

Undivided in temptation

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[0 : 00] of eternal life. And by your word of truth this morning, would you pierce our hearts, would you convict us, and would you lead us back to the cross that we might live for you.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. I can resist everything except temptation. That's what one of the characters say in the play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, written by Oscar Wilde, one of the most famous Irish writers of the 19th century.

Certainly that seemed to be true of Wilde's own life. He willingly got entangled in an affair of a homosexual nature while he was still married. I can resist everything except temptation.

I'll go back over a thousand years before Wilde was born to a different continent and meet Augustine, who will go on to become one of the church's most prominent theologians.

But before he was converted, he was sleeping with woman after woman. He knew it was wrong, but he couldn't bring himself to give it up.

[1 : 13] Famously, he prayed to God, Lord, make me pure, but not yet. Deliver me from my sin, but let me just enjoy it for a little while more, okay?

Both Wilde and Augustine helpfully illustrate the problem before us. We know we're supposed to hate sin, right? Because, well, sin is sin, so sin is somehow bad, so it's a no-no, right?

In our quiet times, we read a verse like Psalm 97, verse 10, let those who love the Lord hate evil, or maybe Romans chapter 12, verse 9, hate what is evil, cling on to what is good.

And we know what we're supposed to do. But there's a problem. It's like this. When you put a big bag of chisels in front of me, I'll happily finish it all off, even though it's bad for me.

When you're supposed to be studying for an important exam or doing an important project, you're happily browsing the internet and generally trying to procrastinate, even though it's bad for you.

[2 : 31] Why? Because it feels good. It gives you pleasure. In that very moment, it feels satisfying.

Lord, make me pure. But not yet. And that's the problem. We're supposed to hate sin, but we don't. Because sin feels good. Of course it does. You don't sin out of duty. You don't say, oh, I need to go and sin now.

It's what I'm supposed to do, like brushing my teeth. No, you and I sin out of delight. It feels good. At least for a while. And we like feeling good.

And the Bible doesn't deny this. The Bible is actually very realistic about how sin works. In Hebrews 11, verse 25, for instance, in the midst of talking about Moses' faith, the Bible uses this phrase, the fleeting pleasures of sin.

[3 : 44] The Bible knows sin is often pleasurable. And we would be foolish to deny that reality and pretend otherwise.

But as Christians, we know the Lord's command. Just because sin is pleasurable doesn't negate Romans 12, verse 9.

Hate what is evil, cling on to what is good. The question we ask, therefore, is how? How can we face temptation and sin when it's so powerful, when pleasure is its weapon?

Is it just a question of saying, no, don't touch, don't taste, don't drink? Anyone with small children will soon know that that approach doesn't work.

We need something more. We need something greater. We need something deeper. Well, here comes Pastor James.

[4 : 52] And Pastor James' big concern for us is that we be undivided in our faith, that we be undivided in living for Jesus. And so last week, he started us off by discussing one big barrier that could stop us from doing that.

the reality of trials. Trials and sufferings, he said, are not good in themselves. But they can be good in growing and deepening and maturing our faith.

And they will come. Christians need to be told this again and again. The authentic Christian life will involve suffering. But the good news is found in James 1, verse 12.

Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

But there is another barrier that stops us from living for Jesus. And it's this. The pool of temptation. And trials and temptations often go together.

[6 : 05] Financial difficulty or sickness can cause us to question God's goodness and providence and tempt us to seek ungodly alternatives.

Unfair treatment can cause us to question God's justice and tempt us to lash out at others in equally ungodly ways. And while trials come from outside us, they're external, temptations come from inside us, they're internal.

And so Pastor James now turns his attention to this matter. How can we face temptation and sin when it's so powerful? And in this little section, just six verses, he offers us two pieces of counsel to equip us.

Firstly, he says, don't buy into sin's web of lies. Instead, be enthralled by God's word of truth. So let's listen to Pastor James.

Firstly, he says, don't buy into sin's web of lies. Now, sin is a master strategist. He's like the canthow viper, a snake found in South America.

[7 : 27] This viper has a bright yellow or whitish tip on its tail which it moves around so that it resembles a wriggling worm. And when its favourite prey is attracted and approaches the so-called worm, it strikes.

And that's the end of the bird or the lizard. But if the prey were to know of the viper's tricks, it would know how to avoid being consumed.

And it's the same with us. When we are ignorant of how sin works, we fall into its traps more easily. But if we can see what's actually happening, if we know how sin works to entangle us, we can build up our defences and be better equipped to fight.

And so that's what James does in verses 13 to 16. He helps us to understand how our sin pulls us in so that we won't buy into sin's web of lies.

