

DON'T BLAME ME

SERIES: LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

By Danny Hall

You may have heard of the TV show Temptation Island. The premise of the show is a bit bizarre. They take some couples who are not yet married but are in some sort of long-term relationship, to an island stocked with luxurious things. There these couples meet some great-looking men and women. The couples are separated, and each partner goes on dates with these other men or women. The whole idea is to see if their relationships will be destroyed. Sadly, this goes under the new general category of "reality television."

The show's producers have tapped into something that we all understand: temptation. We are all easily lured into all kinds of destructive things, although perhaps not as blatantly destructive as the situations depicted on the show. Temptation is part of life.

James knew this two thousand years ago (of course, all the way back in the Garden temptation was part of the human story), so this is not new material. He has some pointed words for us that I hope will help us look at this subject differently.

This is the third of four messages in James 1. The question we're addressing in this series is what it's like to look at life through the eyes of faith. In the first message (Discovery Paper 4677) we looked at the troubles that come our way in life and how we can see through the eyes of faith what God is doing in them. In the second message (Discovery Paper 4678) we looked at the issue of materialism with our possessions and how we need to deal with that reality through the eyes of faith. Now we'll look at how we are to handle the moral realm of temptation. What does it mean for us to walk in the direction of holiness? James helps us with a marvelous perspective on that as we look through the eyes of faith at that part of our lives.

James 1:12-18:

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

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

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. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

The crown of life

In verse 12 we read the word "blessed." This is the same word Jesus used in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. It speaks of contentment and fulfillment and happiness and joy all rolled into one.

"Blessed is the person who perseveres under trial." The word "trial" here is the same word we saw back in verse 2 (Discovery Paper 4677). It also comes from the same root as the word that is translated "tempted" in verse 13, peirazo. This word can be used generically of the difficulties of life, whether persecution or disappointment, and it can also, in certain contexts such as this one, take on the moral connotation of temptation.

James begins by assuming that we are going to be faced with temptations. "Blessed is the person who perseveres under trial...." What he is saying is that in life there is a series of moral choices. We face them every day.

Ginger and I are very different, and that's true of how we approach getting up in the morning. My idea of a good morning is to get up early, way before I have to leave the house, and very slowly and quietly prepare for the day. Ginger's idea of a good morning is to sleep to that last possible nanosecond, hop out of bed and get herself ready and out the door in a flurry of amazing, blinding speed. Can you see where this is going? When we were first married, I had to be up before Ginger because of our different schedules. But she wanted to be the great helper and loving wife, so she was getting up to fix me breakfast. There I was looking for my slow and quiet morning, and when Ginger's feet hit the floor, her mouth would start talking; she's very verbal. She was all cheery and bubbly as she fixed breakfast. But longing for my peace and quiet, as a loving husband I came up with a great solution. I said to Ginger, "Why don't you sleep in? You don't have to get up."

That's a silly little example, but it illustrates that from the first waking moment of the day, we are faced with moral choices. How will I react to what's going on in my world as my day unfolds? Will I react with selfishness? Anger and bitterness? Will I succumb to lust or pride? At almost every juncture, in every activity, in every relationship, in every job we do, we're tempted. There are so many opportunities to choose a way other than the way of God. So we have to figure out how to confront those challenges.

James goes on to say that when we have stood the test, we "will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." What he is saying is that there is a blessedness that comes when you persevere under trial. That battle we wage in the moral realm, moment by moment, day by day, is worth it! There are two possible meanings of this crown of life, and in reality it's probably a blend of both. First, at the end of the road there is a special recognition by God for his children who have lived faithfully for him. There will be a moment when we will see Christ face to face, and he will speak those words that our hearts long for and spring for joy over: "Well done, my good and faithful servant!" And we will receive a crown of life for having persevered.

But there is also a crown of sorts that we receive as we go along day by day. It's part of that blessedness of persevering. In the Scriptures, particularly in the New Testament, the word "life" means much more than existence. It refers to a life designed and created by God that has the quality of knowing him, enjoying him, living for him. That is real life. And part of what happens day by day as we choose godliness in the midst of temptations is that we begin to enjoy that quality of life that God offers to us.

So right up front, when James is beginning to address this problem of how we will handle the temptations of life, he calls our attention to the good things about making it through. There is something that is worth the struggle: knowing God fully, living life completely, as it was designed and created to be lived by the very Author of life himself. James' first point, then, is to choose the path that gets us to real life, and that is to get in the battle and learn to deal with the temptations of life, to choose godliness and holiness.

