

## *How Temptation Turns Into Sin • James 1:13-15*

There is an ancient Greek myth about a beautiful goddess who came to earth offering to marry any man who could defeat her in a foot race. The only catch in the deal was that any competitor who lost against her would have to die.

Enthralled with her beauty, there was no shortage of suitors, even though the cost could not be higher. She was fast – very fast! The races were held one after the other and she outran every man. Sometimes she would tease and start off slowly and allow them to get some distance ahead so they thought they could win – only to catch up and pass them just before the finish line.

After a series of deadly races there was no one left that was willing to compete no matter how great her beauty — except one. There was one young man with a secret strategy. He scheduled the race and several days before went to a goldsmith and had him make three magnificent golden apples. He carefully hid them in his clothing at the starting line that day of the race.

The race began like all the others with the fleet-footed goddess quickly taking a distant lead. When she was almost out of sight she did what she always did — looked back to see where the man destined to die was running. When she looked back, he took that instant of opportunity and threw one of the golden apples high into the sky where it glistened in the sun and caught her attention before falling into a grassy field off the runners' path. Fascinated, she doubled back and went out in the field to find the magnificent apple.

Then looking back at the track she saw that he had not only caught up but was almost out of sight. She quickly ran and in no time at all she passed him and was almost out of sight when she turned back to look again. For the second time he threw an apple high into the sky. It caught her attention and she repeated the whole procedure again.

Knowing that his life was at stake, the runner threw the third apple as high and as far as he possibly could into a nearby grassy field. Since she

knew she was far faster and could easily catch up as before, she chased after the last golden apple. But when she had found it and returned to the track he was far ahead and near the finish line. She ran faster than anyone had ever run before but he beat her. He won the race — not because he was a faster runner but because she could not resist the temptation of the golden apples.

Also in ancient times and writing in Greek, the Bible writer James wrote about temptation in James 1:13-15. He wrote:

*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.*

In explaining how temptation turns into sin, James says that the first step is refusing responsibility. "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone."

It all goes back to the Garden of Eden. In God's perfect creation he placed only one limitation. He told Adam and Eve to enjoy everything that God had made with the single exception of the fruit of one tree called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He warned that its fruit was deadly.

After they decided to sin and ate the fruit God came and confronted them. They acknowledged what they had done. Adam answered as creatively as a new sinner could and said to God that it was "the woman that you put here with me. She's the one who gave me the fruit of that tree and I ate it."

Now it's not the least bit unusual for a man to blame his wife for things that he has done wrong but in this particular case he was really blaming God. He was saying that it was because God had put Eve there with him that all of this happened. If God had not set him up for this kind of sin it would

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not have happened and therefore God was the one who was responsible.

Eve gave a different answer but communicated much the same thing. She no more accepted the blame than did her husband. She said, “The serpent lied to me and that’s why I ate it.”

Our foreparents established a long human tradition of refusal to accept responsibility for human misbehavior. We are all prone to make up excuses and to lay blame on others, especially God.

What we fail to understand is that God is the absolute opposite of evil. God isn’t even tempted by it. God hates evil and hates to see others tempted to do evil. We need to understand that when we sin, we are responsible for our behavior. It’s true that other people do things that affect us. It’s true that God created Eve as Adam’s companion and it’s true that the serpent did lie to Eve. But Adam and Eve were fully responsible for their own response and for the decisions that they made.

If ever there was a time when this teaching from God fits, it is today in America. We have become a nation of self-declared victims. Whatever is wrong in our lives we attribute to someone else. We are quick to blame our parents, schools, churches, the government or our employers and are extremely slow to accept responsibility for ourselves.

We need to admit that the reason we steal is not because somebody else left the money on the table. The reason we lust is not because of the way another person looks. The reason we do what we do is because of ourselves. It’s not God’s fault and it’s not somebody else’s fault that we are tempted by evil. It is our fault.

