

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. 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. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

We have mentioned before that many people have the practice during the Lenten season of denying themselves something, as a means of remembering and appreciating all our Saviour did for us, as He gives up Himself for us. This is not something mandated or commanded in Scripture, so it is purely an issue of Christian freedom. If you do give up something, you are no better or no worse than those who do not.

But if this is your custom, have you ever noticed that the very thing you have denied yourself is suddenly right under your nose? It's like going on a diet: the day you do, the next door neighbour makes your favourite pie, and while they have never done this before, they bring it to you. If you have given up television, there is suddenly a special programme or your favourite movie showing for one night only. If you are trying to avoid chocolate, someone gives you a box of chocolate from Bernard Callebaut, or your favourite treat from Purdy's. If you are a pastor trying to cut out snacks, you will find treats at every call you make.

That urge or encouragement to do what we have said we will not do is called temptation. It isn't necessarily 'sinful' to eat that last cookie on the plate when you feel the desire to do so. It isn't necessarily wrong to veg out in front of the television, even though you could be doing something more constructive. Of course, circumstance and need can change innocent actions into wrongful actions. The child who is grounded from the television, but who gives in to the temptation to watch cartoons when mom is doing the shopping is, in fact, doing something sinful. They are disobeying their parents. The diabetic who eats lots of sweets is not only doing things that are not good medically; they are not caring for the body that God has given them.

Just as we speak of 'good cholesterol' or 'bad cholesterol', so in this epistle, James speaks of two different kinds of temptation. First, he speaks of the 'good temptation', the testing of our faith, which God uses to bring us closer to Himself. James says: *“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”* (James 1:2-3, ESV) This is the kind of temptation or test that we heard about in the Old Testament lesson, where God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac. This is also the “good temptation” that James refers to when he says: *Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.* But in the rest of our text, James is dealing with the other understanding of temptation. He speaks of that temptation which is the overwhelming urge or desire that comes up in us and moves us to do that which is wrong in God's sight. In our lives as God's people we will have to deal with both these temptations. And while God uses the 'good temptation' to test our faith, we can be sure that He, who cannot be tempted by evil, has nothing to do with the evil seductions that come into our lives. It isn't His fault - but He fixes our failings, as He gives us that perfect gift from above: He gives us His Son to free us from sin and its power over us.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask, *“lead us not into temptation”*. I suppose it is possible to hear those words and to think, as did the ancient rabbis, that God sets forth the evil impulse in man, but then gives the law as the cure for this temptation. That is not what Jesus teaches us in the prayer. It is not the message of Scripture. In our text, James says it so clearly: *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. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.* Luther writes in the Catechism: *God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.* (Small Catechism, 6th Petition)

The problem is that we don't easily overcome the temptations of our lives. We are like the little boy, whose mother went out to run some errands. She told her son, "while I am gone, don't get into the cookies." "No, Mother, I won't," he promised. Yet when she returned, the mother noticed cookie crumbs on his clothes and around his mouth. "Didn't I tell you not to get into the cookies, Johnny?" "Yes, Mother, you did." "And Johnny, didn't I tell you that when Satan tempts you, you should tell him to get behind you?" "Yes, but when he got there, he pushed me right to the cookie jar."

We like to excuse our actions by saying "the devil made me do it". The devil does have a very prominent role in our temptation to evil. The devil is the tempter. His desire is to do everything he can to mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great sins. The devil wants to lead us from God and from the life God wants us to have with Him. As He tempted Adam and Eve, so the devil continues to work to lead us away from the blessings that are ours through faith and through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, the devil has great allies in his work, especially our fallen, sinful nature. He taps into our sinful heart; using the world around us he tempts us so that we will forsake God. And he is good at what he does! According to the Greek myth, Achilles, the great hero of the Trojan War, was dipped as a child in the waters of the river Styx by his mother to make him invulnerable. The result of that plunge was that every spot on Achilles' body was protected against wounds, except the heel by which his mother had held him. For many years Achilles escaped unhurt, until the poisoned arrow of Paris found the weak spot and inflicted the death wound there. In the same way, Satan tempts us where we are the weakest. Having found our pet inclinations, passions, and desires, he attacks at the weak spots and is unusually successful.

We also like to excuse ourselves by blaming God for the temptations that overwhelm us. God, you made me so that I like chocolate so much. You made us to be sexual beings and you made us with the drives and urges in us. It is all your fault. But it isn't his fault. James makes us look back inside ourselves. It is our own desire, our own weakness that tempts us. And things go from bad to worse. James tells us: ***Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.***

As the baptized children of God, we are both redeemed saints and sinners. Redeemed by His grace in Jesus Christ, we want to live as the people of God. We want to ***"proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."*** (1 Peter 2:9, ESV) But we are still sinners. As sinners, our hearts and minds are not focussed on the things of God. They are focussed on the things of the world. They are focussed on ourselves. That is not God's fault. It is a weakness brought into us by sin that the devil exploits. Left unchecked, the temptations of our lives bring forth sin, and sin will result in both the physical death of this world and our eternal death in hell.

It isn't God's fault that we are sinners, but He fixes it. James doesn't simply remind us that God has no part in evil. He assures us: ***"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures."*** We know that the greatest gift to come down from above is Jesus Christ, the gift of God Himself in human flesh and blood. We have a God who not only cannot be tempted by evil, but a God who rescues us from evil and the temptations the devil brings into our lives. In the book of Hebrews we are told: ***"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."*** (Hebrews 4:15, ESV) We were reading the words of our Gospel lesson in our office devotions this week, and noted that Mark says that after Jesus was baptized, ***"The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan."*** (Mark 1:12-13, ESV) Unlike Adam and Eve in the Garden, or you and I in our daily struggles, Jesus didn't succumb to those temptations. He was driven by the Spirit to that place of temptation, so that we can have the confidence the Scriptures bring us: ***"For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."*** (Hebrews 2:18, ESV) Yes, He does help us. It isn't His fault, but He fixes it, even when the temptations defeat us. He was, and is, doing whatever it takes to give us the victory, even to the point of dying for us on the cross. He gave His life to free us from sin and its power. He died to bring us the forgiveness which frees us. He lives to give us life. And He is with us to help us stand against the evil attacks of the devil. With His help and strength, we don't have to give in or fail in the face of temptation. We are more than victors through the grace of God, given to us in the dying and rising Christ.

God may tempt us, in the sense of testing our faith, because our faith benefits from the test. But He will not tempt us to evil. That temptation comes from the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh. Yet even when there is temptation, we are blessed to have the Saviour, who is with us to get us through. As Paul says: ***"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."*** (1 Corinthians 10:13, ESV) Yes, that Saviour who died for you rose to help

you through it all. How blessed we are to know His promise: *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.* Amen.