September 25/26, 2010

The Essence of Temptation

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 1:12-18

Pastor Bryan Clark

Nobody gets up in the morning and says, "Hey, I think today I'll ruin my life. (Laughter) This looks like a good day to make a mess of everything." But every day people make disastrous choices. They make a mess of their lives. Why is that? That's what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to James, Chapter 1. The title of our series in the book of James is called *Practically Christian* and I can't imagine a subject that's more practical than the subject of temptation.

The text in James is perhaps the most insightful and the most practical on the topic of temptation in the entire New Testament. I mentioned last week that verse 12 is kind of a hinge verse. It hinges from the previous text into the text that we're going to talk about today. I made a couple of comments last week. I want to pick it up in verse 12 this week.

> **Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.**
> (*NASB, James 1:12)

Blessed—*deeply happy*—very similar to what's said in verse 2—th*e fullness of joy*. Deeply happy **is the man who** what? **- perseveres under trial**. How do we persevere under trial? - by building endurance. How do we build endurance? - through trials.

For once he has been approved...the idea of approval here is not the idea that this one is approved and this one is not. It carries more the idea that it's the revealing of what's there. So what Christ has done for us is revealed through the trials and through the struggles. Often the New Testament refers to them as the *fires of life*. It's an imagery of the refining fires and the gold comes to the surface and the dross is removed. It's revealing or exposing what's true of us.

He will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. The crown is not a crown like a kingly crown. That's a completely different Greek word. This is a word that means a wreath typically given to an athlete who wins a particular event. Throughout the New Testament it refers to multiple crowns but I think they all mean the same thing. They all mean the fulfillment or the completion of our salvation. The crown of life is the reward at the end of the race. It's life—it's life eternal. It's Genesis 2 life. It's what God always intended. And then it's referenced ...**to those who love Him,** which is just language that refers to those who have experienced God's salvation. It's not a condition of salvation; it's the outflow of salvation. The New Testament knows nothing of this concept of *...1-2-3 points and a ticket to Heaven*. What it does know is that through Jesus' finished work on the cross, it is possible to have our sins forgiven and to enter into a lifelong, passionate, eternal relationship with God and so the language is often in reference to relationship. So salvation is for those who love Him, who will ultimately receive the fulfillment—the completion of their salvation—which is life unlike we have ever known it. Now that comes back in verse 18 and kind of provides the bookends to this particular text. Verse 13:

> **Let no one say when he is tempted…**

That seems like a rather abrupt transition. It's not as abrupt though as it seems. Interestingly enough, the one Greek word is translated both *trial* and *temptation* so, whenever you see that in the New Testament, it's the same Greek word. It's simply the context that determines whether the translation here is a *trial*—or a testing—or it's a *temptation*. Now in this case, in verse 2 and in verse 12, James uses the *noun* and it's translated trial or temptation. Verse 13 switches to the *verb* which uses just a little hint that the meaning in this word has changed just a little bit in this next section. Even though the concepts of a trial and a temptation are different, I would not say they're unrelated. We might say they're cousins because oftentimes, in the midst of a trial, if we respond poorly, that makes us very vulnerable to temptation. So there's definitely a link and that's kind of the flow of the text here.

> **Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.** (Vs. 13)

So let's define the word *temptation*. I would define the word temptation as the solicitation—the offer—to meet a legitimate need through illegitimate means. Now it's very important to understand that, because at the core of every temptation, is a legitimate need. Nobody's questioning it; nobody's doubting that. If we camp on this idea—that it's a legitimate need—therefore that makes it okay for me, that's where we get ourselves into trouble. We're thinking, "Well, this isn't really bad because this is a legitimate need so I have a legitimate expectation that that need should be met." Nobody's questioning whether or not that's a legitimate need. We understand that. The question is whether you're going to meet that need through legitimate means—which is God's way—or illegitimate means—which is my way. That's really where the problem is. That's where the battle is. If I start to think this is about a legitimate need and that's the point, then I rationalize. Then I make excuses. Then I figure out some reason why, for me in this case, it's okay because that need should be met and I fail to see the end of the definition. The question is not whether or not it should be met; it's whether it's my way or God's way. So what the text says is, "God never tempts us." There is never a case where God dangles this bait in front of our nose to see whether we're going to take it or not. This isn't a game to Him; He doesn't play that game. He never tempts us with evil.

