

James 1:12-18, No. 4
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James has already told us to “count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” By steadfastness is meant a persevering faith in Christ, the kind of faith that continues to believe, that continues to trust, that continues to look to Christ no matter the obstacles, the spiritual difficulties, the temptations to unbelief that we encounter on every side. As so often in the Bible, here too trials are regarded as an instrument of spiritual growth. As in the lifting of weights, so in the spiritual life muscle grows with painful endurance. Indeed, trials are essential to reaching Christian maturity. Now James picks up the thread of that interrupted thought from the very beginning of the chapter to make another point.

Text Comment

- v.12 The word translated “remains steadfast” in the ESV was translated “endures” in earlier English translations. That would seem to suggest that the trials in view are probably outward troubles not inward temptations because if it were the latter one would expect “resist” not “endure.” [Tasker, 44] However, James goes on immediately to talk about temptations to sin which certainly include inward temptations. Or is James talking about trials that also become temptations, as so many trials do. Under pressure we find ourselves tempted to many thoughts and actions that are unworthy of a Christian and dishonoring to God.

Again, as so often in the Bible, the reward for the endurance of trials is not at some point a life without trials – such a life does not exist for Christians in this world – but the perfect and perfectly happy life of heaven. The “crown of life” is a symbolic way of expressing the same thought as the Lord’s “well done, good and faithful servant.” “Crown” conveys to us the idea of a metal tiara, perhaps studded with gems. But to people of the Greco-Roman world it would have conveyed the image of a laurel wreath, the prize given to the winner at the end of a race. The Christian life, as you know, is compared to a race in several places in the Bible. [Moo, 70] Earlier, in vv. 2-3 the fruit of our trials was growth in a godly character. Here it is a future reward. [Motyer, 48]

This is not the only place in the New Testament when the prerequisite of salvation, the stipulated condition of salvation is not faith in God but love for God. Of course, those ideas overlap and in a most important respect are different ways of saying the same thing. The one who believes will love and vice versa.

- v.13 We will return to this shortly, but the words for *try* and *tempt* are *the same* Greek words. Context alone determines how they are to be translated.
- v.15 James was certainly aware of Satan’s role as the tempter of men, but James here is concerned that no one excuse himself or herself for being overcome by temptation. He will brook no Flip Wilsons saying “The Devil made me do it.” [By the way, young

people, that is an example of how hip your pastor is, referring as I just did to a popular culture icon. You do know who Flip Wilson is. He's very contemporary. He was actually born in 1933 and died in 1998, so he's like "just yesterday"!]]

So James reminds us that we are our own worst enemy and have only ourselves to blame if we succumb to temptation. In the same way James says nothing about "root causes," that we know very well can lend power to many temptations and lead to terrible sin. Poverty, a broken family, ineffective parenting, child abuse, unfettered access to the internet, the general tendencies of a culture, the influence of media, and so on leave many people and many Christians all the more vulnerable to temptations of every kind. Satan and root causes are certainly real things, but James mentions neither and keeps our attention on ourselves, for without our own sinful desires neither Satan nor these root causes would have such an effect on us. And Christians much of the time rise above both, both Satan and root causes, to do what is right. Were there no Satan, no poverty, no sexual revolution, and no internet there would still be plenty of sin! Our first and worst enemy is ourselves. [Motyer, 54]

There is a fascinating passage in a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* in which the progress of a temptation is described. First there is the bare thought of the sin, the source of which thought we may or may not know. Then the thought of the sin is turned into a picture which picture is displayed in the imagination. The attractiveness and the pleasure of the sin is then contemplated in the soul and soon the consent of the soul is obtained and the sin is committed. In other words, our imagination stirs our affections which in turn seduce the will and lead to the sinful act itself. [*Imitation of Christ*, ed. 1737, 27] Our problem is that our imagination and our desires are often stronger and more persevering than our will – that, for example, is why we eat too much and why it is so hard to lose weight – and that is James' point here. We are, he says, *lured into sin by our desires*. And that is true whatever the desires may be: for ease, for rest, for fame, for money, for approval, for revenge, for sexual pleasure, for control, whatever it may be; it is the *desire* that eventually conquers the will and leads to the sin.

Martin Luther put this understanding of how temptations work in a more homely way in a letter to his organist, Matthias Weller written Oct. 7, 1524.

