

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 12, 2009**

TEMPTATION

James 1:12-18

It is not hard to understand why Jesus would teach us to pray, as He does in the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation" (Matthew 6:13). We all know what it is to be tempted. None of us is immune from it. And we all know that the trouble with temptation is that it is, well, just so tempting. Writer Oscar Wilde said he could resist anything but temptation. Mark Twain said the way he dealt with temptation was to yield to it. Too often that is what we all do. I do it. And so do you. Another writer suggested this addition to the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation. Just tell us where it is, and we'll find it."

Jesus Himself knew that temptation is not a laughing matter. He understands temptation because He experienced it Himself. Before He began His public ministry, the Bible tells us (Matthew 4 and Luke 4), Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where He was tempted by the devil for a period of 40 days. It was certainly not the only time in His life that Jesus experienced temptation, but it was a time of concentrated, intensive testing.

In addition, the Bible tells us in Hebrews 4:15 that Jesus is able to sympathize with our weaknesses when we are tempted. He knows what we go through because He Himself was tempted in every respect, in every area of life, in every way that a person can be tempted, just like you and I are. The difference between Jesus and us is that He never gave in to temptation. Not even once. "He was tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). While you and I give in to temptations of different kinds, Jesus never did. Not in the wilderness when Satan took his best shots at Him. Not in the Garden of Gethsemane with the cross looming on the horizon. Not when He was on trial before the Jewish leaders or Pontius Pilate. Jesus never gave in to temptation. He stood firm. And because He did, He is able to help us when we are tempted (Hebrews 2:18) – if we will turn to Him, if we will run to Him, for the help we need. This is not some kind of abstract theological concept. It is a practical life principle we need to take hold of and apply in the nitty-gritty of our daily lives.

When we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," we are asking God to protect us from spiritual danger (A. M. Hunter). Given that temptation is an unavoidable fact of life, it is a prayer that God will spare us from situations or circumstances which would severely test our faith or our faithfulness to Him by tempting us to sin (D. A. Carson and Ken Hemphill). John Stott offers this paraphrase: "Do not allow us so to be led into temptation that it overwhelms us." Eugene Peterson gives this paraphrase in *The Message*: "Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil." I don't know about you, but that is a prayer that resonates with me.

Let's think together today about temptation and how God wants us to deal with it in our lives.

WHAT IS TEMPTATION?

First, just what is temptation? Here is a simple definition: A temptation is any desire to do something wrong. It is any kind of enticement to sin. Temptation always involves the opportunity to make a choice. You can choose to do what is wrong. Or you can choose to do what is right.

The New Testament word for “temptation” is the Greek word *peirasmos*. It actually has two different meanings and is used in two different ways in the New Testament. Sometimes, as in the accounts of Jesus’ temptation by the devil in the wilderness in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and in the description of how temptation works in James 1, it has this meaning of an enticement to sin. But sometimes it has a different meaning. Sometimes it simply means a trial or test. It is used this way in James 1:2, which says: “Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials (*peirasmois*) of many kinds.” And again in verse 12: “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial (*peirasmon*).”

Like temptations, trials and tests are a simple fact of life. Sooner or later, they happen to everybody. God allows trials in our lives. But they are meant for our good. He sends them not to trip us up, but to help us develop moral and spiritual muscle. Not to cause us to fall, but to enable us to stand firm in the faith and to help us grow in the grace and knowledge of God our Savior.

Trials and temptations are not the same thing (even if the Greek word is the same). But every trial in life, every hardship you experience in life, contains a temptation. Every trial, every time of testing in life, requires a decision. Will I trust in the Lord with all my heart and lean not on my own understanding in this situation (Proverbs 3:5)? Will I walk with God by faith (even if I can’t see where He is leading)? Will I obey the clear teachings of His Word? Or will I go my own way? Will I say no to God in order to satisfy my own desires or to make myself look better?

Every trial, whether it is related to money or job or health or relationships or some other area of life, contains a temptation. In every trial you can choose to do what is wrong. Or you can choose to do what is right. If you stand firm and strong and true in the face of life’s trials, you will receive a reward from God – “the crown of (eternal) life that God has promised to those who love Him” (James 1:12).