The text tells us that **God Himself cannot be tempted by evil.** Now there are lots of reasons for that. It's because of the character of God. He can't violate His own nature. His nature is righteousness and holiness. It's because God sees the beginning from the end. He knows the whole story. How could you fool Him? How could you deceive Him? But at the core it is because God has no lack. If you think back to our definition, God has no need; God has no lack. There's nothing this world or anyone else could offer Him what he doesn't already have. Therefore He is not *tempt-able*. Now this discussion gets a little bit more complicated when we think about the incarnation—when God became flesh—because the Scriptures tell us that Jesus, in His incarnation, was tempted in every way as we are—yet without sin. But there's a big theological debate as to whether or not *tempt-ableness—tempt-ability*—means he *could* sin, but that discussion is for another day. For our discussion today the text is clear that God is not tempted by evil nor does He turn around and tempt us with evil. So how does it happen? Verse 14:

> **But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.**

Verses 14 and 15 are critically important to understand. We are tempted when we are **carried away and enticed by our own lust**. The two phrases...**carried away**...and ...**enticed**...are fishing and hunting terms. The idea of *carried away* is the idea of luring something out of its hiding place,

where it was safe, out to where it is vulnerable. So you might think of a call or a decoy or something like that. The idea of *enticed* is to bait a hook or to bait a trap. The metaphor of fishing makes the most sense to me because the essence of fishing is deception. To be a good fisherman you have to be a good liar. Now we're only lying to the fish, but that is what we're doing. We're taking something; we're putting it on a hook and we're saying to the fish, "If you eat this, it's really good. Not only is it good, it's really good for you." That's a lie. He's about to get a hook in the face. But the art of fishing is the art of deception, and in both the Old and New Testament that imagery is used consistently for the idea of temptation. The enemy comes along and baits a trap, baits a hook, and seeks to convince us this is good and it's good for you.

The question we would ask is, "What is it that the enemy is putting on the hook; what is it that he puts in the trap to bait us?" And the text answers the question: **We are enticed by our own lust**. If your translation has the plural, *lusts*, that is incorrect and it's an unfortunate translation. This is not talking about all the different lusts that are out there that face us. We think about sexual lust and all that and so everybody's thinking about their own deal. All of those flow out of one core issue and that is *the* lust; that is *the* desire. It's the core issue that makes us vulnerable to temptation. That's what James is talking about here. This is exactly the same way that John uses this concept in 1 John, Chapter 2, verse 16, when he's defining this world. He says, "This world is made up of the lust of the flesh." The idea of the flesh is that which I can do apart from God. There are a lot of good things done in the flesh. All religion is done in the flesh. It's that which I can do without God. In other words it's that which I can do myself. So the idea of the flesh is, "I can do this myself." The lust of the flesh is referring to a desire I have deep down within me to do this myself. I can meet my own need; I can take care of myself; I can run my life; I can do this. Every single one of us, deep down, has this desire to be our own God and to run our own lives and that's ultimately what temptation appeals to.

To understand this we have to go all the way back to Genesis 3. The correlation between the temptation narrative in Genesis 3 and what's recorded in James 1 is striking. In Genesis 3 the discussion starts related to the goodness of God. Adam and Eve were perfect in every way. They were perfect in their relationship with God. They were perfect in their relationship to one another. They were in a perfect environment that God Himself defined as paradise. That raises the question: "How do you tempt somebody that literally has it all?" The answer is, "You seek to convince them there's still more." As good as this is, there's still more, and that starts with a discussion related to the goodness of God. *God isn't as good as you think He is. You think God's generous but God has really said, "You can't eat from these trees," so He's actually restrictive*. So that's where the discussion starts and we'll come to that in James in just a couple of minutes. It moves to the lie that there are no real consequences to disobeying God. "*You shall not die."* And then it gets to the real essence of the issue. "*You can be like God, knowing good and evil."* Now not knowing good and evil experientially, because God has never known evil experientially, it's referring to the fact that God defines good and evil. God makes the rules and so the lie from the serpent to Adam and Eve is *"You can be like God. You can decide what's right and wrong. You can decide what's good and evil. You can run your own life and, if you do that, as good as this is, it will be better because life is always better with you in charge of your own life. In essence you can be your own God."* Adam and Eve think that sounds really good. They take the bait—and everything comes crashing down.