“If you allow one thought to enter, and you pay attention to it [the Devil] will force ten additional thoughts into your mind until at last he overpowers you. Therefore, the best thing you can do is to rap the Devil on the nose at the very start. Act like the man who, whenever his wife began to nag and snap at him, drew out his flute from under his belt and played merrily until she was exhausted and let him alone.”

Calvin sent similar advice to a Christian friend of some wealth and position. He had written to Calvin describing his dilemma. If he were to stay on his substantial estates, he would have to conform to Rome. But if he gave them up he would face an uncertain and insecure financial future. Calvin's reply reflects James' wisdom here. “What you should do is to leave before you are sunk so deep in the mire that you cannot get out; and the

sooner you leave the better.” [T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin*, 166] In other words, don’t let the desires of your flesh work away until they have conquered your will.

Sin, after all, brings forth death – the reverse of the crown of life in v. 12 – and, if we reckon with that great danger, we will be strong not to tolerate its presence in our hearts and lives.

- v.17 So far from leading us into temptation, God is the source of all the good things we enjoy. James’ “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers...” suggests that the temptation for even Christians to suspect the goodness and wisdom of God’s ways is very real.

The sun’s light varies through the day. It may be diminished by clouds during daylight hours and disappears at night. But God is not like that: he is invariably faithful, invariably generous, and invariably wise.

- v.18 Of all God’s gifts, first among them is the new life that God has granted his children. “Brought us forth by the word of truth” is a way of describing what Jesus called the new birth or what Paul called the new creation, that point at which and that work of the Holy Spirit by which the Christian life and eternal life is begun in spiritually dead people. These early Christians are regarded as a kind of first fruits for a far greater harvest is to be expected as Christian missions begin to bite in heretofore unreached populations.

James’ argument in vv. 16-18 might be put this way: we need holy hearts to persevere in our trials and resist our temptations. But our hearts are impure. But God can be counted on to give us what we need and the very first thing he gave us addressed our ultimate need: he gave us a new heart, a heart capable of resisting temptation. Again and again in the Bible, in Deuteronomy, in Jeremiah, in Ezekiel, and in the Gospel of John, among other places, the new heart, a heart that is expressive of God’s holy nature, is the essential first step in the Christian life, but a step that we cannot take ourselves. New hearts are and must be in the nature of the case a divine gift. As in the first creation, so in the second, it is God’s word that produces the new thing. As God spoke and the world was made, so God speaks and a new life is brought forth from an old one. Have you ever thought of your own case in this way? At some point in your life, for some of you in your mother’s womb, for others at a point in the middle of your lives, God spoke and your heart was suddenly changed; your nature was transformed; your heart of stone became a heart of flesh, as Ezekiel puts it; your old heart became a new heart. That happened in *your* life.

Now, this way of looking at our situation does pose a problem. If we have a new heart, where does the evil desire come from of which James spoke in v. 14? If we have a new nature, why are we still so susceptible to temptation? There is no simple solution to this problem, no easy way to form the statements of the Bible and the nomenclature that it uses into a harmony of truth. The Bible speaks of the war between flesh and spirit in the Christian life, but also uses “flesh” to describe the fallen, sinful human nature that we had by conception and that was replaced by the new birth so that we might live for God. So, somehow, in some way, we still have that old nature within us. This morning in our

confession of sin we confessed to God that we are by nature sinful and unclean. But the Bible also speaks of a new creation and of the death of the old man, even while it frankly describes our struggle with the very desires that belonged to our old man and old nature. However we describe this duality of sin and righteousness in the interior life of a Christian – as Paul does when he speaks of the “sin that dwells within me” or as he implicitly does when he commands us to “put on the new self” as if we have a new self but it isn’t yet operative (Eph. 4:24) – we all know of this reality. We have a new heart and new desires and commitments that arise from it, but we are dragged down by an old nature that, having been replaced, still operates somehow powerfully within us. As Paul puts it with much anguish in Rom. 7:14-25, our selves are divided, almost as if there were two separate persons inside us. We need both truths: 1) that we do have a new heart – our nature will therefore eventually fully and perfectly express itself in the love of God and obedience to him, and we have the wherewithal now to resist our temptations (that should give us hope and confidence in the battle with sin; and 2) we are not done with sin in this world by a long shot and must, therefore, gird ourselves for the battle every day.

Thus far the Word of God. Now I think we will all admit that James is clear enough, however you may question some of his wording, his way of putting things. Our lives are beset with temptations of every kind and, alas, as James will put in 3:2, “we all stumble in many ways.” But fundamental to right thinking about our sin and our temptations is the recognition of our own absolute and unqualified culpability. We cannot blame God for our sins of thought, word, and deed. Perhaps that seems obvious. But James knows very well that we Christians are prone to do that very thing.

