

# ☒ GLEANINGS FROM THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

*Week One | July 14, 2019 | Temptation*

## PREPARATION

### ☒ GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's text, James 1:12–18. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

## THIS WEEK

### ☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God is not the author of temptation. Temptation arises from our own sinful hearts and entices us away from God and toward evil.

### ☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

Temptation's tricks lose their power when we hold fast to the absolute, unchanging goodness of God.

### ☒ MEDITATE

*"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" (James 1:17).*

## GETTING STARTED

+ *Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.*

Humans are experts at making excuses, especially lame ones. Reader's Digest chronicles some of the most ridiculous excuses on record that real people have used to get out of trouble.

A top aide to a governor once neglected to file tax returns for five years. His official excuse was that he suffers from a medical condition called late-filing syndrome, caused by depression. And even though this depression did not stop him from being a highly functional professional or enjoying an active social life, it did seem to affect his ability to pay taxes—five years in a row. In response to this excuse, the American Psychiatric Association told the New York Times that late-filing syndrome is not recognized as a psychiatric condition.

A congressman was pulled over by a cop and blew a 0.17 on the Breathalyzer, which is more than twice the legal limit. Once he recovered from the hangover, he told officials that his high blood-alcohol level was the result of the alcohol-based hand sanitizer he used. The cops, the DA, and the press quickly convinced him to change his plea of DUIHS (driving under the influence of hand sanitizer) to a regular DUI.

E-harmony, the famous online dating site, recognizes that breaking-up is difficult to do and has kept record of some of the most creative excuses:

*My dog has been suffering from depression, and I really think he and I need some time together.*

*My friend is going to be on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire and I'm her phone friend, and you know what these shows are like. They could ring anytime.*

*The football season has just started. I'll call you when it's ended.*

Excuses are attempts to lessen the blame attached to a fault or an offense. They are a means of justifying, or exonerating, oneself. Ever since childhood we have learned the fine art of making excuses. Someone always started it first. There is always some reason. Something always made you do it.

Sometimes, we can twist our theology to help us out with our excuse-making. Say, for example, as a child you learn that God is in control over everything. You learn that nothing happens outside of His purposes, that He is Lord over all. This is a big concept for a little kid, but not impossible to grasp in a general sense. Sometime later, when you fall into some kind of mischief, that weighty doctrine of God's sovereignty comes to mind. *If God is in control over all things, you reason, He must have made me do it! Perhaps you had a wiser person in your life who corrected you. It wasn't God who made you do it, it was your own heart.*

But then you grow up. Nothing really changes, except the excuses get a bit more sophisticated.

*If life weren't so disappointing, I wouldn't have gone to this for comfort.*

*If I didn't have \_\_\_\_\_ to deal with, this wouldn't be an issue.*

*If God would only give me \_\_\_\_\_, I'd never struggle with this.*

*If God hadn't allowed these circumstances, I wouldn't have lost it.*

In each of these excuses, God may not be viewed as the direct cause of our sin, but He is certainly considered the indirect cause. Because of something God allowed or did not allow, we see ourselves being in a situation that warrants, or at least justifies, some sort of sinful action on our part. Sin can even feel like an opportunity for self-expression or a sense of personal agency in the midst of circumstances that are outside of our control. In the first chapter of his epistle, James takes this bad excuse off the table for us. God never invites His children to sin. He is not tempted by evil, nor does He tempt to evil. We sin when we allow our desires to be enticed away from God toward evil. There are no outside excuses because sin is an “inside” job.

🔗: *Can you think of a ridiculous excuse you’ve made or heard from someone else?*

🔗: *What do you think is the difference between a legitimate excuse and a lame excuse?*

🔗: *Consider the sins you struggle with. Do you find yourself tolerating them, or at least recognizing why they have a presence in your life, because of surrounding circumstances?*

## 📊 UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. WHERE TEMPTATION COMES FROM (1:12-13)
2. HOW TEMPTATION WORKS (1:14-15)
3. HOW TEMPTATION IS OVERCOME (1:16-18)

## GOING DEEPER

+ This next section will help show what God’s Word says about this week’s particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week’s biblical truth.

## WHERE TEMPTATION COMES FROM

### 📊 JAMES 1:12-13

Q: *What do you think it means to stand steadfast in trial?*

Q: *According to James, why can we never say God tempts us?*

James begins his epistle by talking about trials and suffering. We are taught to think that when we do things right, good things will happen to us. When something goes wrong, we need to look at what we did wrong to cause it. This was the advice of Job's friends who suggested their suffering friend must have done something to bring on his pain (Job 4–31). While examining our actions and paying attention to their consequences is important, the Bible teaches us that life is not just about the forces of karma or the mechanics of cause-and-effect. There is a sovereign, personal God who is actively working in our lives to produce something far deeper than a problem-free life. He is primarily interested in transforming us into the image of His Son.

