

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
James #4
August 9, 2015

Sermon Summary #4

No, the Devil didn't make You do it, and neither did God James 1:13-18

It's a refrain we've all heard countless times.

- "Officer, it wasn't my fault. That idiot behind me was following too closely and if I hadn't broken the speed limit he would probably have hit me from behind."
- "Well, if I wasn't supposed to fornicate, why did God give me sexual urges?"
- "Honey, I'm telling you that I would never have had one too many drinks if it hadn't been for Joe and all my friends. I couldn't very well have been the only one not to go into that bar. What would they have thought of me then?"
- "Now, listen, Lord. The only reason I fell into lust is because she kept wearing those super skinny jeans to work. You wouldn't believe how much that woman tempts all the guys in the office."
- "Yes, Your Honor, I stole the money. But I really didn't have much of a choice. After all, my former boss is a real jerk and he fired me without a reason. I can't help it if my family and I have to eat. It isn't my fault that my kids get hungry."
- "I would never have used profanity like that if he hadn't first called me a 'bleeping-you-know-what.'"
- "God, you could have healed me if you wanted to. If I got angry and cursed you, you've only got yourself to blame."
- "I didn't want to go over the limit on my credit card. But they made the display window so appealing that I just couldn't resist."
- "OK. I'll tell you why I committed adultery. The Devil made me do it!"

If you haven't yet figured out what my message today is about, it comes down to this: ***"When you and I yield to temptation, we have no one to blame but ourselves."*** No one. Not God. Not the Devil. Not your mom and dad for having raised you in an abusive home. Not your fifth-grade school teacher for having humiliated you in front of the entire class. Not the actors in the movie you watched, even though you knew you shouldn't have. ***The ultimate responsibility for sin lies in the individual human heart.***

Whenever I think of this it reminds me of Daniel Webster, who served as Secretary of State under President Millard Fillmore. He was having dinner one night with several friends when one of them asked him: "Mr. Webster, will you tell me about the most important thought that ever occupied your mind?" After a brief moment of silence, Webster replied: "The most important thought that ever occupied my mind is that of my individual responsibility before God."

Your answer to such a question may well be different, but Webster does have a point. How many of us reflect deeply on our personal responsibility before God? I suspect that the answer is, "Not a lot," especially given the fact that ***"passing the buck"*** is second nature to the human condition. Would that we all might identify with the words of Cassius in Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings" (I.ii.134).

As much as we try to evade it, deny it, or shift it to someone else, moral responsibility will not go away. As you know, when Harry S. Truman took office as our 33rd president he placed on his desk a small plaque with the words: "The Buck Stops Here!" In like fashion, James would have us, whenever we sin, place our hand upon our hearts and confess: ***"The Spiritual Buck Stops Here!"***

But why does James talk about this topic here, now? After all, he's been focusing on the subject of trials and adverse circumstances and how we are to respond with joy when hardship and pain come our way. The answer is found in

the nature of “trials” and the particular Greek word used by James. It’s important for you to know that the word James uses in James 1:2 that is translated “trials” is simply the noun form of the verb translated “tempted” in James 1:13. Clearly, this word has a double meaning.

(1) In contexts such as James 1:2 the word refers to an **external** affliction: pressures of life, persecution by the non-Christian world, financial stress, ridicule, and the like. That is why we translate the word as “trial”. The purpose of such trials is to test the quality of our faith and to purge and refine our commitment to God and to reveal the depth of sincerity in our love for him. This is the sense in which the word is used in vv. 2-12. James concludes in v. 12 by saying: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under *trial*.”

(2) But in v. 13 and following he uses the word to refer to an **internal** solicitation to sin and evil. Thus, it is best translated “temptation” instead of “trial” and refers to something more sinister and morally threatening. Our response to “trials” is “joy”. Our response to “temptations” is resistance and abhorrence. The result of “trials” in vv. 2-12 is endurance and the crown of life. The result of “temptations” in vv. 13-15 is sin and death.