After all, we know - and we Calvinists in particular know - that God is in control of all things, *all* things, including the sins of human beings. If God were not in control of human sin, then the one thing that fatally threatened our hope of everlasting life would be the one thing that God did not control! It takes but a little thought to realize that if God doesn’t control everything, if everything is not subject to his will, then nothing is finally subject to his will. But, the fact of the matter is the Bible makes no effort to deny this or to qualify God’s absolute sovereignty even over the sinful thoughts and actions of men.

Since human sin is such a power in human life and human affairs, it too must be subject to his will. No human being can sin himself out from under the sovereignty of God. And the Bible is perfectly willing to admit this, even to assert this in ways so direct and so peremptory as to seem almost calculated to offend. We have been reading in the morning the early chapters of the book of Acts and already three times we have come across statements that the worst sins ever committed by men were committed according to the plan and purpose of Almighty God.

“Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.” [1:16]

“...this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” [2:23]

“...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*” [4:27-28]

The hatred, the envy of the religious leadership, the cowardice of the Roman government, their conspiracy to murder an innocent man: all of that the plan and the purpose of God! Such statements are hardly unique in the Bible. We have, for example, the famous statement of Joseph to his brothers that while selling their brother into slavery in Egypt was an act of pure evil, and while they acted with evil intention, God had meant it for good. The same act – bitter jealousy leading to a horrible betrayal of family bonds – was God’s plan for the eventual salvation of the family. We have no difficulty understanding the differing motivations, but the fact remains that the brothers’ terrible sin was part of God’s plan.

A more interesting case is furnished by a comparison between 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1. Both are describing the origin of David’s sinful act in numbering the people near the end of his reign, but in 1 Chronicles the act is attribute to Satan – “Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census.” – and in 2 Samuel the same act is attributed to God – “Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel and he incited David against them.” The very same sinful act is described as the intention of both Satan and God! Surely God and Satan are not, as we would say today, on the same wave-length, but they brought the same sinful event to pass.

Or think of the famous episode when the prophet Micaiah told Ahab that God had sent a lying spirit into the hearts of his so-called prophets precisely to send him to his death in battle. So God prompted the false prophets to lie! Actually, there are a good number of such statements in the Bible, designed to prove – whatever else each may be teaching us – that God is in complete control of even the sins of mankind and of his people. If the heart of the king is in God’s hand and if he can turn it in whatever directed he chooses, then God is in control of his thoughts, so many of which are sinful. In any case, the Bible makes it clear that God is not “the idle spectator of our sins.” [Bavinck, *RD*, vol. iii, 60]

This is, as you know, the *scandal* of the doctrine of the divine sovereignty. The typical objection to it is that if we believe this of God, if we believe that his control is so absolute that it embraces even the sinful thoughts and actions of man, then God is responsible for those sins. Indeed, God must be a sinner himself if he causes others to sin. This objection is so obvious that Paul raises it himself against his own doctrine in Romans 9. In speaking of God hardening a human heart, in this case the heart of Pharaoh – and what is hardening of the heart except inclining it to sin – the apostle writes, “You are going to say, ‘If no one can resist his will, why does he still find fault?’” In other words, if God foreordained your sins, they are his fault, not yours. But Paul rejects the logic. “Who are you, O man, to answer back to God? God has an absolute right to do with his creatures what he will.”

But that is hardly all that it is said. The Bible rings the changes on the holiness of God, on his antipathy toward sin, the offense he takes at it, his hatred of it, that there is not a whisper of unrighteousness in God, and that he cannot lie or do evil or lead others to do evil. What James

says here, when he says that God cannot be tempted by evil and tempts no one is, in fact, entirely typical of a hundred statements in the Bible.

What we have here, in fact, is simply a subset of the larger problem of reconciling an absolute divine sovereignty with human freedom and accountability. And for all the ink that has been spilt through the ages, no one has been able to solve that problem. God is in absolute control of everything that happens in this world and in the life of man, from the number of hairs on his head to the thoughts of his heart. But man is himself responsible for his life and has no one to blame but himself when he does what is wrong. I don't know how to explain how both things are true at one and the same time – no one does – but the Bible asserts both truths repeatedly, unashamedly, and often side by side with one another. It is right here that the frail and finite human mind cannot embrace reality so large, so complex, and so rooted in divine powers we cannot possibly understand or comprehend, that it simply must say it cannot explain, it can only believe and confess.

