has provided for you all you ever need to overcome it. You have simply chosen not to draw on all the good and perfect gifts and resources he has given you from above.

So, temptation is inevitable and it is inexcusable.

III. Temptation Is Predictable (1:14-15)

Third, temptation is predictable.

Understand that temptation follows a consistent pattern. Verse 14 begins the process: **“But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”**

The Greek word for **“dragged away”** is a fishing term. When you fish, you need to provide bait that entices a fish.

One of the hazards of being a fish is that you must live with bait around you all the time. The bigger you are, the more often you have seen the bait. No fisherman in his right mind would drop a mouse trap in the water to catch a grouper. I may not be much of a fisherman but I do know that grouper don't eat mouse traps.

The fisherman for your soul, your enemy the devil, knows the exact bait you like. That is why one person can stand next to another person, and one can be exceedingly attracted to something while the other yawns through it all. Our enemy has been fishing for souls for millennia. He knows exactly what you like. He knows your weak point. He knows where you are most vulnerable.

In 1942 C. S. Lewis wrote a book titled *The Screwtape Letters*. The book consists of 31 letters from a senior devil named Screwtape to his nephew, a junior devil named Wormwood, in which Screwtape gives advice on how to tempt a young man, whom he calls a “patient.” Here is Screwtape's advice in letter 12:

My Dear Wormwood,

Obviously you are making excellent progress. My only fear is lest in attempting to hurry the patient you awaken him to a sense of his real position. For you and I, who see that position as it really is, must never forget how totally different it ought to appear to him. We know that we have introduced a change of direction in his course which is already carrying him out of his orbit around the Enemy [i.e., Christ]; but he must be made to imagine that all the choices which have effected this change of course are trivial and revocable. He must not be allowed to suspect that he is now, however slowly, heading right away from the sun on a line which will carry him into the cold and dark of utmost space.²

With incredible insight, Lewis shows how the devil is ever so cunning in tempting you to take his bait.

This predictable pattern always has the same result. James says in verse 15, **“Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”** The Greek term for **“conceived”** literally means “to take together.” It’s the word for the beginning of the birth process. When your desire and temptation’s bait meet they produce a birth, and that birth is called **sin**. And **sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death**.

Sin gives birth to three kinds of death. Sin gives birth to physical death, separating the soul from the body; *spiritual death*, separating the soul from God; and *eternal death*, separating both body and soul from God forever.

Through faith in Jesus Christ, a Christian is saved from *spiritual* and *eternal death*. But if you persist in sin, you may pay the penalty of *physical death*.

Because some believers in Corinth were partaking of the Lord’s Supper unworthily, they brought judgment on themselves. “That is why,” Paul said to the Corinthians, “many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 11:30), that is, had died.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Glasgow: Collins, 1942), 61.

It all begins in the mind. When the thoughts that enter your mind begin to be attracted to the bait that is before you, you are faced with a decision. You give them a green light or a red light. You entertain the thought in your mind or you dispel the thought from your mind. And if you chose to enter into the fulfillment of your **desire**, you then enter into a **death** state—a state of separation from God, a life filled with guilt and frustration and bitterness and emptiness and boredom, which ultimately may kill you.

Don't misunderstand me. There *are* pleasures from sin—for a season. But those pleasures are counterfeit. They are passing. They satisfy, but only for a fleeting moment, and then they leave their painful mark. Let me warn you that the dividends you reap from your **desire** will *always* work against you. I have yet to see anyone truly fulfilled in life who yields to temptation. And I never will see anyone fulfilled—for James says that it always leads to **death**.

So, James teaches us that temptation is inevitable, inexcusable, and predictable.

IV. Temptation Is Winnable (1:18)

Finally, temptation is winnable.

I believe that the Christian has a great deal of hope in this area of temptation. You can be victorious in this area which is commonly viewed as an area of inevitable defeat.

Satan's ace trump is to get you to think that you are weak and powerless. But you are not weak and powerless! You are in Christ, and Christ is in you! You have the living God alive and at work in you! If you simply shrug your shoulders and say, "Well, I'm only human," you are denying the very point of James 1:13-18. You can handle temptation if you handle it the right way.

James writes in verse 18, "**He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.**"

The greatest gift God has ever given you from above is the gift of your own spiritual birth which came about through his

word. And notice that this new birth came about in your life so that you might be **a kind of firstfruits of all he created**.

