

Let Trials Test You, Not Tempt You Pastor: Morgan Murray West Valley Church

Intro: We've been looking to James for sound wisdom about how to go through uncertain times and face an uncertain future. James has helped us reframe our current moment as:

- An opportunity to grow in Christ-likeness
- The right time to asking God for wisdom, knowing that God gives it generously, to all, with no hint of judgment or fault finding
- A chance to decide if our lives are going to be about pursuing God's abundant life or pursuing wealth.

This morning we will see how James addresses a key question that always comes up when we face trials: *Can any good come out of this?* The answer, we will see, is that **it depends on us**. It depends on how we respond.

Can any good come out of this?

Yes! IF we accept the test and reject the temptation.

Here's our text for the day:

James 1:12-18 (NRSV)

12 Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. 13 No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. 14 But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it; 15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. 16 Do not be deceived, my beloved.

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

Outline

We are facing some incredibly difficult trials right now, and we feel overwhelmed by them. But as way of making this conversation a bit more manageable and concrete, I will use a low-level, even silly example of a "trial" for illustrative purposes: Me, My kids, and My kitchen.

Example of a Trial: Me, My Kids, My Kitchen

[Describe the continuous struggle to get kids to help keep the kitchen clean.]

Here's the trial I face: *I am not getting my way*. When I don't get my way, I'm offended. But what part of me is offended? My heart? Not really. My mind? Not so much. No, it's my ego. That is, the part of me that is always on the look-out for when I look bad, when I feel disrespected, when I believe something is happening that is unfair to me. (My ego doesn't really care about injustice unless I am the one who is being treated unfairly.) And guess what? My kids have egos too! So it's a recipe for conflict.

**When there is a conflict, I have a choice.
I can REACT out of my ego,
or
I can RESPOND out of love.**

So here are my working definitions of a Trial, a Temptation, and a Test that help us see what James is driving at:

***Trial:* Any time my ego is offended.**

***Temptation:* My ego-offended (that is, unloving) reaction to any situation in which I am not getting my way.**

***Testing:* My God-empowered (that is, loving) response to any situation in which I am not getting my way.**

James wants his readers to understand that Trials are unavoidable, but we have a choice about what we do when we face them. A Trial can be an opportunity for testing, or an opportunity for temptation. Our choices decide the outcome.

Crazy as it may sound, for James the problem ISN'T the Trial. James is less worried about the very real persecution his Christian community is facing than he is concerned about what Christians may *be tempted to do* in reaction.

For many of us who have grown up on church, we hear the word "temptation" and we think of lustful cravings for food or drugs or sex. These are indeed temptations insofar as they are ways we numb ourselves in response to things like anxiety, fear, and loneliness. But James is probably not worried that his readers are going to react to persecution by partying. The temptations James has in mind include pursuing wealth as the way to solve their problems. We explored this idea last week. James is also concerned that his readers will be tempted to lash out at those who are mistreating them, to let hatred fuel their desire for retribution, and to let envy drive them to become covetous and jealous during economic hardship.

In the heat of the moment, we might even become convinced that God is the one causing all this. We ask ourselves: If God doesn't want me to **reacting** this way, why is God letting bad things happen to me? James makes it clear that temptation doesn't come from God, it comes from us. God can't be tempted to do evil or urge people toward evil. That is not God's nature or

character. The origin of temptation is a person's own misdirected, disproportionate desires or longings. The action of temptation is to drag away or entice. The choice to allow ourselves to react this way is ours. The choice to resist that urge is also ours. No matter how intense the trials are, we are always living in choice.

So when a Trial comes, there are one of two scenarios that can play out:

Scenario One

I face a trial

→ **I react by being tempted**

→ **Sin (settle for something less than God's best)**

→ **Death (separation from God-who-is-love)**

OR

Scenario Two

I face a trial

→ **I respond by being tested**

→ **Perseverance (holding out for God's best)**

→ **Mature and Complete, Lacking Nothing (receiving the Crown of Life)**

The Call

The goal, it seems to me, is to get better and better at noticing when we are feeling tempted, and to interrupt that as soon as possible. That way we can respond to it as a test and allow God make us more Christ-like.

For me, contemplative practices are incredibly important for this. When I spend a few minutes each day simply sitting in God's presence as God's beloved, it becomes much easier to notice when I am operating out of my own ego. (The Apostle Paul calls this living according to the flesh.) When I allow myself to accept that I am in the center of God's grace – which is flowing like a river all around me and gently moving me forward into God's loving and perfect will – it gets easier for me to notice when I am trying to push the river or swim against it's current. The more I practice centering prayer, the more I realize that nothing and no one can change the fact that I am being lavished by God's good gifts. I can lift my eyes up, knowing that every good gift is from above.

The work of noticing when we are being tempted is much harder when we aren't regularly in God's presence. But even if that isn't a regular practice to you, this week I challenge you:

Notice when you are being triggered.

Interrupt it.

Notice those activities in your life that cause you to become more angry, anxious, or apathetic. [For me, it's my FB feed.] When you notice them, interrupt them with this prayer:

**Lord, I turn again toward You and Your goodness.
Help me give to others what you give to me.**

I am a big fan of wise people, and Beth Moore is a very wise teacher and leader. This week on Twitter she highlighted how great the temptations are and how a Jesus-shaped life is still greater. She wrote:

Beth Moore on Twitter June 30 2020:

Gonna tell y'all something. You better have a plan. If you think you're gonna make it through this cultural climate unscathed, you're crazy. Leave your mind unprotected, it'll be a mudhold. Your heart, hate-infested. You'll be mad constantly. Foul-mouthed. Unforgiving. Merciless.

...People of Jesus must return to Jesus. To the simplicity of wholehearted devotion. To spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible reading, fasting, giving. To losing our lives in Christ so we can find them. The good life still comes from living the Jesus-life. It's love and self-giving.

Conclusion

I'll bet you've heard the Christian aphorism, "If you feel far from God, guess who moved?" This can be very misleading. It's not about distance. It's about a feeling. We are constantly being tempted to believe we are separate from God, somehow disconnected from God's love, and that we must "fix the problem." James wants us to know that *we are never separated from God's love*. James wants to understand: There is no distance problem, just a perception of it. And if you perceive that God is absent from your sufferings and difficulties (or, worse yet, that God is *causing* them) then you will be sorely tempted to operate as if you are on your own. This leads to hatred, greed, and envy. What happens then? We feel even MORE separated from God and others. And the downward cycle continues. Where does this train stop? Total separation – that is, death.

The most wonderful news of all is that if we ever interrupt this, stop dead in our tracks, and turn around to face the other way- the way back toward God - what do we discover? We are shocked to see that that God is right there! God is present. God isn't a million miles away, expecting us to somehow make the long and impossible journey back. This turning leads to the revelation that – regardless of how bad our circumstances have become – we are still right where God can meet us. In an instant, we can go from being lost to being found. Isn't this what Jesus meant when he began his ministry with the one-sentence-sermon: *Turn around, because the Kingdom of God is at hand* (Matt 3:2)?

God is both the One who gives wisdom generously, to all, without finding fault and the One from whom every good thing comes.

We are the Ones who get to choose. Amen.