



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The Temptation from Within" (Real Faith for Real People Series)

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We continue our series on *Real Faith for Real People*. We are walking through a letter in the Bible written by, if you can believe it, the brother of Jesus Christ.

James 1:12 Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

James 1:13 No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.

James 1:14 But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it;

James 1:15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. Amen.

Let me start with this question. Have you ever been tempted to do something you should not?

The three big temptations come from the areas of money, sex, and power. But what about the temptations of popularity? Or binge eating and drinking? Or to not eat. Or the temptation to hold a grudge and not forgive? Or the temptation not to pray? Or not to go to church so we could sleep in? Or to not help someone in need? How about the temptation to gamble, or to play video games in excess?

As you can see, temptations are everywhere, and they come in various ways and in various forms. So I ask, have you ever been tempted?

Let's be authentic and real. All of us have been tempted in many areas in our lives, and maybe often.

Temptation is basically an alternative to God's plan or will. You know you're not supposed to do something, but you do it anyway. Why? Well, if we see it as a proposed alternative to God's plan or will, then basically we're saying that we don't trust that God wants the best for us. When we give in to temptation, we want to do it our way because we doubt that God's way is better.

It's the serpent's lie to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Don't trust God because God is holding back something from you. So go ahead and eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge even if God said you can eat from any tree or plant except for that one. Don't you want to know as much as God?

But our Bible passage has this important first point in understanding temptation and it is this: Don't blame God for your temptation.

God tempts no one. He might allow us to be tested that we might receive the crown of life, which I will talk about later, but He doesn't tempt us. Don't say, "God put that money that wasn't mine on the table so I had to take it." Or "God put that attractive person next to me, so I was tempted to be unfaithful to my spouse." No, James is saying that is nonsense. The very essence of God's character does not tempt us. God doesn't lead people to sin. He leads us AWAY from sin.

But get this: The most serious, devoted, mature Christian will still be tempted. So put your guard up. Phaser shields up! Why? Because we live in a world that is not centered on Christ. It is a broken world. Temptation is all around us. It is a world that has other priorities other than Jesus. It is a world where Satan, the prince of darkness rules. It is true.

There is a spiritual force in the islands, in the world that is actively working for evil and not good. It is the dark side. Satan is actively working against you, your family, your friends, and your church. Therefore, without exception, he will go after you, your family, your friends, your community, and your church. If you're on God's side, Satan will go after you and tempt you in every way he could.

I have a friend who joined our church a few years ago. She said three of the pastors in her life, including her two more recent pastors, have had affairs. Then she added, "I'll be praying for you, Pastor Dan." Yes, please! Your pastors and church leaders welcome and appreciate your prayers to be strong in our faith and stand firmly against temptations.

Paul of Tarsus was an apostle. He was THE main theologian and church planter of the early church. He wrote most of the letters in the New Testament. He was one of most spiritually mature Christians of all history, and he even experienced Jesus in a vision. He was a great leader. But Paul knew that he was not exempt from temptations.

Rom. 7:15 *I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.*

Rom. 7:16 But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good.

Rom. 7:17 So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

Rom. 7:18 And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't.

Rom. 7:19 I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

Rom. 7:20 But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

Rom. 7:21 I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong.

Rom. 7:22-23 I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.

Rom. 7:24 Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?

Rom. 7:25 Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin.

I believe that is the back and forth conversation many of us have in our minds. I do the thing I the the most. Whether a saint or a pastor, all of us struggle with temptation. All are tempted, even those who spend a lot of time praying, reading the Bible, or attending Christian events. Sin can prevail in all of us because sin is a disease in us.

A friend of mine who lives on the mainland where they have billboards, said, "I hate those billboards of women in sexy clothes or lingerie. It's like they are out to steal my husband. To get him to think of them, not me."

There are external temptations like billboards, which we are illegal here in Hawaii, but there is also porn, or certain

food, or drink, or certain behavior. All of those tempt us in some way.

But those external forces are not as great as the INTERNAL temptation that starts from within our hearts. I know this is hard for secular society to understand, but the next verse in our Bible passage makes things even more clear. That ultimately, the temptation comes from within, not from without.

James 1:13 No one, when tempted, should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.

James 1:14 But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it;

James 1:15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.

As mentioned earlier, God does not tempt us. The world does, and Satan does. BUT we need to know that is not the full picture. We are also tempted from within, which is often stronger than temptation from without.

Verse 14 says we are tempted by one's OWN DESIRE. Really? That is where our real temptation comes from? We heard that also from St. Paul's words about the sin within. Let's hear it from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. He says the source and cause of your temptation is you, in your own heart.