James, who obviously shared this high view of God's absolute rule and sovereignty, says that we will be tempted to say to ourselves – and we only say this if we believe in God's sovereignty - “Well, if God didn't want me to commit this sin he should have kept me away from the temptation” or “If God is in control of even my thoughts, obviously he is to blame for them when they are sinful.” We may never make such statements to ourselves or others so baldly but deep down that is the rationale by which we excuse ourselves. *For is that not what we are saying when we say that we can't help ourselves! It's God's fault, not ours.*

But, James reminds us, *it's not God's fault; it is our fault.* And the fact is *every Christian knows it.* We know ourselves too well. We are not robots. We have desires and we have a will and we can and do control both of them all the time every day; all manner of things we might do, we choose not to do. When we fail to control them, we have no excuse. If we tried to excuse ourselves, we would be denying our very humanity as we experience it day by day, making one decision after another as we do for reasons that are perfectly clear to us, and as Christians often, very often, choosing to do what is right rather than what is sinful, precisely because we want to do what is right. If we can do that much of the time, we know very well we can do it all of the time. And when we do not, we know why. Our desires in that case got the better of us. We know very well – however impossible it may be for us to explain the relation between God's absolute sovereignty and our free will – we know very well that we weren't compelled to sin; we chose to do it; we did it because we wanted to. When the Bible tells us this same thing, as it does repeatedly, it is only paying us the respect due the persons we are, with a mind, with a heart, and with a will that we are entirely capable of controlling.

And in this there is a deeper truth. Malcolm Muggeridge, in repudiating his earlier hope of some utopia on earth, wrote this in his spiritual autobiography *Chronicles of Wasted Time*:

“The essential quality of our lives as I now understood, was a factor, not so much of how we lived, but of why we lived. It was our values, not our production processes, or our laws, or our social relationships, that governed our existence.” [*Chronicles of Wasted Time*, 291]

That is right. Is that not what James says here, both when he speaks of “sinful desires” as our great problem and when he speaks of the crown of life and the goodness of God. It is far too easy for you and me to spend our time thinking about *how* we live our lives and not about *why* we live them, for what purpose we do what we do.

Simply to ask yourself the question: *why am I doing this?* often clarifies the situation immediately. It is an immensely important exercise, but one that is, alas, rarely performed.

1. Why am I so angry and acting angrily? Why? The very issue that James raises next in chapter 1. Answer that question and you’ll know immediately where you stand morally!
2. Why am I sitting here in front of this computer screen playing a video game or doing something worse? Why? What is my purpose? Force yourself to answer the question.
3. Why am I giving vent to my fears? Why am I wringing my hands and pacing the floor? Why?
4. Why am I seeking this particular job? Or watching that show? Or eating this snack between meals? Or ignoring my kids? Or complaining to my spouse?
5. Why am I avoiding that particular person or why am I so anxious to be liked by *that* person? Why? Why? Why?

In far too many ways you and I allow ourselves to be are strangers to ourselves. Oh, I suspect we actually know a great deal about ourselves. But we don’t think about what we know, we do not bring it to mind, and we don’t reckon with our self-knowledge day by day. As C.S. Lewis wrote in one of his *Letters to an American Lady* (27):

“Humans are very seldom either totally sincere or totally hypocritical. Their moods change, their motives are mixed, and they are often themselves quite mistaken as to what their motives are.”

But they can find out easily enough, if only they care to. An honest reckoning with our motivations, our desires will make a great many things clear in very helpful ways. It was Socrates who first said that an unexamined life was not worth living, but the Bible has many things to say that amount to the same thing:

1. “Consider your ways...” What’s going on? Why are you behaving as you are? Remember this is what the Lord challenged his people to do through the prophet Haggai.
2. “Examine yourselves...” This is what Paul challenged the Corinthian Christians to do.
3. “Watch yourselves...” John tells the readers of his second letter. It is a looking at ourselves, an examination of ourselves that is essential for Christian growth and godliness.

It was the Lord Jesus himself who was always going down to the bottom of things, to the motivations, the desires that explained our behavior. “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them,” he said in the Sermon on the Mount. Why? Because a false motive, a selfish desire utterly ruins the behavior – however in itself proper? Why? Because God looks on the heart and knows the motives of the heart. Putting a man on the moon was a phenomenal achievement with the state of technology what it was in those days, but

in retrospect it loses some of its luster when we learn that the motivation for the decision to do so was jealousy of Russian success in space. President Kennedy wanted to outdo them, make their achievements seem small in comparison. He would tell meetings of his advisors that he was looking for something, anything that we could do that they could not. And so we went to the moon. *False motives and desires ruin the behavior for us too if we only know what those motives actually are!* Human beings are the only creatures with motives, with selective desires that produce behavior. They alone can do something for one reason and claim to be doing it for another!