Whether it is a recovery program or when becoming a Christian, the first step is to admit that we are responsible for our behavior and not someone else. Unless we can get past blaming God or others, we are not far along in conquering any habit or becoming Christians. Not that temptation itself is sin, because it’s not. But failure to accept responsibility is a significant first step in the progression from temptation to sin.

The problem is when we respond positively to evil. The idea that James is communicating probably comes out of his background as a fisherman. We are like fish swimming along in a lake when we see a fishing line with an attractive lure on the end.

The fish is tempted by the sparkle, goes over, takes a bite and gets hooked. If we keep on swimming by temptation we’re okay, but if we swim over to take a bite, we’ll get hooked.

Or as James 1:14 says, “each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.” It’s because we all have this inside problem of sin that James refers to as our “own evil desire.”

We have a kitten in our house that is fast becoming a full-grown cat. Her name is Carmen. One day when she was a fairly little kitten Carmen made an amazing discovery. She ventured to the top of the couch in our family room and glanced over and saw for the first time our fifty-five gallon aquarium with tropical fish. She was enthralled and stayed there for the longest time yearning for those fish. Now that she’s big enough to make the leap sometimes she even jumps on top of the aquarium and hangs over the side and watches those fish. I think she would do it by the hour if we did not chase her away.

Now, I don’t know whether tropical fish think or not, but if they do, every time they see that cat they should think how grateful they are for the glass! Because if it were not for the glass it would be only a swift movement of the paw and those fish would be lunch.

Deep down in the makeup of a cat is a very strong desire for fish. They are born with it. And just as cats desire fish, so humans desire evil. We are born that way. Fortunately we have laws and rules that are like glass to keep us from doing all the things that we are interested in doing.

Often people say that things are worse today than they were twenty-five years ago. Is there really more crime or do we just hear more about it? The answer may be that there are a lot more cracks in the glass of our society today. It isn’t that previous generations had less evil desire it’s just that there were more social and legal barriers keeping certain sins in check.

For those who would like to stop temptation from turning into sin, it is important to understand that responding positively to evil is a tragic second step. Pick a temptation, any temptation. If I respond positively to that temptation then I become like a fish that has changed its course and is swim-

ming for the lure and is at least considering biting onto the hook. It means I've taken a second step in turning temptation into sin. But when exactly is the moment when that temptation becomes sin? When does sin become sin?

According to James 1:15 it's when we decide to do it. "Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin."

Let's take income tax as an example. It's coming up to that time of year when people always complain that taxes are too high and they look for ways to reduce them. It occurs to you that if you don't report cash income there's really no way for the government ever to know you received it because there's no paper trail. Another thing you might think of is to increase your deductions by inflating the amount of charitable contributions you claim to have made. You figure that the chances are minuscule that you'll ever be audited as long as you stay in a reasonable range of contributions for your income level. Or you may be tempted with the idea of claiming a vacation trip as a business trip. You may have saved all the receipts and you can rationalize that one afternoon on the beach you remember thinking about the office.

Now thinking those things are temptation, but that's not sin. It's not sin to hear about the idea or to think about the idea but it becomes sin at the moment a decision is made to do it. In other words, we don't have to actually do it for it to be a sin.

The analogy that James uses here compares the conception and the birth of a baby. A baby doesn't have to be born to be a baby. Once a baby is conceived it is real and fully human as if it has been born. In the same way when a temptation has been conceived and a decision has been made to do it, then it has become a sin. Even though it may be a sin that is not yet born.

For example, a man may be tempted to sexual sin with a woman he sees. That is temptation. And then at some specific moment, he decides he's going to go for her. But she refuses him and he is stopped from doing what he has lusted and decided to do. It's like the cat hitting the glass wall of the

aquarium. Is it sin even if it doesn't actually happen? You bet it is. That's why Jesus taught that someone who lusts in his or her heart is guilty of adultery. Someone who hates in his or her head and decides to kill someone else is guilty of murder. Even if the plans don't work out that does not make it any less sin as far as God is concerned.

