FATAL ATTRACTIONS

JAMES 1:9-15

James has shown us that trials are inevitable. However, verse 13 says “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.” It seems like he’s changing the subject. When in reality he is continuing the conversation.

It’s not as easy to see as you read through it, but the very same Greek word for trial in verses 2 and 12 is rendered tempt in verses 13-15. In other words, in verses 2 and 12, this Greek word peirasmos came up, and it was translated trial. Here the same word comes up in verses 12 and 13, and it’s translated temptation. Why would the translators do that? It’s the same word. Why would they render it as two different English words?

That’s because the same word can have a couple of different nuances. The nuance here in verses 13, 14, and 15 has to do with inner enticement toward sin. The teaching here is God tests us, but he never tempts us. God may give us a test, a circumstance from the outside, but if we find that test leads us to sin, it’s not God who is tempting us, because every test is a temptation. The test may come from God, but the temptation comes from inside.

What we’re learning is a number of things about temptation and about sin and about how sin works in our lives. This passage teaches us several things about the nature of temptation and sin.

1. All trials are temptations

Every trial is a temptation. That’s the reason you have to see this in context Look at verse 9. If you fall into poverty, that’s a test. If you fall into riches and success, that’s a test.

Let me lay the principle out here. Every adversity and every prosperity ... Every difficulty and every success is a test that could either make you much wiser ... It’s an opportunity for great growth, and if you handle it properly it will move you on (verse 12) toward the crown of life, but the same opportunity is also a terrible danger. If you mishandle it, it moves you from temptation to sin into death.

Every change in your situation, whether it’s a good change or a bad change, every adversity, every prosperity, every success, or every failure is something that will push you to become a much better person or a much worse person than you were before, but you will not stay the same.

Look at the illustration in verses 10 and 11. What happens if you strike it rich? What happens if you start to get wealthy? You either can let it humble you ... You can say, “Lord, why me? I know about very bright people out there. I know of talented people out there. I know of hardworking people out there who just have not made it, and I've been successful. Why me?” You can let it humble you.

Not only that, it can make you generous, because as a person who is doing well financially you can start to reason like this: You can say, “When the average person making the average salary tithes and gives 10 percent of their income away that gets them pretty close to a discomfort level in their lifestyle, but I could give away 10 percent. I could give away 20 percent. Of course, I wouldn’t be able to live as high as I would if I weren’t giving it away, but I can live very comfortably.”
You can let it make you humbler and more generous, or you can let it make you more arrogant. You'll say, “The reason I have gotten successful is I'm a higher class of person. I'm a little smarter. I'm a little better. I’m a little savvier. That’s the reason. I am better. That must be the reason I’m doing well.”

It'll also make you less generous. Statistics prove people who make under $25,000 a year give away 4 percent of their income for charity on the average, and people who make over $100,000 a year give away less than 1 percent of their income. Why? Because riches can also tempt you into believing luxuries are necessities, but wealth will not keep you the same.

The same thing happens with adversity though. If things go badly, you can let it make you humble. You can let it make you compassionate, more understanding to other people who've gone through it, or it can make you bitter. It can make you anxious. It can make you despondent, but it will not leave you where you were. Trials and tests are all temptations.

2. WHY ALL TRIALS ARE TEMPTATIONS

It tells us right here. “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.” (James 1:13, ESV)

This point is you never sin except for one cause and that is you want to sin. Nobody makes you sin. No conditions make you sin. You only do it because you desire it. NOTICE HE SAYS YOU MUST NOT MAKE THE MISTAKE OF CONFUSING THE CAUSE OF YOUR SIN FOR THE OCCASION.

There’s a big difference between the cause and the occasion. THE OCCASION IS THE TEST, BUT THE CAUSE IS YOUR OWN DESIRE. For example, an algebra teacher gives a test. The purpose of the test is to show you what's in the heart, but if the student has not learned the material, the test doesn't cause the student's failure. It’s the lack of discipline and the lack of knowledge in the student.

The test is the occasion for the failure but not the cause of the failure. A student could very easily say, “If my algebra teacher hadn't tested me, I wouldn't have gotten an F.” You make the mistake of the occasion for the cause.

Most people who abuse, beat, or hit children, and so on, were abused as children. Therefore, can we say your abusing is caused by the abuse you got? No, we have to come to the place where we give people the dignity of saying, “Though you may have been abused, it doesn’t excuse what you’re doing to your children.”