And we can summarise the workings of sin in five D's. First D, deception. James summarises his counsel simply in verse 16.

[8 : 50] Don't be deceived, my brothers and sisters. Because that's how sin primarily works. By deception. By temptation.

Now, what is temptation? temptation? It's actually not that easy to define, but here's my attempt at coming up with one definition. It's on your outline.

And appeal to the inclination of our hearts to do what is evil in God's sight. It's an offer. It's a proposal.

It's an invitation coming sometimes in a loud voice, other times in a whisper, suggesting a certain path to follow. It's when the viper wriggles his tail.

Or when somebody holds out the chisels in front of me and says, come, eat. And one of the biggest ways sin tries to deceive us is by constantly whispering to us, it's never your fault.

[10 : 00] That's attractive, isn't it? to never have to say that it's us who's at fault. After all, it's always easier to blame others.

Back in Genesis 3, after God asked Adam whether he has indeed eaten from that tree he's not supposed to, Adam moves into blame shifting mode.

The woman, the woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit. In other words, God, it's not my fault. Who asked the woman to be so careless?

I wasn't the one who went to the tree and plucked the fruit. Very easy to do, isn't it? And sin goes even further by whispering in the ears of our hearts.

Maybe it's God's fault. Often it's done not in direct terms, but through insinuation. Look again at what Adam says, the woman you put here with me.

[11 : 13] In other words, Adam is saying, hey God, don't forget, it was you who created Eve. It was you who made her so gullible.

It was you who gave her to me as my partner. So don't blame me. We can so easily echo Adam, can't we?

God, it was you who put me in this situation. God, it was you who created these circumstances. God, you made that person like this.

What could I do? Not that Eve is any better. The serpent deceived me, she protests. And by the way, wasn't it you who created the serpent?

But James is clear. This is wrong thinking. This is self deception. Verse 13, when tempted, no one should say, God is tempting me, for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.

[12:30] We're given the reason why we cannot say God is tempting me. Remember who God is. He's not like human beings.

He's not temptable. In other words, sin is not something that makes his heart go pumping, or makes his pulse race, or makes him go on the high.

So, it doesn't make sense that God will get us to do something that grieves him and goes against everything that he stands for.

God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. If I may use a millennial expression for a moment, he's not trolling us.

He's not one of those people on TV shows where they play pranks on the unsuspecting public, all for the sake of a few laughs. He's not tempting us as if this was all a game to him.

[13:35] God is not to blame, James says. Who is then? Well, this leads us to our second desire.

Look at verse 14. But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and entice.

Notice that it's as each person is tempted by their own evil desires. We have to take responsibility. We have to take ownership. I've been describing sin so far as if it were a bit of an external force. But actually sin comes from within us.

Circumstances might be the occasion for sin and even the catalyst for sin but they are not the cause of sin. We are.

[14:36] Perhaps I should say that again. Circumstances might be the occasion for sin and even the catalyst for sin but they are not the cause of sin.

We are. You see we have desires. That's not the problem. Unlike strict Buddhists who consider desire itself to be the root of everything that is wrong with the world we do not say that desire is bad in itself.

The problem is what we are desiring. When the thing we are desiring is wrong off limits or pushes God off his rightful place at the center of our lives that's when desire becomes evil and that's what sin goes for.

And we must never forget these evil desires are our own. We can't even blame the devil. Now the devil is active in this world and he will certainly have his own tricks.

We'll hear about him in chapter 4 later on. But James is clear that we must own responsibility for our sin. Have you ever heard people talk about casting out the demon of greed or the demon of pride or something like that?

[16:02] The problem with that is that it externalizes sin, making it something outside of us that simply possesses us, not something inside of us that actively emerges from our hearts.

Indeed, the scriptures never talk about greed or pride or any other sin that way, not even a single time. When we do that, sin has successfully deceived us into thinking we are not personally responsible.

sin and sin works by pairing deception and desire together. Deception always involves attraction. You won't be deceived if you are not attracted. And so sin appeals to our disordered desires. Look at how James describes the process.

Let me read verse 14 again. But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Now when you go fishing, you arm yourselves with bait to entice the fish.

[17:18] And once you hook them, well, you've got them. You simply just drag them out. And sin is a master fisherman. He knows just how to get you and I hooked.

He knows which bait to use. He knows what we find attractive and desirable. And so the moment we know we are being tempted, we mustn't play around.

We need to treat it seriously. If we don't, we're being stupid. This week, Chinyin was telling me about something that she read in the newspaper about some friends who went into a jungle somewhere to look for the wrong assam.

And they came upon a snake and for fun, they decided to poke it, thinking themselves invulnerable. Two of them are dead.