But what is James’ point in alerting us to the shift in meaning? Simply this: Due to our weak and fallen condition, **external trials can often become the occasion for internal sin**. When external trials descend upon us we all too often react not with joy and endurance but with bitterness and rebellion. When that happens, says James, don’t blame God. If what God intended for your spiritual maturity and growth becomes the occasion for your sin, be certain of this: **It is your fault, not his**. Whatever truth there may be in the fact that God tests our faith, and he does, let no one dare lay on him the blame for the sin which may result.

What James is denying is not that God **tests** our faith. What he is denying is that God **tempts** us in order to cause us to fall into sin. God’s design is to strengthen our faith, not to solicit sin.

James’ purpose is not merely negative in this passage, but also positive. He not only denies that God is the source of temptation, he also affirms that he is the source of everything good. The paragraph we’re looking at today is an incredible study in contrasts:

- (1) In v. 13, temptation is **not** from God. In v. 17, every good gift **is** from God.
- (2) In v. 14, man’s **desire** issues in **sin**. In v. 18, God’s **desire** issues in the **new birth**.
- (3) In v. 15, human sinful activity produces **death**. In v. 18, divine righteous activity produces **life**.
- (4) In v. 13, God cannot be touched by **evil**. In v. 18, God is alone the source of all **good**.

So, clearly, this paragraph falls into two parts: vv. 13-15 that deals with the origin of temptation, and vv. 16-18 that deals with the origin of all that is good.

The Origin of Temptation (vv. 13-15)

Let’s be honest with ourselves. Our problem isn’t simply that we commit acts of sin that we know to be wrong. But we add to the problem by denying or at least minimizing our responsibility for them. We blame God (after all, isn’t he sovereign over all things?). This started in the garden when Adam said to God: “The woman whom **you** gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). God then turned to Eve and said: “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The **serpent** deceived me, and I ate” (Gen. 3:13). As I’m sure you’ve heard said before: Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on!

If we can’t pin the blame on God, we blame our heredity: “My mom and dad set a bad example for me,” or “I was born this way so get off my back.” Of course, the tried and true fallback is to blame it all on Satan.

But it is with our tendency to accuse God that James is particularly concerned. His response to this accusation is found in v. 13. He’s not saying here that God is naïve or ignorant of the nature of evil, nor does he mean to say that people can’t put God to the test (we know that Israel did this repeatedly during their wilderness wanderings, and Jesus was three-times tempted by Satan). **His point is that if there is nothing in God that evil may assault, insofar as God is righteous and pure, then from what in God could evil possibly proceed? Since God is himself incapable**

of feeling an inclination to commit evil, he can't directly solicit it in the heart of someone else. So, James draws a conclusion about what God does or does not do, in this case, tempt a human to commit sin, based on who God is.

Well, if the source or cause of sin isn't in God, why do we sin? The answer is given in vv. 14-15.

It all begins with *"desire"* (v. 14b). This word doesn't necessarily mean evil desire. Context must determine if it is good or bad. The desire for *food* is good, but may become sin if it degenerates into gluttony. The desire for *sex* is good, but may all too easily be perverted into promiscuity outside of marriage. The desire to enjoy a good night's *sleep* is good, but becomes sin when it degenerates into sloth.

Where desire goes wrong is when a person is deceived into thinking that certain unlawful ways of satisfying it can do more for us than obedience to God can. This deception is what he has in mind when he speaks of being *"lured and enticed"* (v. 14b). Both of these words are taken from the world of the hunter and the fisherman. Just as one might "lure" his prey from its retreat and "entice" it with bait, so also we are deceived by temptation into thinking that it will satisfy us more than anything else can.

James then shifts his metaphor from hunting and fishing, in v. 14, to that of childbirth in v. 15. Temptation provokes elicit desire, desire conceives and gives birth to sin, and sin, once it has taken root in our hearts yields only death. Note the progression:

Desire ---- Deception ---- Disobedience ---- Death

Thus we see the vivid contrast of vv. 13-15 with vv. 2-12. God's purpose in sending us trials is to produce in us steadfast endurance, and by means of endurance proven character. And when such trials are successfully weathered, God in grace pronounces us blessed, the reward for which is the crown of life. Temptation, on the other hand, awakens desire in our hearts, and when our wills yield, sin is birthed, the ultimate effect of which is neither blessing nor life, but death.

