

# How to Triumph Over Temptations

Developing a Faith that Works, Part 2

James 1:12-18

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 11 June 2006

A few years ago a research team from Stanford University conducted an interesting study. They placed some four-year-olds in a room with a marshmallow. The experimenter told each child that he had to leave the room for a minute and if the four-year-old could wait until he returned he could have two marshmallows. But if he wanted to eat the marshmallow now, he could – but he would only get one. (I know what our Emma would do!) The kids developed all kinds of strategies to enable them to wait. Sing songs, tell themselves stories, play with their fingers. One kid actually sat down and began to lick the table, as if the flavour had transmogrified into the wood. But what's most amazing is the impact early decisions like these had on the lives of those who were part of the study. The research team tracked these children for many years. Those who chose to wait as four year olds grew up to be more socially competent, better able to cope with stress, and less likely to give up under pressure than those who chose not to wait. They even averaged better test grades at school. By contrast, the marshmallow-grabbers grew up to be more stubborn and indecisive, more easily upset by frustration, more resentful about not getting their own way. All those years later, the marshmallow grabbers were still unable to delay gratification. How we respond to temptation has massive downstream consequences.

Last week we started a new series from the book of James. We looked at how we can profit from our problems – how to respond to trials – difficult *external* circumstances – in a way that honours God. But what about temptations – powerful *internal* impulses to act in a way that dishonours God? How do you respond to those? How do you triumph over temptation? Let's look at James 1:12-18. In this short passage James outlines several principles for passing the marshmallow test, strategies for triumphing over temptation. Let's quickly run through them.

## 1. Be realistic (1:13)

The first strategy is this: Be realistic. James says in v13, "When you are tempted..." Not "If you are tempted," but "When you are tempted." Just as we all face trials – difficult circumstances that God uses to draw us closer to him, we all face temptations – internal impulses or desires that Satan uses to draw us away from God. The Bible says that Jesus was tempted (Hebrews 4:15). So temptation is not a mark of spiritual immaturity, something that we outgrow. In fact, the more we grow in our commitment to God and his agenda for this world, the more likely it is that Satan will shove a marshmallow in front of us. And he does. Often. What's your marshmallow? For some of you, I know, it's pornography, or adultery, or compulsive gambling. But often temptation is much subtler than that. Henry Nouwen said that for him the marshmallow, the temptation, was "to lose faith in the Voice that calls me the Beloved" – to doubt that God loves me – "and to follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire ... to cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self-fulfilment: the accumulation of wealth, the attainment of status and admiration ... to take the gifts God had given me and to use them to impress people, instead of developing them for the glory of God." I can identify with that. Can't you?

Or maybe for you the marshmallow, the temptation, is to hold bitterness in your heart towards someone? Or to be sullen and grumpy, to gossip, to bully, to use some other unloving and destructive pattern of behaviour to achieve what in itself might be a perfectly legitimate end. James' point is that you and I often face and fall to temptation. Let's just admit it. Admit it to others. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man." What you struggle with, most of us struggle with. We need each other to help us in that struggle. Successful organisations like *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Weight Watchers* are carefully structured around this one simple truth: We all struggle, and we need each other if we are to ever win. So, in a small group here, or with a trusted friend, confess your struggle. Ask them to pray for you. Be realistic. That's the first step to triumphing over temptation.

## 2. Be responsible (1:13-14)

Secondly, James says: Be responsible. The text says, "No one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, and God confronted them, do you remember what they said? Adam's words were, "The woman *you put here with me* – she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). In other words, it was your fault, God. And Eve, what did she say? "The serpent" – the serpent you made and put in the garden – "he deceived me and I ate" (Genesis 3:13). From the very beginning,

our instinct has been to try and pin responsibility for our decisions on someone else. We blame our parents, our schooling, the economy, the government, our church, our wife. A little while back, Lorraine and I were out on a romantic date night. We were driving slowly along a side street in Takapuna, and a car started to reverse out of a driveway across the road and into the front of our car. Now I was about to expertly throw the car into reverse, when Lorraine cried out, "What are you doing? Press the horn." So I did, instead of reversing. And we collided. I was furious. The accident was entirely avoidable. And it was entirely Lorraine's fault. At least in my mind it was. If she hadn't shouted out, I would have evaded a collision – and a hefty repair bill. It was her fault. She wasn't even driving, but it was her fault. I was blaming Lorraine.

I'm not the only one. We live in a blame culture, don't we? Have you noticed how no one takes responsibility for their actions anymore? Sometimes we go to extraordinary lengths to avoid responsibility. A few years ago there was a news item about a man in Italy who was arrested for bigamy. He had 105 wives. When the authorities asked him how this had happened his response was that he had received bad legal advice. (It's hard to imagine what his lawyers might have said: "Try to keep a reasonable number of wives – a hundred or so. Just don't overdo it.") This week I read about a thief who, in the process of robbing a home, severely injured himself. So he sued the owner of the house for damages – and won. Admittedly, it was in America. But we do the same thing. All the time. James says, Don't. Temptation arises because of your "own evil desires." Take responsibility for your own actions.

### **3. Be ready (1:14-16)**

This means, thirdly, being ready. Being on your guard. Because temptation works by deception. Each of us, James says, is tempted when, by our own evil desire, we are "dragged away and enticed." The word translated "entice" means, literally, "to bait a hook." Like a baited line is used to deceive fish, temptation always looks better than it really is. But hidden beneath the attractive bait is a barbed hook. We often know we're being tempted – we know there's a hook – but we think that we can keep nibbling without getting caught. Yet James goes on to say in v 15: "After desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin." This is important. Some people think, when they feel an evil impulse, "I'm not a Christian. Or if I am, I've blown it. So it doesn't matter if I blow it a bit more." But temptation is not sin. Although it will lead to sin. If nurtured and fed long enough, temptation will give birth to sin: "And sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." Spiritual death. "Don't be *deceived*, my dear brothers." Temptation works by deception. Be on your guard.

