

Week 3: James: Trials and Temptations

Hook



Main Point: God uses all things for our good.

Around 50 percent of American follow a diet or eating pattern at some point in the year.¹ These diets often jumpstart in January – bad news for fast food restaurants, as January tends to be one of the slowest months for sales.² However, most diets that begin as a New Year resolution are abandoned in four months or less.³

Q: What is the most challenging diet or eating pattern that you’ve ever tried?

Q: What helps you to keep to a diet?

Q: What food tempts you most to break a diet?

Transition: In today’s lesson, we discuss temptation, sin and the dire consequence that follows.

RECAP: In our first lesson, we were introduced to the book of James, covering the author, audience, genre and the supposed “conflict” between James and Paul (faith and works) – which isn’t a conflict at all! Then we began our verse-by-verse study of James, in which we focused on wisdom – what true wisdom is and how we find it. Wisdom is the basis for everything else covered in James, known as the “wisdom literature of the New Testament.” This week, we will learn about the place of trials and temptations in the life of a believer and how God uses all things for our good.

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Book

Main Point: God uses all things for our good.

James 1:9–11 and Matthew 20:16, 25–28 [Read]

Talking Point 1: In the kingdom of God, the lowly will be exalted.

Q: What does it tell us about God that He exalts the lowly and humbles the rich?

Q: What does James's point about riches fading away teach us about the kingdom of God?

Here James gave us another way the wisdom of God is upside-down from the world's. In the world, a rich man boasts in his riches, but in the kingdom, he boasts in his "humiliation," which doesn't mean being embarrassed but being humbled. In God's kingdom, the lowly are exalted, and the rich are humbled. This doesn't mean the poor are elevated above the rich in God's kingdom, but that when the rich are humbled and the poor are elevated from what the world thinks of them, their value meets in the middle to become equal, as they are in God's eyes.

In an honor/shame culture like the ancient Greco-Roman world, each person was born into a certain social status. Wealth wasn't just about money; it was about status. The wealthy were the highest in social status. They took great pride in their wealth and status, though they didn't earn it; they were born into nobility. The poor weren't just financially disadvantaged, they were low in status and value. Slaves were considered possessions like donkeys or sheep. Additionally, you could gain or lose honor depending on things you did or even what happened to you. Winning a debate increased your honor; getting an illness could lower it. But even if you moved up or down the honor scale, it was just a little bit. It was nearly impossible for a person born a slave to ever reach the status of nobility. You were simply either born rich or poor, elite or humble.⁴

In their world, social status (honor) mattered even more than money. People did not marry, do business with, or even eat meals with people of a lower social status. This is why the early church in Acts was such a revolutionary community, unlike anything the world had ever seen. In that first church in Jerusalem, not only did the rich and poor share meals together, pray together, and worship together, they shared everything they owned in common. The wealthy sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had a need (Acts 2:42–45). In a world where wealth was not just about money but also about status, social standing, and value, this was a revolutionary idea – not only that the

wealthy would share everything they had with the poor but that they would give their status away like that.

The way they lived fits Christ's countercultural teaching that in the kingdom of God the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matthew 20:16), and those who wish to be great in the kingdom of God should become servants (Matthew 20:26). He was flipping their honor/shame culture upside-down! The first church practiced this revolutionary sharing of resources and equality in honor, but as the church spread, many churches struggled with letting go of this worldly distinction. The Corinthians were segregating meals by rich and poor (1 Corinthians 11:17–22). James said churches were giving places of honor to the rich and lowly places to the poor (James 2:1–7). Paul had to teach the Galatians that in the kingdom of God, every distinction of high/low honor in the world is taken away (Galatians 3:28).

James said the honor of the rich man would fade away as the grass withers in the sun. When God's kingdom comes, earthly riches and worldly honor won't matter. Only the treasures we have stored up in heaven will last (Matthew 6:19–21). We should invest our lives in things that will last into eternity – the Fruit of the Spirit in our own lives and the salvation and spiritual growth of other people. Instead of building our wealth, we should be building His kingdom. Instead of growing our honor, we should be bringing Him honor.

The honor/shame between rich and poor in our society may not seem as drastic as the ancient world, but there is still a lot of division between those of different social statuses, backgrounds, races, ethnicities, incomes and other things. The kingdom of God is a place where all human hierarchies are stripped away; every person has equal value in the eyes of God, and we value one another equally and live together in harmony regardless of how the world wants to rank, categorize, or divide us. When we get to heaven, everything will be made new, and everyone will be of equal value regardless of their status while on earth. Since the church is an earthly model of that heavenly reality, we should be living that way even now.