Why does that give dignity to say, “You're responsible? You’re not an animal programmed by your genes. You are not a machine programmed by your environment. The abuse you got is the occasion for why you now abuse, but it’s not the cause”? What I am saying is you’re a human being. You have dignity. Don't mix up the cause and the occasion. You’re responsible. You can stop this.

Jonathan Edwards, in his book, Freedom of the Will, worked this out like this. He says the Bible does absolutely teach us that we all have free will. Do you know what it means to have free will? Free will means you only and always and ever only do what you most desire to do. We have free will, which means you never, ever do anything but what you most want to do, so take responsibility.

Somebody says, “I don’t believe that.” Somebody says, “Listen, my boss told me I had to lie or he’d fire me. I didn’t want to lie, but I had to lie. I lied, but it’s not what I most wanted to do.”
“No, no, no,” says Edwards. “I’m sorry. You wanted to keep your job more than you wanted to tell the truth, so you did what you most wanted to do.” DON’T EVER SAY YOU HAVE SINNED BUT YOU DIDN’T WANT TO. DON’T EVER SAY YOU HAVE SINNED BUT YOU REALLY COULDN’T HELP IT. YOU ALWAYS DO WHAT YOU MOST WANT TO DO. THIS IS LIBERATING AND HUMBLING.

You can get out from under the responsibility of this by saying, “The reason I am the mess I am, the reason I’m treating people the way I am, the reason I’m doing the things ... I know they’re wrong, but I can’t help it.” You’ve taken that great burden of responsibility off of yourself, and you’ve also destroyed your humanity. You’re an animal. You’re a machine. You’re not a human being. But the Bible says you are a human being. When you are tempted and you sin, it’s because you desire to do it.

3. How temptation happens

Finally, we see how trials bring about temptations. One of the things that is most astonishing about this little passage is James uses a sexual metaphor to describe how sin has its way in our hearts.

It says, “When tempted, no one should say, “I am being tempted by God,” For God cannot be tempted with evil ...” Here’s what happens in verse 14. “…But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” which is a word that means seduced, a sexual word. Of course, what it comes after is clearly part of the sexual metaphor.

After you have been seduced by your evil desire, there’s conception, and then there is birth. Then believe it or not, there’s a grandchild because, “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown.” (James 1:15, ESV) It can become a mother as well. “...brings forth death.”

What are we being told here?

Every time we get to this phrase evil desire or desire, the translators struggle with how to translate it. It’s not a good translation. In the old translations it’s translated lust. In the new translations it’s translated evil desire or desire. It’s the word epithymia. It literally means an “over-desire”.

The way sin works is not that we want bad things. That’s what’s kind of misleading about this translation. THE WAY SIN WORKS, THE ESSENCE OF SIN, IS NOT THAT WE WANT BAD THINGS, BUT WE WANT THINGS SO BADLY, TOO BADLY. This tells us it’s your over-desires that seduce you. This is powerful theological imagery. IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, GOD TELLS US HE NEVER SEES SIN AS JUST BREAKING THE RULES. HE SEES IT AS SPIRITUAL ADULTERY.

In the Old Testament, God characterizes himself as our Husband, and he characterizes his people as his wife. He never just sees us as breaking the rules. He says the reason people sin is they are enticed away into the arms of other lovers. It’s anything that becomes a way to self-esteem more than God becomes a fatal attraction. An over-desire is, a fatal attraction.

Over the years when I’ve talked to men and women who have committed adultery, very often they have said, “It’s not so much that I was unhappy with the spouse I had.” Here’s what the guys usually say about the lover. They’d say, “Ah, but she made me feel like a man.” Or the woman will say, “Ah, but he made me feel like a woman.”
The reason they fell into the adultery, is not that they were so unhappy with the spouse, but something started to happen in their lives that made them feel insecure and bad about themselves, empty inside. They needed the strokes. They needed the worship. They needed the adoration. They needed somebody who came along and gave them what this lover gave them.

WHAT THE BIBLE TELLS US IS SIN IS NOT JUST BREAKING THE RULES. SIN BEGINS WHEN SOMETHING BECOMES YOUR LOVER RATHER THAN GOD. Something becomes the author of your self-esteem. It’s okay to want work or a career, but when the career becomes the way you feel good about yourself and the way you feel happy about life, it becomes a fatal attraction. You go after it. You need to have it. The Bible says that’s spiritual adultery. That’s how sin starts. What’s wrong with career? Nothing, but an over-desire for career is seduction, spiritually speaking.