We are his workmanship (Ephesians 2:10), and God is so confident in His work that He is willing to expose it to testing. While God does discipline His children, we learn from Job that the presence of suffering in our lives does not always mean we have done something wrong, but it does always mean God is at work through it. Suffering is not evidence that God has abandoned us. Rather, it is a confirmation of His promise that nothing can separate us from His love for us and that He will never leave us or forsake us. Therefore, when we face trials, rather than primarily figuring out how to get out of them, James says we should seek to be steadfast within them. God is using them to bring about the completion of His good work in us (Philippians 1:6).

There are two kinds of testing in the Christian life. The first, as we see in verse 12, is the testing of trial. The second is the testing of temptation. James does us a great service by addressing these two types of testing alongside each other, because they are often connected in our lives. When we experience suffering, we are especially vulnerable to temptation. Hardship naturally inclines us to look for comfort. We respond to pain and brokenness by searching for joy and beauty. When pressed by the weight of suffering, we naturally seek relief and rest. These things are not wrong, but the question is *where* we look for them.

Just as God does not abandon us in trials, He also does not abandon us in temptation. However, James wants to make something very clear to us. There is a difference between God testing us and God tempting us. While God is present with us in temptation, He is not the tempter. As Sinclair Ferguson says, "God tests his workmanship through the rigors of life, but he never, ever, ever solicits his children to sin."

Not only does James tell us that God doesn't tempt us, he also gives the reason such an idea is illogical. God and evil have nothing to do with each other. God is, of course, aware of sin, but it is foreign to Him. God is wholly good and His ways are perfect (Psalm 18:30). Therefore, God cannot sin, nor can He entice someone to sin. To do so would go against His very nature.

If temptation cannot come from God, then where does it come from? In verse 14, James hands us a mirror. We are tempted when we are enticed by our own sinful desires. Now, desire in itself is not sinful. In fact, Scripture emphasizes how desire draws us to God. David writes, "Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word" (Psalm 119:12–16). David doesn't just think what God says is right, he sees it as beautiful, attractive, and desirable. He doesn't obey God's Word just because he knows that's what He is supposed to do; his imagination is completely captured by it. He is preoccupied with it and drawn to it.

Desire is a vehicle that takes us to whatever it is we find attractive. The vehicle of desire is never parked in the garage. It is always moving, and we are always in it. In other words, we never experience a state where we are utterly lacking desire. To be human is to desire. That's how God made us. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon entreats his son to chase after Lady Wisdom instead of Lady Folly. Solomon does not advise his son to sit still at home; he encourages him to chase, but he tells him that what he is captivated by determines the direction of his chase. If he is captivated by Lady Folly, he will run to her. But, if Lady Wisdom is beautiful and attractive to him, he will pursue her. Throughout the book, Solomon tries to get his son to see just how beautiful Lady Wisdom is so his desire will be for her alone. Desire is a powerful engine that draws us to what we love. When what we love is God, desire takes us to Him. When what we find lovely is sin, it takes us in the completely opposite direction.

🔍: *Look at Genesis 3:1-7. How did the serpent redirect Eve's desires away from God to something else? Why was he successful?*

🔍: *Based on what we've learned in these verses, what do you think is the best remedy for disobedience?*

## HOW TEMPTATION WORKS

### 📌 JAMES 1:14–15

**Q:** *What different stages of sin's development does James outline in verses 14–15?*

In verses 14–15, James gives us slow-motion footage of sin. In real-time, the temptation-to-sin process happens very quickly, but James wants us to take a close look at each stage of development so we can become deeply acquainted with every detail. Rather than being caught off guard or ignorant to how temptation works, James wants us to be experts in identifying our vulnerabilities to it, the kind of lies it tells, and what happens if we give in to it.

Temptation tricks us through deception. It tries to evoke our desire by showing us other shiny objects and trying to convince us they are worthy and beautiful. In other words, temptation offers us a shady sales pitch. It cannot force us to buy, but it will be as relentless as possible. It is important for us to realize that God does not force us to sin, but neither does temptation. Just because you are tempted by something does not mean you have sinned. Just because the shady sales pitch doesn't let up does not mean you have actually bought what is offered to you.