These are powerful, significant teachings about temptation and sin from the Bible. But let's not be stupid about how we apply them. There are some people who stretch the Bible's teaching to say that it doesn't make any difference whether a person actually commits a crime or not because they are just as guilty if they decided to do it. Now that may be true in terms of offending God. God is offended and it is a sin against God once we've decided to do what we are tempted to do whether we can pull it

off or not. But that is not true as far as community standards and criminal law are concerned. For example, if you decide tomorrow morning that you need some money and you're going to rob a

bank so you get your gun, fill your car with gas, put on your handkerchief and go; but when you get there, it's the wrong address and it's an empty lot — you don't pull it off. As far as the law is concerned you have not, in fact, robbed a bank and you're not guilty of anything. But as far as God is concerned, just because you got the wrong address doesn't make you less guilty of doing it.

If someone decides to have an affair with a co-worker or a friend and the liaison falls through but the spouse of the person intending that affair finds out about the intention, it is not grounds for divorce. There is a distinction between offending God and breaking the law in human terms. But what we tend to do in situations like that is to consider criminal law and human relationships most important and to somehow minimize the offense against God. But it's really a far greater a tragedy to offend God and to sin against him than to break any criminal law or any community standards. We need to understand that sin is serious stuff. Sin is death in the making.

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it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown gives birth to death.” Sin is deadly. Sin kills relationships. Sin destroys bodies. Sin wrecks lives. But most of all, sin offends God and kills our relationship with him.

Often it takes a long time. Just as it takes a baby a long time to grow up; just as smoking cigarettes today may not result in lung disease for thirty years; so most sin takes time to destroy a life. But that doesn't mean that we should ever forget that sin is deadly stuff.

In case we haven't understood — all of this tells us that God is against sin. He's not against us, he's not putting restrictions on us for arbitrary reasons, he isn't trying to limit our happiness. God is like a parent and good parents have to warn children of dangers that they would not see for themselves, of consequences that are far down the road of life. That is why God carefully warns us how temptation can turn into sin.

Knowing that we are born with evil desires that draw us to sin like a fish to the hook is bad news. But best of all, there's good news – good news that Jesus told us how to stop all this from happening. The night before he was to die he gathered his best friends together and they went to a garden called Gethsemane just outside the city of Jerusalem. Jesus knew that this was his last night and he went off by himself to pray and to prepare himself. He no doubt had mixed emotions of wanting to be with his best friends and wanting to be alone to deal with what he faced. While he was alone he prayed for himself but also for his friends. And then he did a startling thing. He interrupted his prayers to go and give them some final advice.

They say that the last words that a person consciously speaks before dying are often considered to carry more weight than all the words that have otherwise been spoken in a person's lifetime. And so it must have been very important to Jesus to speak what he knew would be counted as among his very last words to his very best friends. He told them to “watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation (Mark 14:38).” It was good advice — to watch and pray.

What are you most tempted to do that could turn into sin? What temptation do you feel is most

likely to hook you this week? Take Jesus' advice. First of all, watch out. Be on constant guard and avoid biting the hook. If it's the temptation to lose your temper, then when you feel it's going to happen bite your tongue or count to ten — just be ready. If it's lust, don't take a second look at the body of the person who tempts you. If it's greed, stop thinking about what you can get and start thinking about what you can give. But be sure to take the second piece of advice from Jesus — to pray. Make prayer a daily routine and specifically ask God to give you the strength to stop evil desires from turning temptation into sin. Ask him to put up the glass so that the temptation in your life will not turn to sin. Take the advice of Jesus to watch and to pray.

*Father, will you do that for us? It's so easy for us to slide into doing that which is wrong. Instead, Lord, help us to keep up our guard to watch out for turning temptation into sin. We pray that by your Spirit you will strengthen and protect us so that we may do that which is good and not that which is bad, what is right and not what is wrong, that the temptation may be stopped and that you may be pleased.*

*For Jesus sake, Amen.*

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