It’s the same thing with romance, when you say, “I won’t be anybody unless somebody loves me.” Love itself has become the idol. It makes you feel like a human being. It’s a fatal attraction. The Bible says this is how sin always starts. YOU ADD SOMETHING TO JESUS CHRIST AS A REQUIREMENT FOR BEING HAPPY, AND SOMETHING YOU HAVE TO HAVE. “Jesus is nice. God is nice but if I don’t have this, my life is over.” It’s an over-desire.

This is what the Bible defines as lust. Lust is not wanting bad things. Lust is wanting things so badly, that you’re fatally attracted to them. “I have to have it, and I’m going to it.” God sees you sleeping with that. This has become your lover. As a result, it’s controlling you. It’s a fatal attraction.

Look what happens when your over-desires entice you and seduce you away. CONCEPTION, WHICH LEADS TO BIRTH OF SIN. CONCEPTION MEANS SOMETHING INSIDE THAT’LL EVENTUALLY COME OUTSIDE. YOU MIGHT PUNCH SOMEBODY IN THE MOUTH. YOU MIGHT HARM THEM. YOU MIGHT KILL THEM, BUT IT STARTS WITH ANGER, CONCEPTION, SOMETHING INSIDE THAT WILL GIVE BIRTH LATER.

All sinful actions start as little seeds in the heart. What this is saying is very important if you think about it. All of your resentments, the internal things, and all of your anxieties come from the over-desires. Why are you so bitter about certain things? Because something you think you have to have has been taken from you. That’s why you’re so angry about it. Why are you so anxious? Why are you so afraid? Why are you tempted to lie? Here is a person who says, “I had to lie because my boss said I’d be fired if I didn’t tell the lie.”

What is giving birth to that lie? Don’t blame your boss. Here’s a person who says, “Fine, then fire me.” Here’s a person who says, “I know it’s wrong, but I have to.” What’s the difference? The person who lies is lying because there’s a fatal attraction to his job, to his precious career, to money. The lying comes from the fear. The fear which is conceived gives birth to the lie, but the little embryo of fear has come because of the fatal attraction to your career.

Sin is not just breaking the rules? Sin is a fatal attraction that conceives all of those troubling emotions that are deep in your heart that will lead to sinful behavior. They have come because you were seduced by one of your lover gods, by one of those false lovers. It says, “Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.” (James 1:15, ESV)

I have to sit down with my children if they’d lied to me, and I’d say, “You can’t go to the party. You have to stay in your room.” They’d say, “Why?” we’d say, “if you get in the habit of lying, it will lead to
death.” If you get in the habit of lying, when you get older you'll lie at work and you'll lose your job. It'll kill your job. Or you'll lie to your wife and you'll lose your marriage. Or you'll lie to yourself and you'll lose yourself … you won't even know who you are … because sin, once it's conceived, always gives birth to death.”

With an over-desire, you'll kill your body with overwork. With an over-desire for love, if you don't get the person, you'll kill yourself with self-punishment. If you do get the person, you'll destroy the relationship because of all of the expectations you'll put on that person to make your life perfect. **Sin will lead to death. The death comes from the sin. The sin comes from the conception. The conception comes from being seduced, a fatal attraction to something which you love more than God.**

Now what are we going to do about it? How can we escape? How can we possibly ever get away from this? The answer is you have to work backwards. If you think of sin as simply breaking rules, you'll think, “Well, the way to deal with temptation is just say no.” Do you remember the slogan, “Just Say No”? The Bible never says “just.” Saying no is certainly part of dealing with sin, but it’s never the main part. It’s never the only part. It’s never “just.”

Thomas Chalmers was a great Scottish preacher in the 1840s. His most famous sermon was *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, and his thesis statement was, **“The only way to break the hold of a beautiful object on the soul is to show it an object even more beautiful.”** You can’t just say no when you find out sin is due to the fact that your imagination has been captured by something. Therefore, the answer to temptation is spiritual passion, not just negation, not just discipline, not just to say no. You have to fall in love with Somebody.

- **A MORALIST WILL BE UNSUCCESSFUL IN TRYING TO DISPLACE HIS LOVE OF THE WORLD BY REVIEWING THE ILLS OF THE WORLD. MISPLACED AFFECTIONS NEED TO BE REPLACED BY THE FAR GREATER POWER OF THE AFFECTION OF THE GOSPEL. – CHALMERS**
- **A NEW AFFECTION IS MORE SUCCESSFUL IN REPLACING AN OLD AFFECTION THAN SIMPLY TRYING TO END IT WITHOUT SUPPLANTING IT WITH SOMETHING BETTER – CHALMERS**
- **IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO UNDERSTAND THE WORTHLESSNESS OF THE WORLD; ONE MUST VALUE THE WORTH OF THE THINGS OF GOD – CHALMERS**