Temptation happens to everybody. Not everybody is tempted in the same way or by the same thing. But everybody is tempted. And it is absolutely essential to understand that temptation is *not* sin. Temptation and sin are not the same thing. Temptation is the suggestion or the enticement to sin.

Sometimes the temptation comes without warning. Sometimes it comes uninvited. It may come when you least expect it. Or, as is too often the case, we go looking for it and welcome temptation with open arms.

The problem with temptation is when we give in to it. The problem is when we yield to that impulse or desire to sin in some way. And all of us do it. Mark Sanford (South Carolina Governor) and Senator John Ensign from Nevada aren't the only ones.

But here is some good news: While temptation is a universal fact of life, giving in to it doesn't have to be. You and I don't have to give in to it. In Christ, God has promised and provided a way out. A way to overcome temptation. Remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted [not *if*, but *when*], He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

In the grace of God, giving in to temptation is not an inevitable, foregone conclusion. It doesn't have to be the end of the story. Temptation may be inevitable, but sin does not have to be, if our hearts are set on God and His grace.

WHERE TEMPTATION COMES FROM

Second, in our Scripture reading today, James tells us where temptation comes from. And where it does not come from. It does *not* come from God.

Look at verse 13: "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." God is not the author or source of temptation. Never was. Never will be.

So, where does temptation come from? It comes from within me. It comes from within you. Look at verse 14: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own evil desire." The pull toward sin we experience when we are tempted comes from our own fallen nature. It doesn't come from God.

We humans love to play the blame game. We want to be able to blame someone else for the troubles we experience or our struggles in life. But you can't blame God for the temptations you face, because the temptation to do wrong does not come from God. It comes from within us. It says in *The Message*: "The temptation to give in to evil comes from us and only us. We have no one to blame but the leering, seducing flare-up of our own (desire)."

So, don't blame God. And, as James says in verse 16, don't be deceived. Don't get thrown off course (*TM*). God is not the source of temptation. Instead, He is the giver of every good and perfect gift in life (verse 17).

Temptation comes from within us. It is an inside job. And Satan, our enemy, loves to exploit our weaknesses in order to trip us up and cause us to fall. He knows what buttons to push in your life. (Mine, too.) The Bible says: "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). He is poised to pounce, and would like nothing better than to catch you napping, spiritually speaking (*The Message*). So don't let your guard down. You've got to stay spiritually alert.

When you are tempted to cheat on your spouse (if that is a temptation for you),
 When you are tempted to put yourself in a compromising situation,
 When you are tempted to look at porn,
 When you are tempted to tell an off-color joke,
 When you are tempted to stretch the truth or tell a flat-out lie in order to make yourself look good or to make someone else look bad,
 When you are tempted to take credit for something you didn't do,
 When you are tempted to cheat on your taxes, to cheat in your business, or to cheat at school,
 When you are tempted to seek revenge on someone who has hurt you,
 Don't even think about blaming God or anyone else.

When I am tempted, there is no one to blame but myself. The Bible is clear: Each of us is tempted when we are lured and enticed by our own sinful desire. So don't try to pass the buck like Adam and Eve did in the Garden. Temptation is an inside job. And each of us is responsible for how we deal with it.

In verses 14 and 15, James describes the process of temptation. This is how it works: It begins with a sinful desire within us. Desire leads to sin when we yield to temptation. And sin results in death. It fractures our fellowship with God. It cuts us off from His blessing. Ultimately, sin leads to both physical and spiritual death. "The wages of sin is (what?) death," says Paul in Romans 6:23. "But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Temptation begins with our own desire, which leads to sin when we give in to it. And the end result is death. But it doesn't have to be that way. Because you and I do not have to give in to temptation. There is a way to have victory over temptation.

HOW TO HANDLE TEMPTATION

This is the third point. When temptation comes, how should we respond? How do we gain victory over temptation?