I'm reminded of a true but tragic story involving two unemployed men who, in 1987, in search of a fast buck, entered a partly demolished radiation clinic in Goiania, Brazil. They removed a derelict cancer therapy machine containing a stainless steel cylinder, about the size of a gallon paint can, which they sold to a junk dealer for \$25. Inside the cylinder was a cake of crumbly powder that emitted a mysterious blue light. The dealer took the seemingly magical material home and distributed it to his family and friends. His six-year-old niece rubbed the glowing dust on her body. And no doubt she danced in the dark allowing the glowdust to display her movements. The dust was caesium-137, a highly radioactive substance. The lovely light was the result of the decay of caesium atoms. Another product of the decay was a flux of invisible particles with the power to damage living cells. That girl is dead. Others died or became grievously ill. More than 200 people were contaminated. Not all that glitters and glows is great. The things that shine most brightly may prove to be most deadly. Don't be deceived by temptation. Be ready.

### **4. Be re-focused (1:17)**

But then James goes on to say in v 17: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." At first glance it seems like James has suddenly changed topic, gone off on a tangent, forgotten what he was talking about. But in actual fact he's introducing a crucial fourth strategy for triumphing over temptation. Be re-focused. Don't try to resist temptation. If temptation gets your attention, it will ultimately get you. So focus your thoughts elsewhere. Focus on God's goodness to you.

In one of our *Alpha* groups this week someone said, "If I commit my life to God, my guess is I'll have to give up half the things I really enjoy." One of the enemy's tricks is to convince us that God is holding out on us. That he doesn't really want us to be happy. Remember how the serpent deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden? God had said to Eve, "You may eat from any tree in the garden, except this one tree." But the serpent says, "Did God really say that you must not eat from *any* tree in the garden?" (Genesis 3:1) He planted a doubt in her mind about the goodness of God. Once we start to doubt God's goodness, we're much more likely to reach for the bait, the marshmallow. That's why Moses warned Israel, "When the Lord your God brings you into the land he promised to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, and you are full and satisfied, be careful that you do not forget who

it was that brought you out of slavery in Egypt, and gave you all these good gifts" (Deuteronomy 6:10-12, paraphrased). It's why King David took the bait when he saw Bathsheba. God said to him through the prophet Nathan, "I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you ... I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more" (2 Samuel 12:7-8). It's why James says that God is a loving "Father," full of "light," goodness. Unlike the moon or sun in the sky, which appear to change in their position and brightness, God doesn't change, doesn't deceive. He is unchangeably good. He gives us good gifts.

## 5. Be reborn (1:18)

And the greatest gift of all is a relationship with him. James says, if you want to triumph over temptation, be realistic, be responsible, be ready, be refocused. And, finally, remember that you have been reborn. Verse 18: "He chose to give us *birth* through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created." The fundamental problem with temptation is in here. Our hearts are the problem. We're often attracted to evil. But through the word of truth – through Jesus – God has given us a new heart, a new life, a new relationship with himself. We're his children. This week we got some photos from the church kindergarten, photos they had taken of our two little girls. What struck me was how much they look like their mother. I see Lorraine in them all the time. I see myself in them. It's scary. But because they're our children, because they carry our genes, they're becoming like us. James says that we're God's children. We carry his genes – his Spirit, his nature – within us. So there's a kind of power available to us now that is greater than the power of sin. We just need to draw on it. One of the ways we do that is through regularly reading the Bible. Just as God used the "word of truth" to give us spiritual birth, he uses the word to give us spiritual strength. Jesus, when he was being tempted, said we do "not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). As we do that, James says, "we will become a kind of firstfruits of all God created." Remember, James is writing this letter to Jewish Christians. Most Jews knew that in the Old Testament God's people were required to bring the first fruit of their harvest, the best of their harvest, to God as a gift. Because it belonged to him, it was "set apart" for him. God wants us to be set apart from the rest of the world. To be an example to the world, by the way we triumph over temptation. So, again, what is your marshmallow? Where are you vulnerable to temptation? In one sense, it's a matter of life and death. God wants to help you. Will you let him?

## Questions

1. How would you define temptation? What about this: "Any urge to satisfy a good desire in a bad way"?
2. What do you think are the most common temptations of our age?
3. Organisations like *Alcoholics Anonymous* work on the H.A.L.T principle. I.e., we are usually at our weakest when we are hungry, angry, lonely or tired. When are you most vulnerable to temptation?
4. James 4:7 says, "Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." The devil uses temptation to draw us away from God. C.S. Lewis pointed out that there are two equal and opposite errors into which we can fall when it comes to the devil. One is to think about him too much. The other is to not think about him at all, to disbelieve in his existence. Where are we on that spectrum?
5. When the serpent tempted Eve, what she did *not* do was as significant as what she did do. She didn't talk about the temptation with Adam. She didn't tell God about it. She tried to handle the serpent on her own. Do you have anyone to whom you are truly accountable, someone who is standing with you when you are tempted? If not, who could that be, and what do you need to tell them?
6. Jewish rabbis taught that God made the evil tendency within humans, and so temptation was, effectively, his fault. How do we as a society, and as individuals, often evade responsibility for our failures?
7. Charles Spurgeon said that Satan's great lie is that "just once won't hurt." Discuss.
8. Read Genesis 39:7-9 and 2 Samuel 12:7-8. With which character do you most identify?
9. How can you draw strength from your relationship with God to triumph over temptation? Which of the five principles mentioned above do you think you could apply this week?