Temptation turns into sin when we give into the sales pitch. We may give in because we are tired of withstanding the pushiness of the salesman, and we think that buying what he offers will get him off our backs. Or, we may come to agree that the bright, shiny object is worth the cost. Either way, sin happens when we chase desires that are directed away from God. Solomon warns his young son that chasing after Lady Folly instead of Lady Wisdom will always lead to death: “Her feet go down to death, her steps follow the path to Sheol” (Proverbs 5:5).

**Q:** *Does the description of sin in verses 14–15 ring true to your own experience?*

**Q:** *Thinking about a sin you tend to struggle with, can you trace back to the mis-directed desires behind it?*

**Q:** *How do you think our mis-directed desires can be redirected to God?*

## HOW TEMPTATION IS OVERCOME

### ■ JAMES 1:16–18

Q: *What does James say we should not be deceived about?*

Q: *What characteristics of God's nature does James highlight in these verses?*

Scripture tells us that we are not born morally neutral, but morally depraved. Because of the fall, our desires have been recalibrated. They do not naturally point to God; they naturally point away from Him. That means that what feels most intuitive to us is to desire and chase after sin rather than God. Christians, however, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Part of His work is to open our eyes to see the beauty and worth of Christ, to draw our hearts to Him, and to reorient our desires for His ways. Apart from the work of the Spirit, we will lose the desire-battle. We will choose sin every time because sin is what “grips” us. Paul says, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you” (Romans 8:5–9a). The Spirit often uses God's Word to redirect our minds from the things of the flesh and captivate us with His truth, goodness, and beauty. The Spirit also uses the Church, God's people, to show us the glory of Christ. If you feel you are more enthralled with the world than with Christ, seek Christ in Scripture and in God's people. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal His incomparable worth to you once again.

In verse 16, James returns to a theme he introduced in verses 12–13. The goal of temptation is deception. It always involves convincing us to question God's goodness and attracts us to the “goodness” of something else. Don't believe the lies, James says. God is absolutely good, and He wants what is good for you. He is not a cosmic kill-joy who doesn't want us to be happy or have nice things. He isn't stingy and he isn't forgetful. God is the source of all good things. Nothing good will come to you apart from the gracious hand of God. Even though the bright, shiny object luring you away from God seems like it is good, it will turn to ash. It's goodness changes. But God's goodness never changes. Hold on to this truth like a shield when temptation rages.

In addition to holding on to the goodness of God despite the way things may seem at the moment, James also says we need to become more far-sighted. God has given us newness of life by His grace. We are the firstfruits of His creation. David Platt explains,

The picture of firstfruits carries the idea of a foretaste of that which is to come. What God has done in our lives to change our hearts by His goodness is only a preview of that which is to come. What God has done in

our lives to change our hearts by His goodness is only a preview of the day to come when He will make all things new in all creation. And the work He has done in our new birth will one day lead to a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more trials and no more temptations.

Temptation keeps us near-sighted, focused on the moment when we feel lack or longing for something we don't have. That moment feels like forever, and we can't seem to see past it. James reminds us that God has not saved us to leave us. He has not given us His Son to then withhold good from us. James directs our gaze to the day when God completes the work He started in us. Rather than being deceived in the moment, we should keep our eyes fixed on the future that awaits us.

♀: *What are some Scripture verses you go to when you need to be reminded of God's unwavering goodness?*

♀: *Can you think of a time when you were enticed by something that seemed good but drew you away from God? Did its apparent goodness quickly change?*

## NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

♀: *Motivational speakers and life coaches know the importance of not making excuses. Consider this commonly prescribed encouragement in light of today's passage: "Be stronger than your excuses." What about it is true and what misses the mark? What do you think James would say about it?*

♀: *Have you seen evidence of God's goodness in the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ? If so, share what you've seen with them. It will encourage them to hear how you can see Him at work, and it will help you fix your eyes on God's*



*goodness all around you.*

♀: *In an age of instant gratification, how can we cultivate steadfastness? How can you, as brothers and sisters in Christ, help one another hold fast to God's promises and be faithful in both trial and temptation?*

## PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

- *God, thank You that we do not have to justify ourselves by making excuses for our sin because You sent Your Son to be our justification.*
- *Father, forgive me for directing my desires toward things that are not unchangingly good like You are.*
- *Holy Spirit, please reveal the goodness, worth, and value of Christ above all other things in this world. Help me to be more enthralled with Him than I am by anything else. This is not natural to me, so I need Your help.*
- *Jesus, thank You that I can look to You when I am tempted to doubt God's goodness. The cross is the absolute, show-stopping evidence that God is for me, not against me, and that He does not withhold any good thing from me.*

## COMMENTARY

*\*All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, the Christ Centered Exposition (James), and Sinclair Ferguson's January 2000 sermon titled "Temptation."*