First, we need to understand the true nature of temptation and sin. J. C. Ryle, a 19th-century British preacher put it this way: "We are too apt to forget that temptation to sin will rarely present itself to us in its true colors, saying, 'I am your deadly enemy, and I want to ruin you forever in hell.' Oh no! Sin comes to us like Judas, with a kiss; like Joab, with outstretched hand and flattering words. The forbidden fruit seemed good and desirable to Eve; yet it cast her out of Eden. Walking idly on his palace roof seemed harmless enough to David; yet it ended in adultery and murder. Sin rarely seems [like] sin at first beginnings. Let us then watch and pray, lest we fall into temptation."

Temptation always promises more than it can deliver. You may enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season (Hebrews 11:25), but in the end you will pay a huge price – in this life or in eternity. So watch and pray, and keep the eyes of your heart open to the true nature of temptation.

Second, in order to gain victory over temptation, follow the example of Jesus. What did Jesus do when He was tempted by the devil for 40 days in the wilderness? He dealt with each temptation by appealing to God's Word. The Word of God was the weapon Jesus used to defeat the devil. In each temptation, Jesus responded to Satan by saying: "It is written." He relied on the authority of God's Word.

If the Bible was good enough for Jesus, it must be good enough for us, don't you think? But here is the thing: You can only rely on God's Word when you face temptation in your life if you know God's Word. This is one reason why it is so important for each of us, whatever our age or season of life, to read and study God's Word regularly.

Some of you have memorized Psalm 119:11, which says: "I have hidden Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you." If you don't hide God's Word in your heart, if you don't store it up in your heart, if you don't make it a part of your regular spiritual diet, it will not be of much (or any) help to you when you are tempted. That is intuitively obvious, isn't it?

In addition to claiming the authority of God's Word in your life, you can put on the whole armor of God to stand firm against temptation. This is what Paul says in Ephesians 6: "Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes... Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm, then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests" (6:10-11, 13-18a).

Use the armor God Himself has provided:

- The belt of truth
- The breastplate of righteousness
- The shoes of the gospel
- The shield of faith
- The helmet of salvation
- The sword of the Spirit (God's Word)
- The privilege of prayer

Another way to gain victory over temptation is to simply stay away from compromising situations or places where you know you will be tempted. You've probably heard about the man who went to his doctor and said he broke his arm in two places, to which the doctor replied: "Then stay out of those places!"

That is a good strategy for dealing with temptation. Don't go where you know you will be tempted. Just don't go there. I don't know if any of you are Danish, but there is an old Danish proverb which says: "You cannot be caught in a place you do not visit." It is true.

And you have probably heard Martin Luther's comment about temptation. He said: "Temptations, of course, cannot be avoided, but because we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, there is no need to let them build a nest in our hair." Temptation may be inevitable, but you don't need to welcome it and invite it to stay.

Here is Charles Spurgeon's counsel:

"What settings are you in when you fall (into sin)? Avoid them.
What props do you have that support your sin? Eliminate them.
What people are you usually with? Avoid them."

That may seem hard or radical, but the truth is that we need to recognize the seriousness of the spiritual battle in which we are engaged. Spurgeon goes on to say: "There are two equally damning lies Satan wants us to believe:

1. Just once won't hurt.
2. Now that you have ruined your life (by giving in to temptation), you are beyond God's use, and might as well enjoy sinning."

Both of these are lies of the devil, who is a liar by nature and the father of lies (John 8:44).

The truth is that sin is always a serious matter. But God's grace is greater than our sin, whatever it is. And none of us is beyond the reach of His redeeming love.

Here is what the Bible says: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you" (James 4:7-8). Choose the way of obedience. Just yesterday I came across this line in a column by Andree Seu in World magazine. "The best kept secret about obedience in the face of a hard temptation is that there is a blessing waiting on the other side." Choose to obey God, not your sinful desire. And you will be blessed.

If you have given in to some temptation and need to turn away from the sin in your life, take to heart these words from 1 John 2: "My children, I write these things to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:1-2).

Isn't that good news? Temptation is inevitable. Giving in to it doesn't have to be. In the power of Christ, we can have victory over it. And when we fall, when we give in, we can find forgiveness and a fresh start with God.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.