By **firstfruits** James is referring to the Old Testament practice of offering to God that which is your very best. Paul communicated this same idea in Ephesians 2:10 when he wrote, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”

The primary motivation for overcoming temptation in your life should not be a fear of God’s judgment, but an acute awareness of who you are now in Jesus Christ and what it is that you are becoming—a person conformed to his image. And it is with that in mind that you resolve to fight the good fight of faith. And God makes it very clear that you can win!

But how can you win?

Only through the study and application of the Scriptures is there found consistent victory over temptation. God not only caused you to be born again by his **word of truth**, but he has also chosen to deliver you on a daily basis the same way. The real battle is in the realm of your mind. So the placing of the living **word of truth** in your mind is the only way to counteract the evil thoughts.

The Psalmist asks the question, “How can a young man keep his way pure?” His answer: “By living according to your word. . . . I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:9-11).

Someone has said it well when they said, “A dusty Bible invariably leads to a dirty life.”

The key here is your thought life. The way you handle those fleeting thoughts is the way you will handle temptation. Mark Antony was not a weakling in body or in mind. He was a weakling in the discipline of his thoughts. Small little thoughts.

When you are alone, what do you do? When you are on a business trip, and have checked into that hotel and no one is around to identify you, how do you conduct yourself in your thought life then? What do you do for amusement? How do you dress? What do you watch on TV? What do you read? What specific thoughts do you allow to come into your head and dwell on?

“Oh,” you say, “Who cares about those little thoughts?”

I’ll tell you. God cares!

It’s been said that “temptations are like tramps; treat them kindly and they will return, bringing others with them.”

Conclusion

Several years ago a noted circus performer was attacked by one of his trained animals. This is the eyewitness account:

After the man had shown his complete mastery over several lions, tigers, leopards, and hyenas, he concluded his act by introducing an enormous boa constrictor nearly 30 feet long. He had purchased the snake when it was only 2 or 3 days old, and for 25 years had handled it daily so that he considered it perfectly harmless and completely under his control.

As the huge serpent slithered along, its head erect, its bright eyes sparkling, the entertainer gave a prearranged signal to the powerful creature. As it had done every day before, it began to coil its heavy folds around him. Higher and higher it rose until the man and the serpent seemed blended into one, and the hideous head of the snake was raised above his own.

Suddenly the trainer gave a muffled cry, and the audience burst into applause! Their cheers froze on their lips, however, for it soon became obvious that the man’s scream was a death wail of agony. Without warning, the boa constrictor’s serpent nature had returned, and its shiny, rippling body embraced him for the last time. The crowd heard bone after bone crack as the killer tightened its hold. The man’s plaything had become his master and destroyer.

Never ever play, pamper, or flirt with temptation. For if you do, it will eventually crush you and kill you.

Learn to take temptation very seriously. Hate it, resist it, and run from it at its earliest manifestations. Go to God’s word, hide it in your heart, and apply it to every temptation that comes to you. Only by doing so will you overcome temptation God’s way. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181
3. www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz

Please give your input and leave your feedback at websites 2 and 3 when requested to do so. This helps with evaluation and planning of sermons.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

O Father, I ask that no one other than the Holy Spirit do soul surgery in this sanctuary today. Someone may be tempted by alcohol. Another may be tempted by drugs or sexual infidelity, or wanting more material positions, or a more prestigious position. O Lord, you know where the battle rages in each heart here today.

If that is a description of you this morning, ask the Lord Jesus Christ to come to your rescue to give you the pardon and the power you need. Pray something like this: ‘Lord Jesus Christ, I am struggling with temptation and I desperately need your help. I believe that you died for me and rose again from the dead to give me not only pardon for my sin but the power to resist temptation.’”

O Father, yielding to temptation is indeed a serious matter. I ask you to show everyone your grace that forgives, your love that invites confession, and the instant reversal that you bring through genuine repentance.

Father, we know that the consequence of sin is death. How foolish it is for us to choose death. Cause these truths we have studied today to lodge in our minds and serve as a combative force against the power of temptation, the allurements of sin, and the sting of death. We ask this for Christ’s sake. Amen.

CHARGE:

A moral essayist once said: “It is good to be without vices, but it is not good to be without temptations.”

Why did he say that? Because temptations call you into the battle, and show you your desperate need of Christ and cause you to run to him; and to find in him the pardon from sin, and the power to overcome temptation.

Now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.