You have to bring Jesus out of the realm of the conceptual into the realm of the passion of your heart. Now there are plenty of places that talk about that. In Ephesians 5:25, we’re told, **“Husbands love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her … to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”**

Now let's go back to the Old Testament imagery, the biblical imagery. If we say, “You make me feel beautiful.” That's what we say to our career. That's what we say to our romance. That's what we say. That's the reason we sin. **“You make me feel …”**

In Jeremiah 2:32, the Lord says, look at this lover, look what he has done **“Does a maiden forget her jewelry, a bride her wedding ornaments? Yet my people have forgotten me, days without number.”** What's God saying? He is saying, “Do you know why a bride wants to look beautiful? To walk down the aisle in confidence.”
Don’t you see what Jesus has done for you? Jesus was stripped so you could be beautiful. Jesus was disfigured so you could be beautiful. Jesus was stripped naked so you could be clothed. Have all these other lover gods done that for you? Of course, not. Look what Jesus has done for you. Fall in love with him. That is the only way.

You have to look … When you’re scared. The woman who says, “My boss told me I have to lie,” what could she do at that point? She could say, “My boss, this career, this will never clothe me. This will never make me beautiful. This won’t make me feel like a woman. Jesus … Look what he has done. Jesus, Lover of my soul.”

The only way to break the hold of one beautiful object on the soul is to show it a more beautiful object and this is the expulsive power of a new affection. Do you know what’s so beautiful about this? This is why Christianity is way beyond behaviorism. It doesn’t say, “Just say no.”

Look at how he tells the poor person and the rich person to deal with their poverty or their riches. It says, “The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position.” What’s the high position? If you’re a Christian, the Bible says in Christ you’re seated at the right hand of God. Look at that in Ephesians 2. It says, “If you believe in Jesus, because Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, so are you, because God sees you as perfect as Jesus.”

You should take pride in your high position. Think about the beauty of it. This isn’t behaviorism. You’ll never overcome your temptations unless you’re living in holy consciousness of what you are in him. That’s the only way a poor person is going to overcome bitterness. That’s the only way those of you who haven’t gotten the things you want in life will overcome your bitterness too.

You’re supposed to take pride. That’s an astonishing thing. Clothe yourself in the self-esteem … The only lover who can do it is Jesus. Then it says, “But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position …” What? Take pride in his low position? Yes. The way to humble yourself is to remind yourself you are a sinner saved by grace.

The poor person deals with the temptation to despair by remembering the glory of grace, but the rich person deals with the temptation to arrogance by remembering the grace of glory, that the glory that comes to us is strictly by the grace of God.

Robert Murray M’Cheyne, a Scottish preacher, once was dealing with rich people in his congregation who didn’t want to give their money away, and what did he do? He said, “Take pride in what he has done for you. Dear Christians, some of you pray night and day to be branches of the true Vine; you pray to be made all over in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like him in giving.”

“Though Christ was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor.” Someone objects, ‘My money is my own. I earned it.’ Fine. Christ might have said, ‘My blood is my own. My life is my own.’ Then where would you be? Someone says, ‘But the poor are undeserving. Why should I give my money to the poor?’ Answer: Christ might have said, ‘Why should I lay down my life for these wicked rebels? Shall I lay down my life for these? I will give to the good angels, the deserving poor.’

Ah, no, but he left the 99, and he came after the lost. He gave his blood for the undeserving. Objection: ‘The poor may abuse it. If I give my money to people, they might misuse it. If I give my money to this church, somebody might misuse it. If I give my money, somebody might abuse it.’
Answer: Christ might have said the same, yea, with far greater truth. Christ knew that thousands would trample his blood under their feet; that most would despise it; that many would make it an excuse for sinning more; yet he gave his own blood.

Oh, my dear Christians! If you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and ... the undeserving. Christ is glorious and happy and so will you be. It is not your money I want, but your happiness. Remember his own word. ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

What’s going on? What is the minister doing? He is saying, “Think about the grace of your position. Think about what he has done, and that will get rid of all your pride.” Then he says to the poor, “Think about the glory of where you are, and that’ll get rid of all your despair.” Think about him. Take pride. Clothe yourself in it.

The only way to break the grip of sin on your heart ... The only way to break the grip of a beautiful object on the heart is to show it a more beautiful one. Why do you think I show him to you every time? Why do you think I always get to Jesus? Why do I always say, “Look, look, look, look”? Because just saying no will not do it. Say yes to him ... Let's pray.