When we poke at temptation and sin, we are being just as foolish. And we must never think that we are beyond temptation.

[18 : 32] Notice that James starts off verse 13 by saying when tempted. He doesn't say if tempted. All Christians can expect temptation.

No matter what stage of the Christian life they're at. James doesn't say when you are tempted in the first 20 years of your life. He doesn't say when you are tempted while you have little knowledge of doctrine or your immature.

No, there are no exceptions. When tempted. Pastors are tempted. King David was tempted. Jesus himself in his human nature was tempted.

Temptation comes to everyone. And so we must never think that we weren't tempted or worse, can't be tempted regardless of where we are at in the Christian life, whether we've been Christians just for five days or for 50 years.

But on the other hand, if temptation comes to every Christian, well, we don't need to be ashamed when we are tempted.

[19 : 51] tempted, we shouldn't take it as a sign that we are somehow lousy Christians, as if strong Christians are never tempted. We don't need to be embarrassed, even if the things we are tempted by might seem shameful to others.

What we do need, however, is to be aware of our third deep, deliberation. when do you know that you are poking and playing around with the snake?

When do you know if you are hooked by the master fisherman? It's when your mind begins to deliberate on these desires. It's when your imagination moves into a higher gear.

It's when you begin to dwell on what potential reward you might get from following the path that sin is inviting you on. And where your mind goes, your affections will soon follow.

That's why James says in verse 15, that after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. You know your hook when you decide to click on that link that popped up on your computer because the image that accompanied the link was so tantalizing.

[21 : 12] And you begin to consider that it's just harmless pleasure if you click through and view a few more images. you know your hook when you're indulged in that satisfied feeling you get if you just unleash all your anger at your irritating classmate or your irritating colleague or your naughty children.

You know your hook when you're daydreaming about the approval you get from your boss and your peers, driving you to work so hard at your career that time with God and with your church family gets sacrifice.

It's at this level where many of the battles of the Christian life takes place. Perhaps you might protest, sure I think about them, but I'll never do them.

It's okay just to fantasize a bit, isn't it? But when we do this, we are doing the equivalent of leaving our front door and our front gate open so that robbers will come in.

And it shows how much we really treasure God and his commands. For we will guard what we most treasure. And we will naturally fix our minds on what we worship.

[22 : 38] And that's why if we fix our minds on sinful desires, well, after desire has conceived, it so easily gives birth to sin.

So what is your mind fixed on? What is your heart dwelling on? And when our evil desires do conceive, we end up with our fourth D, disobedience.

we act out our desire, desire gives birth to sin. And that's dangerous because sin never just exists. It doesn't remain static. It grows. You can see that near the end of verse 15, where we are told that sin can be fully grown.

It's not a benign tumor that doesn't touch or invade other parts of the body, but a malignant tumor that divides uncontrollably, that grows and spreads its cancer.

[23 : 51] And just like malignant tumors, it eventually leads to the fifth D, death. Make no mistake, this is sin's ultimate goal.

Sin is a viper. Sin is a murderer. it disguises itself as pleasure, but it wants to eat you, consume you, and kill you.

Earlier in chapter 1 verse 4, if perseverance in trials were to finish its work, it will leave you mature and complete.

But here in chapter 1 verse 15, if sin was to finish its work, it will leave you shattered and dead. So don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Don't buy into sin's web of lies. Sin will do all it can to attract us, to appeal to our own evil desires, getting us to deliberate and then disobey, thus dragging us towards death.

[25 : 06] It will persuade us by twisting scripture, telling us, oh, God will forgive anyway, while ignoring the fact that God's design for us is to pursue holiness.

It will persuade us by downplaying its seriousness. I was only indulging in just a tiny sin. It won't really harm me or anyone else. It will persuade us that it isn't really a viper, but just a cuddly pet that you can keep around.

Don't buy into it. Pastor James says, at all times, remember the destination it's taking you to. And remember, just like it's better to fight cancer and tumors at the early stage, rather than the late stage, and so we need to fight sin at the early stage, at the level of desire, rather than when it's fully grown.

By then, it's usually too late. But Pastor James doesn't just stop there. He's too good a pastor for that.

He knows that it's not just enough to highlight the negatives of sin. He knows that we are creatures made with desires. Remember, we said earlier that desires in itself was not wrong.

[26 : 35] It's what we desire that matters. Or in this case, it's whom we desire. And so in verses 17 to 18, he endures that we turn our gaze from the pleasures of sin and fix our eyes to behold God in all his majesty and splendor, to see his generosity and love most tender.

And so secondly, James says, be enthralled by God's word of truth. Open your heart, James says, so that your desire is set upon God himself.