Q: How did the way Jesus measured honor differ than the way Biblical culture measure honor? What are the differences you see in our culture today?

Q: How have you seen divisions in honor or status in the world around us? How have you seen those divisions creep into the Church?

Q: What can we do to make sure everyone in our church is valued equally?

James 1:12 and 2 Timothy 4:6–8 [Read]

Talking Point 2: Remain steadfast through the trials of this life.

Q: What does it take to remain steadfast and faithful to God when we go through hard things?

Q: What did Paul mean by “fought the good fight”?

James said at the very beginning of the letter that we should consider trials a joy because they produce steadfastness, which grows us in spiritual maturity, noting that the full effect of steadfastness is that we would be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:2–4). Being perfect and complete will not happen until we are made perfect in heaven, what we call “glorification” in theological terms (1 Corinthians 15). But until then, for the rest of our lives, God is making us more and more like Jesus, which is what we call “sanctification.” James was telling us that a lot of that growth happens through trials, just as physical muscles grow through the “trials” of exercising.

In weightlifting, we must go through pain to grow our muscles. When we lift weights, we literally tear our muscles, and as we rest, they grow back stronger. You have to break a muscle down to build it back up. Each time we lift weights, our muscles get a little bit stronger, which means we can endure more weight next time.⁵ In the same way, going through trials builds our spiritual muscles, which, over time, builds our endurance so we can handle bigger trials next time.

James already said the full effect of steadfastness (or endurance) is being perfect and complete, which will only happen in heaven. He repeated this idea here with the metaphor of “the crown of life,” which referred to the tradition in the Greek games, like the original Olympics, of placing a wreath of laurel on the head of the athlete who won a race or contest.⁶ Scripture often compares the Christian life to running a race – not a sprint but a marathon. Paul talked about pressing on toward the goal (Philippians 3:14) and running the race in such a way as to get the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). Hebrews tells us to throw off every hindrance and fix our eyes on Jesus as we run (Hebrews 12:1–2). But James said it’s not a competition of who can run the fastest; everyone who finishes the race will receive the prize.

It’s not how fast or slow you run or how good you look doing it, it’s remaining steadfast. Staying faithful. Finishing the race (2 Timothy 4:7). Trials and tribulations test our faith (James 1:3). Will we continue to follow Jesus or give up when things get hard? Just as with exercise, will we quit when it hurts or persevere and grow stronger? When Paul wrote about spiritual warfare and the spiritual attacks of evil against us, he said over

and over to put on the armor of God and then to stand firm, to take our stand, to stand our ground. God is the one who will fight the battle for us (Psalm 20:7; Proverbs 21:31; Ephesians 6:10). He is the one who will cause the growth in us (Galatians 5:22–25). We just need to stand firm, stay strong, endure, remain steadfast. We will make mistakes, have failures, or even occasionally veer off the path, but the key is to always come back to Jesus, fix our eyes on Him, and keep running after Him.

Q: Describe times in your life when trials have made your faith stronger.

Q: What does the word steadfast mean? To stand firmly fixed in purpose, resolution, and faith.

Q: How can we help each other remain steadfast under trial? How could running the race together help us stay faithful?

James 1:13–18 and 1 Corinthians 10:12–13 [Read]

Talking Point 3: God does not tempt us with evil. Only good things come from God.

Q: What causes temptation in our lives? How does temptation lead to sin?

Q: Where do good things come from? How can God use hard things for our good?

Since James had been talking about staying steadfast through trials, he now wanted to make sure his people knew that evil and temptation to do evil do not come from God. God takes things the Enemy or other people meant for evil in our lives and uses them for our good (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28). But He is not the author of evil. God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). When God created the universe, everything He created was good (Genesis 1:31). God didn't *create* evil. Evil only came later, when human beings did not trust what God said was true and took matters into their own hands.

The root of all sin is human beings choosing what their lustful desires want over what God says is good. When Eve saw the fruit, it was “a delight to the eyes” and desirable (Genesis 3:6). James used similar language to say that temptation comes from our own desires, not from God (1:14). Paul called these kinds of lustful desires the “desires of the flesh.” They are not godly, pure desires but contrary to the Spirit – sexual immorality, idolatry, selfish ambition, hatred, drunkenness, and so on (Galatians 5:16–26). Then he described the process of desire leading to sin and ending in death (1:15). James says our desires can lure us and entice us to sin. Like a fish with a fishing lure – the lure looks good to the fish, but the fish doesn't know there's a hook in it. When he bites into it, it will lead to his death.