That's exactly the same usage that James has when he refers to our own lust—the deep desire within us to be our own god, to decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, to call our own shots. Certainly I would be happier if I was in charge. Certainly life would be better if I was running the show. I have this need. It's a legitimate need but it's going unmet. Therefore, if I was in charge, I

would meet that need and that would make me happier. That's the idea of lust. Probably the greatest temptation all of us face, as people made in the image of God, is the temptation to think I can be my own god. I can somehow make my life more. And so that is the core issue out of which flows all other issues. Whether I'm talking about the temptation to say something, the temptation to be arrogant, to be prideful, the temptation towards sexual immorality, the temptation to be selfish—whatever the temptation is, whatever that lust is—it comes all the way back to this one core issue: *I'm tempted to be my own god and to do it my way.* Verse 15:

Then when lust has conceived…

The English translation doesn't use the word *the*, but it's important to understand the Greek actually reads in verse 15, "Then when *the* lust"... It has the definite article there. Again it confirms the idea that this is talking about the core issue—*the* lust out of which all other flows—then when *the* **lust has conceived**...James is going to use a powerful birth analogy. Everybody understands that life begins at conception. When a husband and wife come together, a child is conceived. James is saying that's where temptation starts. It starts at the point of conception. There is a thought that enters into my mind to meet a legitimate need my own way. I start to think about a certain behavior, a certain attitude, a certain response. Whatever it is, there's this thought that's been conceived, where I would like to do this. There's something deep inside that *conceives* of this. That is the point at which temptation must be dealt with. If you deal with temptation at the point of conception, with a disciplined mind, you will be wildly successful. You will live a life of integrity and uprightness. The farther this process is allowed to go, the lower the chances are that you're going to respond correctly. In order to really deal with temptation, you must have a disciplined mind and, at the point of conception, you must realize what's happening.

What's happening here is, "I have a legitimate need and that need is apparently going unmet." So I'm starting to think that maybe I should meet that need my way instead of God's way and I'm thinking about taking charge and doing something that I previously would not have considered. It's at that point when I need to wake up and think, "What am I doing? Do I really believe if I become my own god and take charge of my own life, I can make it better than God can make it?" That's the moment of truth. When lust is conceived, it gives birth to sin. It means that that thought has been allowed to stay there. It stays in the womb of my mind. I feed it. I nurture it. It continues to grow until it's ready to be delivered. So now I've allowed it to stay there. I've justified it; I've rationalized it; I've explained it away. I've figured out some reason why, for me, that behavior is acceptable. And now I'm at a point where I'm ready to give birth to the action.

…it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. (Vs. 15b)

Literally the Greek here is, it's *stillborn*. It's a very powerful imagery—going from what I thought would bring me so much happiness and joy has actually broken my heart.

Many of you couples have been through this process literally. A husband and wife come together; they conceive a child. The child grows in the womb and it's a time of great excitement. We're excited about this new life. We get the bedroom ready; we buy the furniture; we think about names; it's a wonderful time. And finally comes the moment when that child is to be delivered and everybody is excited. Here's this new life that's going to change our lives and bring us so much joy. But in that moment, when the excitement is way up here, you hear the words of the doctor, "I'm sorry but your child is dead—stillborn." You go from what you thought was going to be such a joyous moment to absolute devastation.

Now as I said, some of you couples have been through that literally. All of us have been through that metaphorically with temptation. Somewhere along the way we conceived the thought and we convinced ourselves, "This is going to make me happy; this is going to make life better. For some reason, in my case, this choice is acceptable." And we nurtured that and we fed that until finally it gave birth to the action.

Sometimes people will say when they gave in to temptation, "It just happened." It has never *just happened*. It has always been the result of something that started before that, that was allowed to fester, was allowed to be nurtured and fed, to give birth to the action. And somehow you convinced yourself this would be fun; this would be good; this would make my life better. But in that moment your joy drops to devastation—when you realize what you thought would make you so happy has actually been stillborn and it has brought nothing but heartache and devastation.

This last week I read a quote by Dallas Willard. He said, "Reality is what you run into when you're wrong." That is a great quote. "Reality is what you run into when you're wrong!" People can talk about truth and redefining truth all they want to, but at some point you have to face reality. It smacks you in the face.