Matt. 15:17 Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer.

Matt. 15:18 But the words you speak come from the heart—that's what defiles you.

Matt. 15:19 For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander.

Matt. 15:20 These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you.

The point of the unwashed hands in that last verse is that in the first century Jewish culture, the Jews believed that if you wash your hands and your utensils, you are made clean physically and

spiritually. But Jesus said, no, what happens on the outside does not necessarily take care of the dirty stuff we carry in our hearts.

Just going to church or Bible studies doesn't cleanse you. But if the word of God goes into your heart, then you will be transformed inside out. You will know how to better handle the situations life throws at you. You'll have a better chance of withstanding temptation.

This is a hard talk if our philosophy is that we are basically a good people. Therefore, why do we need God? Why do we need a Savior to die for our sins? We might say, "Hey, my sins are small and I'm really basically a good person." The Bible takes a different view. We have this terminal disease inside us called sin. Sin is rebellion against God. We think we can run our lives better without Him.

But because of that, we continue to "miss the mark," which is the definition of the Greek word used for "sin." Our sinful acts miss the mark of God's plan and will for us. We realize that it is out of our own hearts that murder, adultery, theft, lying and slander come from. The Bible says that yes, we were made in God's image; yes, there is a lot of good in us, but the truth is – all areas in our lives are tainted by sin.

The irony is that once we think we are invulnerable to temptation – we are the most vulnerable. And that's why we need to have humility. Humility is the key to withstanding temptation. When we are humble, we seek God's perspective and power. When we are humble we realize we are not perfect and need help. When we are humble, we realize there are certain situations where we are more prone to temptation and so we need to be more cautious about those times. We need to slow down and seek God's wisdom.

What are those times that we need to halt and seek God's face? Those times are in the word HALT.

We are especially prone to temptation when we are **H**ungry, **A**ngry, **L**onely, and **T**ired. When we are hungry we might want to over eat or over drink. When angry we are tempted to not resolve arguments, and not seek or receive forgiveness. When we are lonely, we might drink more than we should. We might watch porn. We might seek relationships that are not healthy or appropriate. When tired, we don't think straight. Our defense systems are down.

When we enter into those periods, then we do need to HALT, regroup, and seek God's wisdom or His community. But for now I want to go into the verse 15. But we will begin with 14 to run into it and give it full context:

James 1:14 But one is tempted by one's own desire, being lured and enticed by it;

James 1:15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.

I once mentioned this before, but wrongful desire that leads unto death is kind of like having a wooden block in our stomach. Most wrongful desires that are acted out start with lying to ourselves. All deception has to do with lies, and by the way Satan is called the Father of Lies. Go read later John 8:44.

When we first lie to ourselves, this block turns and the sharp corners stab our stomach. Ouch. And the next time we fall to temptation, and we lie the block turns again and again the sharp corners hit us and it hurts. It is like our conscience getting pricked and we still know that what we are doing is wrong and it hurts.

But after a while, when we give into temptation more and more the wooden block now has the corners smoothed down after the erosion from so many turns. The block is now a smooth ball, and now when it turns because you lie, you don't feel a thing. That ball is spinning. It is no longer a block with sharp corners. It is now a smooth ball that keeps turning and turning as we give into temptation. We no longer know right from wrong and,

therefore, we are now on the way to spiritual death. Now that 15th verse makes sense:

James 1:15 then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.

Grudges start that way. You lie to yourself that a relationship cannot be resolved.

So now that we have heard these Bible verses, one could come to the conclusion that we can never live a life to withstand each and every temptation in our lives. But if we go back to verse 12 we hear we CAN endure temptation and receive the PROMISE for us all. It says:

James 1:12 Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

So what is the crown of life? The crown of life is a life transformed in Jesus. It's a life transformed in that you want God so much that the temptations shrink.

Everything good in life is from God. Everything bad in life is not from God. The good that God offers enlarges and enhances our lives. The bad that life offers shrinks our life. The bad in life makes good things small.

Gluttony, which can be a temptation for some, takes the huge blessing of food and reduces it to "the more I eat the better I feel." Fornication says I can have sex with whomever whenever. It shrinks the sex act from something sacred, beautiful, and fulfilling that's reserved for within the commitment of marriage. That's big and fulfilling. Sexual immorality reduces sex to just pleasure without commitment.

Greed says if I get more things I will be happy. Greed shrivels the large, beautiful promise that quality is more important than quantity. Slander says I can say anything I want to whomever I want and

whenever I want whether negative or positive. But God says that shrinks the beauty of language and friendship to back biting and criticism without the integrity of saying it face to face. God is big. Our temptations makes God's goodness small.