But unlike the fish, who dies quickly after being hooked, James described temptation leading to death as a process – desire “gives birth to” sin which leads to death “when it is fully grown.” We often don’t realize we’re hooked right away; we sink deeper and deeper into sin before we realize we’re stuck. Like King David’s adultery/murder – he started out with one bad decision – not going to war with his troops. Then a bigger bad decision – watching a woman bathing. Then a worse one – calling her to his room. And things snowballed from there, until he found himself plotting to have her husband killed to cover up his sin. There were many points along the way he could have stopped himself before things got so out of control.

In contrast, when Potiphar’s wife asked Joseph to lie with her, he ran out of there so fast he left his robe in her hand. Joseph said no to the very first bad decision. He didn’t give evil a chance to snowball out of control. This is why Scripture encourages us to take every thought captive in obedience to Christ – because the battle starts in the mind (2 Corinthians 10:5). Saying no to temptation starts with that very first decision that may seem small but will hook you. Wisdom is being able to tell the difference between a lure (a fake piece of food with a hook in it) and a real piece of food. Between something that just *looks* good and something that *is* good.

Once David got to a certain point, he felt hooked, as though there was no way out. But Scripture tells us that God *always* provides a way out when we are tempted. But we must be careful not to be too overconfident about our ability to withstand temptation (1 Corinthians 10:12–13). The power to withstand temptation doesn’t come from our own strength, but from the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us that self-control is a Fruit of the Spirit. It’s not something we just work harder at to do better. It’s something the Spirit grows in us as we walk with Him and abide in Christ. When we feel tempted by our desires, we can turn them over to the Spirit and ask Him to work in us. We can pray, repeat Scripture to ourselves, practice spiritual disciplines, or simply cry out to Him – anything that helps us turn our temptation over to the Holy Spirit.

Temptation doesn’t come from God, because only good things come from Him (v. 17). God does not tempt us with evil; He wants us to flee from evil (Psalm 37:27). He does not give us anything bad; all His gifts are perfect. God is able to bless us far more abundantly than we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). When we trust Him to give us His perfect gifts, not what we think we want or need, we will be blessed. Even in times of suffering, pain and trial. God doesn’t cause evil to happen to us, but He does use it for our good. We just need to cling to Him, fix our eyes on Jesus, run the race with perseverance, and let God fight our battle for us. He will work it all out for our good (Romans 8:28).

Q: In what ways have you seen God work “bad” things for your good in the end? What does this tell us about God? What does it tell us about bad things?

Q: What are some practical ways to handle the temptation to sin in your daily life?

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Took

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James 1:14–15 is the grotesque opposite of the rebirth that the Christian experiences. Unchecked desire gives birth to sin which matures into death. This depiction impresses upon us of the serious, life-altering consequences of sin. Discuss with your LifeGroup the steps that lead to death that James describes and tools/methods to break the process instead of seeing it through to death.

CHALLENGES

THINK: Reflect on times you have felt tempted to sin. How did the temptation start? What was the original feeling of desire? What would have been a better way to channel that desire into good instead of allowing it to grow into sin? Think specifically about ways you are tempted most often. How can you prepare ahead for these temptations? How can you respond in the moment? How can you grow in self-control?

PRAY for God to give you perseverance to keep running the race and remain steadfast under trial. Pray for wisdom and strength to resist temptation. Ask God to give you His spiritual armor to be able to stand firm against the schemes of the Devil. Ask Him to show you how to submit your desires to His will for you, within the boundaries He has set up for what is good. Ask Him to make your desires His desires for you.

ACT: Memorize Scripture. Reflect on the ways you are tempted the most often and then choose a Bible verse that may help you in the moment you feel that temptation. For example, if sexual temptation is a struggle, you could repeat to yourself, “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit.... Glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) when you feel tempted.

¹ <https://foodinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/2024-IFIC-Food-Health-Survey.pdf>

² <https://get.grubhub.com/blog/how-restaurants-can-avoid-the-slow-season/>

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/new-years-resolutions-tips-why-they-fail/#>

⁴ Derek Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1984).

⁵ “How Microtears Help You to Build Muscle Mass” *The Science of Health*, Feb 5, 2018 -

<https://www.uhhospitals.org/blog/articles/2018/02/microtears-and-mass>

⁶ James B. Adamson, *The Epistle of James, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1976).