For as we fight sin, we must never forget the gospel. We must never forget that because of what Jesus has done, he has transformed us from people who love darkness, who naturally love evil, who are enslaved to sin, whose core is corrupted, into a new kind of human being.

Look at the beginning of verse 18. He, that is God, chose to give us birth through the word of truth. We are born again.

That means we are new humans with new kind of desires, new kinds of taste buds, new kinds of appetites.

[28 : 10] Our evil hearts used to produce evil desires, but thank God, through Jesus, through the gospel, through the word of truth, God has given us a total makeover.

We now want to please him. We now want to bless others. We now want to live for Jesus. If sin gives birth to death, God gives birth to new life in Christ.

So if you're in Christ, if you're born again, you have a new heart and a new nature, that is who you are.

But you are not yet part of the new world. You're not yet part of the new universe. That's why at the end of verse 18, we are a kind of first fruits.

We are awaiting the full harvest when all creation is renewed. But we are not yet there. That's why the old self remains with us.

[29 : 21] That's why we still have evil desires that emerge from within us. That's why we still have to keep battling sin and temptation. But because the gospel tells us we are new creations, that means we can keep fighting.

It is no longer inevitable that sin puts us on the fast track to death. So, as a new kind of human, we need to train our desires to be set on God.

And we do that by constantly reminding ourselves of who God really is through his word of truth. Remember how sin appeals to us by promising pleasure?

God is never the source of temptation, but always the source of good gifts.

He is never the tempter, but always the giver. He gives every good and perfect gift, and he has given the best and most perfect gift of all.

[30 : 40] Jesus. Now, we normally give gifts to mark an achievement or an occasion, like a birthday, or an anniversary, or a graduation.

But God didn't give his son on such an occasion. He gave us Jesus to be good.

God to bad people. And if he's given us Jesus in such circumstances, well, we can trust that every good gift will come from his hand, too.

We can trust that he showers us with every blessing, even in the midst of trials. And we can trust that he offers us superior, everlasting pleasure, compared with the fleeting, temporary pleasure of sin.

God And if we trust that this is who he is, we will desire him. After all, he is the God of all creation.

[32 : 06] He's the father of the heavenly lights, which is a bit of a strange expression, but simply means that he is the maker of all the stars. And that should take our minds back to Genesis chapter 1, where God created not just the stars, but the sun, the moon, and everything else.

And so he is infinitely more powerful than everything else in this world, including sin. And he cares for all that he has made.

He cares for you and me. And that's why he is father, not just maker of the lights. And so he is ever ready to aid you and me in our battle against sin.

And he is the father who never changes like shifting shadows, verse 17. He doesn't change mood, deciding to give you something good one day, but deciding to withhold something from you the next.

When he did not withhold his only son from us, we saw for ourselves how true that is. And he doesn't change because he himself already is the greatest good.

[33 : 30] You can't get any better than God himself. Why would God change when he is already the greatest good? What really should change is our perspective?

Imagine a child receiving a gift from his parents, maybe an Xbox or something. But imagine the child becomes so consumed with the gift that he goes into his room, he locks it, and then he enjoys his gift without ever speaking to his parents ever again.

But of course, that gift, that Xbox, is unable to produce life and love for him. Even if he doesn't necessarily see it at first.

In fact, the child cannot continue on without the care and the provision of his parents. The gift is good, but it's meaningless without the parents.

In that sense, the giver of the gifts is of greater worth than the gift. So it is with God.

[34 : 40] God He never stops giving, stops loving, stops providing. He's always good, even when we can't see it.

But if we only see his gifts, and not God himself, as the greatest good, then we rob ourselves of true satisfaction.

temptation, and we will find the pleasures of sin more desirable. But if we pursue God for who He is, if we marvel at Christ Himself, not whatever benefits we perceive we can get from Him, but we find true life.

We find abundant life. temptation, when we are ensured with God, we guard ourselves from deception and temptation, and we will be genuine firstfruits.

We can look forward to receiving the crown of life in the future, not the sentence of death.

Therefore, how do we face temptation and sin?

[35 : 54] We need to guard our affections. We need to see how sin works to ensure we are not trapped by its bait. We should name and confess sin specifically in our lives to God when we spot it.

We must bring our desires to God and ask Him to purify and transform them. And we must meditate on God as God as creator, as giver, as father who never changes.

And we allow His Holy Spirit to work on our divided hearts. So today, let's do that. Confess our sin, resolve to fight temptation, remember the future, and fix our eyes on God, the greatest good.

Let's pray. Go on, go on, go on. go on. He's from this story, and the holy baby. Let's pray.

Thank you.