In this process of temptation we can rationalize; we can excuse; we can figure out all the reasons why, in our case, it's okay and, in our case, it's going to work in our favor and all the reasons why this would be a good thing. But the moment that you give birth to the action you get smacked in the face with reality. You can lie to yourself all you want but, at the end of the story, reality smacks you in the face and says, "This wasn't good." What you thought would make you happy has broken your heart. It's exactly the narrative in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve are convinced that life would be better their way, but the moment that they sin against God, they know they've been had—that they had been lied to—and they are devastated! They hide from God. They point fingers at one another and everything falls apart. Verse 16:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

James is saying, "Don't believe the lie." The lust deep within all of us is this strong desire, as people made in the image of God, to think I can be my own god. With me running the show it would be better or, in this particular case, with this particular need, I think I need to do it my way because I don't think God's going to come through for me this time. James says, "*Don't be deceived; that's a lie.*" It's the same lie for thousands of years. The enemy is crafty; he's just not very unique. He's used the same line for thousands of years and it continues to work very effectively. Verse 17:

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above...

This is now getting to the discussion related to the goodness of God. James says, "Don't be deceived." Everything that's good and everything that's perfect—that means the absence of moral evil (we would probably use the word *right*)—everything that's good and everything that's right comes from God. There is no Plan B. There is no alternate source. There is nothing that can come into your life that's going to make you more happy, more joyful, more fulfilled—that's going to more deeply satisfy that need—than what God has to offer. Nothing! But this is the question we wrestle with: "Do we believe that?" Do I believe that ultimately everything that's good and right comes from God? Therefore God is God; I submit and surrender to that and I will do it His way, I

will meet a legitimate need God's way. Or am I going to believe the lie that I can do better than God? Is there anything out there that this world has to offer that is better? The text says, "No." Everything that's good, everything that's right comes from God. Every time we give into temptation, what we're saying is, "I don't believe that. God, I don't believe You really are as good as You say You are. I don't believe You really love me as much as You say You love me. I'm going to meet this need my way because I don't trust You to come through." James says,

> **Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.** (Vs. 17)

In the ancient world shadows were a big deal. They didn't have electric lighting and so, basically, they depended on the light of the sun with the exception of maybe a fire and a candle here or there. But most of life was lived with significant shadows. So in both the Old and New Testament, shadows became kind of a metaphor. It is places where the bad guys hide; it's places where the animals hide; it's places where you experience an ambush; it's places where you put things where you don't want anybody to see them. Shadows were a big part of life. So the idea that God is the father of lights is saying He is the originator—He's the creator of light. He isn't just light but He is the *originator* of light. It emanates from Him. It flows out of Him; therefore it's not possible that there could be any shadows. There are no pockets of darkness. There are no secret sides of God that are evil. Therefore it goes to the idea that everything that's good and everything that's right comes from God. God has no bad side; God has no evil side. It's just light. Verse 18:

> **In the exercise of His will...**meaning according to His plan**... He brought us forth...** God has His own birthing language, His own birthing metaphor; *brings us forth* is Greek for God gave us birth. Just like in the story of Nicodemus, we have been born again. How does that happen?**... by the word of truth...**

In other words the enemy lies to us and says to us, "You could be your own god. With you in charge, life would be better. With you in charge, that need would be met. With you in charge, everything's going to be what you've always wanted it to be." Religion is driven by this lie that says, "You can do it yourself. You can make yourself good enough. You can make yourself acceptable to God. Just try really hard. You can do it." But the text says we were *rebirthed* by God—according to the word of truth. God came along and said, "Hey folks, that's a lie. You cannot be your own god; you cannot save yourself and you're never going to find life in your choices and your decisions and in your way. Actually you are a desperate sinner headed for judgment if something doesn't change." So God Himself became flesh and allowed Himself to be nailed on the cross in payment for your sin, that those who believe by faith that Jesus did this for me, experienced the forgiveness of sin and we are *reborn*. That's the language here. The word of truth was, *"You need a Savior."* The word of truth is, *"Everything that's good and right comes from God."* The word of truth is, *"There's nothing this world has to offer that can even come close to the life that God offers."* The word of truth is, *"Your way is destructive and God's way is life."* So we were rebirthed according to the word of truth,