The Origin of all that is Good (vv. 16-18)

James then turns the tables, as it were, and argues not only that God is not responsible for your sinful decisions but that he is responsible for all the good that you enjoy.

He begins in vv. 16-17 by appealing once again to God's nature. God's nature is holy and righteous, and that is why he cannot tempt us to sin. Now he tells us that God's nature is good and generous, and that is why he gives us all good gifts.

Stop for a moment and reflect on the "good" and "perfect" gifts from God that we so often take for granted.

The sense of awe and wonder on a clear, star-lit night.

The fragrance of freshly mowed grass.

The refreshment of ice-cold lemonade on a hot summer's day.

The laughter and encouragement of friends around the table as you share memories of events in your past.

The amazement of watching Kevin Durant and Russell Westbrook perform seemingly super-human feats on a basketball court.

The feeling of accomplishment after finishing a long and demanding assignment.

The soul-satisfying tangible presence of God during a worship service at Bridgeway.

The beauty of a well-crafted sentence.

The thrill of hearing the words, "I love you."

A hot fudge Sundae!

Baseball!

College football!

A lover's caress.

A friend praying for you at the side of your hospital bed.

The taste of honey.

Both the simplicity and complexity of music.

Bonfires.

The sound of cicadas in the summer.

The reassuring knowledge that nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ.

And so much, much more!

And you can rest assured that God will never change when it comes to his desire and determination to provide you with every good and perfect gift. His heart does not vary. His ways do not change. His character does not fluctuate as ours does. The language James employs of “*variation*” and “*shadow due to change*” was often used in the ancient world with reference to astronomical or heavenly phenomena. His point is that you look into the skies at one moment and you see the moon, only to look up a while later and it appears to have shifted. From our vantage point on earth it appears that these heavenly planets and stars and meteorites are constantly changing, something that will never happen with God.

And of all God’s “good” and “perfect” gifts do you know what the very best one is? It is new life in Christ! ***It is being born again from death into life through the Holy Spirit, by means of the Word of God.***

A Practical Guide to Resisting Temptation

Before I close I want to say a few words about the tactics of the world, the flesh, and the Devil when it comes to temptation. ***No, Satan cannot compel you to sin. But he works very hard to make it very easy for you to do so.*** How?

The focus of Satan’s efforts is always the same: to deceive us into believing that the passing pleasures of sin are more satisfying than obedience and trusting in the promises of God. But there is great diversity and insidious ingenuity in the way he goes about this task. It behooves us to become familiar with his tactics.

Remember first of all that ***temptation, in and of itself, is not sin.*** This is critically important, especially for those who suffer from an overly sensitive and tender conscience. Jesus was repeatedly tempted (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:15; Mt. 4), but he was sinless. ***We must resist thinking that we are sub-Christian or sub-spiritual simply because we are frequently tempted.*** The great reformer Martin Luther once said, “You can’t prevent the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.” His point is that a temptation only becomes a sin when you acquiesce to it, as it were “fondle” it and “enjoy” it.

Temptation is often strong because it comes in the form of ***an enticement to satisfy legitimate needs through illegitimate means.*** The strategy of Satan with Jesus in the wilderness is a clear example of this. Bread is not evil. Neither is the desire to alleviate hunger by eating it, especially after you’ve fasted for forty days! Divine protection is a valid promise in Scripture (Ps. 91). Authority over the kingdoms of the world is something God promised the Son long ago (cf. Ps. 2). ***The temptation, therefore, was aimed at seducing Jesus into achieving divinely approved ends by sinful and illegitimate means. Temptation is often strongest when relief or satisfaction seems to dress itself in the very sin that Satan is suggesting.***

As I noted earlier, the strength of temptation also comes from a tendency to push virtues to such an extreme that they become vices. For example, it is all too easy for the peace of quietness to become non-communication, or for industriousness to become greed, or for liberty to be turned into an excuse for licentiousness. We all know what it’s like for pleasure to become sensuality, or for self-care to become selfishness, or for self-respect to become conceit, or for wise caution to become cynicism and unbelief, or for righteous anger to become unrighteous rage, or for conscientiousness to become perfectionism. The list could go on endlessly, but I think you get the point.