The cycle of temptation

James goes on in verse 13 to enlarge the picture of the spiral of temptation and how it works in our life: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." As he describes the seduction of sinfulness he begins with the source of that temptation. The first thing he says is that it is not God! We're tempted to blame God: "How could you put me in this position? How could you have ever let me do that? It's your fault for allowing my stupidity." But God cannot be tempted, and he doesn't tempt anyone else. God is holy, and he doesn't want us to fail or fall. The truth of it is that temptation resides deep in who we are, in a vulnerability to seduction away from God's way to the glitter and superficial beauty of the things this world has to offer. Deep within us, we are often confused about what is really valuable and what life is all about. There's a part of us that's looking for fulfillment, some sort of satisfaction, and when we see the glitter of what is offered to us, we think, "Aha...that looks good...that looks like it could get me where I want to go."

When that happens, James says, it starts a cycle. This evil desire comes up from within us. What we do with that is what James is talking about here. When we entertain that desire for a moment, when we begin to let it take root in our heart and mind, it becomes images and possibilities, and the enticement grows. And then, James says, desire gives birth to sin. After we have let the desire percolate longer than it should have, rather than stopping it and choosing life, it begins to develop within us, and all of a sudden we act on it: we make sinful

choices based on the impulse.

Then what happens? The cycle deepens. It always becomes easier to make that choice to sin the next time. Choices to let sin be born lead to habits that lead to destruction. The spiral keeps going, and sin gives birth to death. And here we thought we were finding life, and it looked so promising! But that moment of pleasure becomes a lifetime of pain. That moment of pride sets up walls around us that are very hard to scale and very hard to tear down.

But there is a benefit to temptation if we are seeking godliness. What temptation does is highlight for us how serious this whole battle with sin is. The very act of our will to choose holiness puts us right in the middle of the battle. We begin to find out how difficult those impulses are to face. But that is God's call.

Trusting in God's goodness

Now, fortunately, James doesn't leave us there. He gives us a way out of this 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." Part of what makes us so vulnerable to sin is that we don't really believe God's ways are good. There's a part of us that says, "This can't possibly be the path to life!" So we doubt the very goodness of God. But James brings us back to that, because how to deal with the issue of temptation is rooted in God's character. It starts with a belief in who God is, with a faith commitment to the goodness of our Father as the Author of life and as the One who gives good and perfect gifts to us. God's ways are good and his gifts are good because he is good.

This goodness of God is consistent. We live in a world that tries to tell us that morality is shifting all the time, and there's no such thing as an absolute way. We just have to choose in the moment what we want to do. But if God is truly good, and if all good gifts issue from him, and he never changes, that consistency should be liberating to us. We don't have to wander all over looking for some elusive answer that changes moment by moment. The answer is rooted in the consistent goodness of the very character of God.

Now, this goodness of God is grounded in his character, but it is realized in our own transformation. Observe how James closes the section 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." James says that we are the benefactors of God's grace. Notice, we did not choose him, he chose us. "He chose to give us birth through the word of truth"-a birth to that new life, that full humanity, for which we were created. That word of truth that is the source of our life then becomes the sustenance for life as God teaches us and guides us.

We are not only the benefactors of his grace, but we become examples of his grace. James uses the picture of firstfruits, the first off the vine, the cream of the crop. The firstfruits epitomized the best. The metaphor of firstfruits is beautiful, first because God has given us this life and we are the best of the best; that is, we are participating in the very greatness of God's plan, all that he wants for us, and so there is something special about us as children of God. But the firstfruits are also the indication of a larger harvest that God is gathering in. We become testimonies to the larger harvest, examples of God's grace to people who are struggling on the path toward life, trying to figure out how to get life and being detoured off the path through this temptation process. We stand as beacons showing the way as we live out life as God calls us to live.

I've taught the book of James many times over the years I've been in ministry. I love this book. But in going through it again I noticed something I've never seen before. It's something that's missing from this passage: There's not one word about how to deal with temptation here! No advice, no instructions on how to stand against it, no ten steps to freedom or five steps to the victorious life. Maybe it's because they don't exist, but also I think it's because James is making a different point here. We want a list of steps so that we can do each one, check it off, and then we'll be holy. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

But the book of James, as I've mentioned before, is really about faith. It's not about steps we can take to freedom. That doesn't mean there aren't things we can do to make ourselves stronger in the battle. But looking for a pattern to follow in order to get somewhere misses the point of this whole Christian life. It's not about

steps, it's about faith in God, trusting in who he is. So James describes sin for us so that we will be aware of how painful and dangerous it is, but he doesn't give us a little plan to get out of it. Rather, he calls us to absolute faith in the character of God.