> **so that we would be kind of first fruits among his creatures.** (Vs. 18b)

The idea of *first fruits* is taking the first of the crop or the herd—the best of what you have—and giving it to God. We would say today to give God the best of my talent, to give God the best of my time and the best of my energy and the best of my resources. But in this particular text God is saying you are His *first fruit*. You are the glimpse of what is to come. First fruit always carried the

idea that this is the first gift with more to come. God is saying, "When I rebirthed you, that was just a glimpse of what is to happen to all creation. One day God is going to redeem all creation back to Himself. That's what Romans 8 says. God's plan for this universe was always Genesis 1 and 2. God hasn't scrapped that plan. He is not coming up with Plan B. That's always been the plan and the promise is, "*I'm going to do what's necessary and I'm going to redeem all creation back to what I always intended"* —a future more glorious than we could begin to describe. But as amazing as it may sound, when God rebirthed you, He wanted you to be a glimpse of what is to come, that you would demonstrate life lived under the goodness of God, life lived under the right things of God. This is a glimpse of the kingdom that is to come. Therefore, when He calls us, it's to be a people that find our life and our meaning and our purpose from Him— believing that everything that's good and everything that's right, comes from Him. Therefore we become the prototype. We're just a glimpse of what is to come. We're the first fruit of what will ultimately be fulfilled when the end of the story is told.

The question we all must wrestle with is, "Do we believe that's true?" Do you believe that ultimately God is good and that everything that's good and everything that's right comes from Him? You cannot find more life; you cannot find more joy; you cannot find more happiness; you cannot find more fulfillment for those needs in anything outside of God. Or do I believe that life would be better with me in charge? Life would be better with me calling the shots? Life would be better with me running the show? That if I determined to meet my own needs, somehow that's going to make me more happy than what God can deliver? The core issue in every temptation is, "*Do I believe life is better with me in charge or do I believe life is better with God in charge?"* Nobody gets up in the morning and says, "Hey, I think today I'll ruin my life." But every day people make devastating choices that make a mess out of everything. What's it going to be for you?

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us. You love us too much to just let us wander aimlessly around in the darkness. Lord, on the basis of Jesus' finished work on the cross, You have rebirthed us. We've gone from death to life with a future more glorious than we could describe. Lord, Your intent was that we would be a glimpse of the glory to come. We would be a people filled with Your goodness, that we would walk in Your light, revealing what You've always wanted for people made in Your image. Lord ,we know there is something deep within us that is very responsive to the idea that we could be our own gods, that somehow life is better with me in charge. Lord, help us to recognize that that is a lie, and, Lord, help us to find our life in You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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September 25/26, 2010

The Essence of Temptation

Practically Christian: A Study in the Book of James

James 1:12-18

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What is the difference between those times when you have successfully resisted temptation and those times when you gave in?

2. What are the factors that make temptation so powerful? What is temptation?

Bible Study

1. Read James 1:12. Write the antithesis of this verse. "Miserable is the person who…" In what way does responding poorly to trials open the door to temptation?

2. Read 1:13-16. Why might someone say he is being tempted by God? Why is that bad theology?

3. According to these verses what is happening at the deepest level when we are being tempted? What is it at the core that "entices" us to sin? Compare with Genesis 3:1-6. Why is "lust" singular and in 1:15 the Greek actually states "the lust?" What is this referring to?

4. Describe the birth metaphor that James uses. At what point in the process are you most likely to experience victory and at what point are you most likely going to lose the battle?

5. Describe the idea of the baby being still born ("brings forth death"). In what way does this describe the process of going from what you thought would bring you joy to heartache as it relates to temptation and sin?

6. Read 1:16-18. What are we deceived about when we sin? What are we saying to God when we sin? What are we doubting?

7. In 1:18 James uses another "birthing" metaphor by saying God "brought us forth" which is literally God "birthed us." How did God "birth" us and why did He birth us into new life?

Application

1. Write a one or two sentence summary of this text. What is temptation at its core? What are the primary issues we need to know to understand and resist temptation?

2. Pick an area of temptation that people in your group struggle with and analyze it using this text as your guide. How does one go from conception to action? What would it mean to deal with this temptation at the conception level? In what way does it bring forth death? What is the legitimate need at the core of this temptation? What would it mean to trust God to meet this need? Why is that hard?

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