Let’s now consider seven tactics employed by our enemy.

1. Satan especially likes to tempt us when our faith is fresh, i.e., when the Christian is only recently converted and thus less prepared to know how to resist his seductive suggestions. This is precisely Paul’s grounds for warning against the premature promotion of a new Christian in 1 Timothy 3:6. An elder, says Paul, must not be “a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.”

2. Satan especially likes to tempt us when our faith feels strongest, i.e., when we think we are invulnerable to sin. If we are convinced that we have it under control, we become less diligent. "*An unguarded strength*," said Oswald Chambers, *is a double weakness*".

3. Satan especially likes to tempt us when we are in an alien environment. Gordon MacDonald explains: "In the environs of home life with family and friends, there is a schedule of routines, a set of support systems, and a way of doing things, all of which lends encouragement to responsible living and, conversely restraint against irresponsible living. Virtually all of these external systems fall away when a person is hundreds of miles from home" (*Rebuilding Your Broken World*, 100).

4. Satan also likes to tempt us when our faith is being tested in the fires of affliction. When we are tired, burnt out, persecuted, feeling excluded and ignored, Satan makes his play. His most common tactic is to suggest that God isn't fair, that he is treating us unjustly, from which platform Satan then launches his seductive appeal that we need no longer obey. Physical pain, relational and financial loss, *when combined with the silence of heaven*, serve only to intensify the appeal of temptation.

5. Satan especially likes to tempt us immediately following both spiritual highs and spiritual lows. Periods of emotional elation and physical prosperity can sometimes lead to complacency, pride, and a false sense of security. When they do, we're easy targets for the enemy's arrows. The same thing happens during the doldrums when we find ourselves wondering if God even cares. We become bitter and despondent and sin suddenly seems the reasonable thing to do.

6. Perhaps Satan's most effective tactic in tempting us is to put his thoughts into our minds and then blame us for having them.

7. A related tactic of temptation is for him to launch his accusations as if they were from the Holy Spirit. In other words, he couches his terms and chooses his opportunities in such a way that we might easily mistake his voice for that of God.

So how do we distinguish between satanic accusation and divine conviction? Among other things, the former comes in the shape of condemnation that breeds feelings of hopelessness. We are told that our sin has put us beyond the hope of grace and the power of forgiveness. Satan's accusations are devoid of any reference to the sufficiency of the cross. Divine conviction for sin, on the other hand, comes with a reminder of the sufficiency and finality of Christ's shed blood, together with a promise of hope and the joy of forgiveness.

So how do we resist the enemy? Here are four suggestions.

1. The first and perhaps most important tactic for facing temptation is to embrace and pursue the simple truth that when our hearts beat with perpetual fascination with Christ and our thoughts are filled with the beauty and splendor and adequacy of God, little room is left for the devil to gain a foothold (see Phil. 4:8).

2. Know yourself. Ask the question often: "If I were the devil, where would I attack me?" In other words, be quick to identify your weaknesses, your vulnerable spots, areas where you've failed before, and take extraordinary steps to protect yourself in the future. If you are susceptible to the effects of alcohol, don't toy with a casual drink. If your fantasies are easily fueled by visual images, stay away from R-rated movies.

3. Deal radically with sin. In the words of Jesus, "if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell" (Matt. 5:29).

4. Confront and conquer temptation at the beginning, not at the end. In other words, the best and most effective tactic against temptation is to deal with it from a position of *strength*, before it has an opportunity to weaken you. Better to take steps up front to eliminate temptation altogether (if possible), than to deal with it later when your defenses are down.