That hit me like a ton of bricks. I'm always making lists and thinking about the next step. And there have probably been times in my teaching ministry when I concocted lists and gave them to people. But James wants us to get our eyes on Jesus, to understand that God is our loving Father, the giver of those good and perfect gifts, and the one who offers us the crown of life, both now and in the future. James wants us to trust that God's ways are right and good. And if we get to that point where we can actually believe that God is good and therefore his ways are good, we've made a giant step forward in dealing with the issue of temptation.

Liberated to be who you are

There is another aspect of this that jumps out at me. Part of the problem with making lists is that it's part of a process that I have pejoratively labeled "Christian cloning." I came to know Christ in 1971, and in the seventies, at least where I was in the Christian world, there was a discipleship movement going on. We would go through these Bible study books, and there were all these steps teaching us to do this and that, and it seemed to me that the goal was that we would all come out the other end looking alike. We would all have the same skills, carry our Bibles the same way, share the Four Spiritual Laws (1) the same way, and so on. Of course the content of these studies was helpful as a primer to start new believers out on the Christian walk. But the idea of reducing this life to a series of steps is dangerous, because it overlooks the very nature of what God is doing. The beauty of what he's doing is that it's all about my becoming who God created me to be. The glory of this process is that I get to be me!

How many times I have looked at somebody else and said, "Oh, how I want to be like him!" What I see are qualities in his life that I want in my life, and that is legitimate. But beyond that, God doesn't want me to be like anyone else, he wants me to be like me.

One thing that Rick Watts was sharing during our men's retreat this year was that there is a sense in which, when we talk about temptation, we say "I'm only human"-but the problem is really that we're not human enough! True humanity is being created in God's image and living out a life of relationship with him as we walk this path. We need to be more human, more of what we were meant to be.

I mentioned before that I have really been enjoying Philip Yancey's book *Searching for the Invisible God*. He tells a story and then makes some comments that I think are illustrative of this point.

"Mark Van Doren, the literature professor who once taught Thomas Merton, visited his former student at a Kentucky monastery after a thirteen-year separation. Van Doren and other friends of Merton still could not comprehend Merton's transformation from a New York party animal into a monk who cherished solitude and silence. Van Doren reported, 'Of course he looked a little older; but as we sat and talked I could see no important difference in him, and once I interrupted a reminiscence of his by laughing. "Tom," I said, "you haven't changed at all." "Well, why would I? Here," he said, "our duty is to be more ourselves, not less." It was a searching remark, and I stood happily corrected.'

"I believe God has a similar goal for all of us, that we become more ourselves by realizing the "selves" God originally intended for us. The rabbi Zusya concluded, 'In the world to come I shall not be asked: "Why were you not Moses?" I shall be asked, "Why were you not Zusya?"' Quietly, persistently, the Spirit coaxes me to be neither Moses nor Zusya, but Philip Yancey, a flawed personality in whom God himself has chosen to dwell. With infinite resources, God can assist every willing person on earth in that custom process. It begins with trust in God's best for me, a confidence that God will liberate my true self, not bind it." (2)

How many of us have thought at some point in our life that following God is limiting and binding? Hasn't it been presented to us that way? We tend to focus on how it hems us in. But in Yancey's

words that so beautifully echo the spirit of what James is saying, God wants to liberate who we are, not bind us.

You are specially created by the God of the universe, the product of his very creative hand, with your personality and your gifts. You have life experiences that mold and change you, but part of who you are is that you are created in the image of God. And if you are his child, his very presence resides with you, and all those resources that Yancey refers to are there and alive in you. And God wants you to trust him. That's the heart of the matter: trusting that amazing grace of God that forgives our frailty and falling. We're still going to be tempted and we're still going to mess up. But the beauty of this is that God is still working and walking with us, helping us gain the crown of life, helping us see a little bit more of who he has made us to be. And as we walk with him and allow him to work in us and through us, we become transformed by his grace. Isn't it amazing that he loves us like that?

How do we face temptation? Well, we have to understand it. It's dangerous. We can't let it get a grip on us. But the path out of it starts with seeing God as our loving Father, trusting him day by day, seeing temptation through the eyes of faith.

NOTES

(1) Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?*, © 1965, 1994, 2000, Campus Crusade for Christ, Inc., NewLife Publications, Orlando, FL.

(2) Philip Yancey, *Searching for the Invisible God*, © 2000, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 163.

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