The Puritan masters of the Christian life insisted that realistic self-knowledge and self-awareness was essential to spiritual maturity. And here is James telling us that among the things we need to know about ourselves, among the things we need to be aware of *are our desires*. A man who desires the crown of life – who has his or her sights set on heaven – will not behave in the same way as the man whose desires are set on other things. In fact it is a fixed law of the spiritual world that actions follow desires and motivations. This is the principle that James has given us here. That is how powerful motivations and desires are – they shape our behavior; indeed they control it – and that is why the Lord Jesus was always going down to the bottom, to a man’s motivations, his desires in his teaching of the righteous life. A woman who hungers and thirsts for righteousness will not live the same way, not at all the same way, as a woman who desires other things and is motivated by other interests.

Think, for example, of a perennial problem that we all have: that of getting our feelings hurt. If our desire is for approval and acceptance, or for praise or position, it will be comparatively easy for us to get our feelings hurt. If our desire is for a righteous life – humility, grace, and obedience to God – it will be much harder for anyone to hurt our feelings simply because our desires direct our feelings and our actions in a different direction. If we’re not in it for the recognition or the praise we’ll simply not care very much if such things are taken from us, or, better, if someone tries to take them from us imagining that we care about such things because so many others do!

But put the question to yourself more directly still. If you have to explain to yourself *why* you are sitting in front of a computer screen watching porn or playing a video game for hours on end, I say if you have to admit *why* you’re doing that, I guarantee you the bloom will go off the rose. That is why we rarely ask ourselves the “why” question. We don’t want to know.

And why don’t we want to know? *Because James tells us we have this new heart from God* and our new heart knows very well what we ought to desire and why we ought to desire it. In fact, the great effect of having a new heart is that our desires come from the heart and so we have a new set of desires, the very opposite of the desires that we would have had by nature without the transformation of our lives by the spirit of God. The reason we need a new heart is that the old one will never desire holiness, never desire God, never desire to have his forgiveness, never desire heaven as heaven is described in the Word of God. The great divide that separates the saved from the unsaved in this world is the yawning gap that separates our desires from theirs. Peter speaks of the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

Our new heart is going to be embarrassed, ashamed, and even appalled if we have to admit to ourselves that what we really want is ease not useful labor, pleasure not purity, the satisfaction of

the moment not the crown of life. How different if we desire instead to depart and be with Christ, if we desire the heavenly country, if we desire to live a genuinely godly life for the sake of Jesus Christ, if we hunger and thirst for righteousness – all things that are said of the Christian in the Bible. All of them that have to do with a Christian's *desire*.

To be sure, introspection can be carried to far. It can paralyze us rather than help us. If we are forever asking ourselves why we thought such a thing or did such a thing we will scarcely have time to do or to think. But too much introspection is a problem very few of us have. Too little is far more likely to be our case. And a healthy dose of such self-examination, of such introspection is a powerful weapon against allowing our desires to overcome our wills and sink us under temptation.

What are your desires? What do you want? What is really important to you? What motivates you? What gets you going? Put those questions to yourself and answer them honestly. If you're not sure you know how to answer those questions – though I suspect you do – James is telling you that an examination of what you do, how you spend your time, the temptations you succumb to, will answer your questions soon enough.

Listen to James' wisdom. Temptations are made powerful by desire. The wrong sort of desires are our undoing in a world as full of temptation as ours is. So keep your wits about you. Remember that you have a new heart, that God has given you a new set of desires. You don't need to search for holy desires, they are already within you. But you need to awaken them, identify them, and keep them in sharp focus as you live your life. And perhaps the easiest, the simplest way to do that is to keep asking yourself from time to time, and especially when you realize that you are being tempted: *what is it that I really want. Why am I living? What am I living for?* We have something the Puritans didn't: sticky notes! Put one on your computer, up in the corner where you can't help seeing it. And write on it simply: "Why am I here? Is it for the crown of life?" Nothing so commends and empowers holy desires in a Christian's life than simply remembering that you have them and what they are. And in the same way, nothing so weakens unholy desires as to have them dragged out into the cold light of day!