HIM Speaker and Catholic priest Richard Rohr says in essence that God always expands and multiplies while things not of God don't expand but shrinks the goodness of life.

So how do we fight temptation? How can we live transformed lives?

1. Meditate on Scripture

The monks of old would do that. They would read Scripture verses to combat various temptations. Reading God's word, meditating on it, will remind us of God's love and presence and how His plan and will is better than ours.

2. Community

A second way to fight temptation is find another brother or sister with whom you can share your temptation. Maybe even be so bold to share it in your church small group, which any of you can sign up for if you go to the website and look under small groups for places and times. There is power in a community.

I have a friend who surprised me with a call while he was on a business trip in Chicago. He said, "Could you pray for me? I am confessing there is a porn shop around the corner next to my hotel and I am tempted." He called out to his community for help. Strength in numbers! Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says "Two are better than one, for if they fall, one will lift up the other. But woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help."

3. Confession

Much like how some molds thrive in darkness and perish in sunlight, so it is with sin and temptation. Temptation loves secrecy and darkness. Confession brings it to light.

The temptation loses its power when brought into the light.

4. Remember H.A.L.T.

Remember that when we are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, we need to be careful and regroup.

5. Location, location, location

Part of the fight against temptation is to not put yourself in a bad location. If you don't want to have sex outside of marriage, then don't have a date at night in a lonely cabin in front of a fireplace with a glass of wine, lying on a bearskin rug. Bad location for not wanting to be tempted.

I close with remembering that the crown of life is simply this: a transformed life in Jesus Christ. That is the goal. God came to this earth to redeem us. He loves us. He doesn't hate us.

Jesus knew how hard temptation is. He knows we are not always strong. He knows we often are weak. He seeks all those who have fallen to temptation.

Church is not for those who haven't fallen to temptation. Church is for those who have fallen, and continue to fall but in Jesus find forgiveness, hope, and love so that they can help others fight temptation too. Jesus went to the cross to be a sacrifice so that all of our sins, which is the result of falling into temptation, are forgiven. He has paid the bill for our sins.

So if you have blown it, don't keep beating yourself up. Don't think, oh now I have to pay for my sins. No, don't keep repaying a bill that your host has already paid. Accept God's forgiveness. This is the good news. When we have blown it, God forgives and He still wants to have a relationship with us.

I close with this story about our Lord in the Gospel of John chapter 8. Once when Jesus was sitting down and calmly teaching a crowd about God's love, a group of religious leaders who were highly legalistic brought to him a woman

who was caught in the act of adultery and placed this woman right in front of the crowd. They said, "The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

Strangely, Jesus got up but then stooped down to write in the dust with his finger. The Bible said, the leaders kept demanding an answer, perhaps ridiculing him saying, "Come on Jesus, what do you say? Come on Holy boy, what say ye? Shall we get our stones now? She clearly is a sinner. Shall we stone her?" If you are reading the Bible for the first time you are thinking, wow, what did Jesus do next? This is a page-turner. What happens next?

John 8:7 They kept demanding an answer, so Jesus stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" (NLB)

And then get this, Jesus stoops down again and writes in the dust. And when the woman's accusers saw and heard this, they slowly slipped away one by one starting with the oldest first and then the youngest.

Jesus keeps writing in the dust until all of the accusers are gone and it's just the woman still in the middle of his Rabbi class he was teaching, which had to be the best Rabbi class in the world, and the Bible says this:

John 8:10 Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"

John 8:11 "No, Lord," she said. And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

When we fall into temptation, remember this story. Because I believe Jesus would be saying to you, "Okay, you blew it. Maybe this is the tenth time you have blown it on the same issue. But, I don't condemn you. So go and sin no more. Get out there. Don't fall into your temptations, but hear, this; I don't condemn you for failing."

And here's the thing that should get us all teary eyed or have a lump in our

throats. Before Jesus came to earth there was only one human person who could wear the true crown of life. That was Jesus. But amazingly, He loves us so much He left His throne to come down to earth, to experience the SAME temptations you and I have had, though He never gave in.

And when He walked here on earth, when He met people like a woman caught in adultery He was saying this: "I am offering you my crown (Me? Me who fails and falls to temptation?) Yes, I'm offering you MY crown of life. I have come down to earth to offer it to you, if you would just follow me and accept my forgiveness. I am giving you my crown that is rightfully mine."

And you say, "How can I trust Him?" We can trust Him because Jesus didn't just say, "Turn away from temptations." He actually became human Himself to experience those same temptations once in a desert and once in a garden. He knows our temptations first hand. He made the right choice you weren't able to and then He let YOU receive that honor instead. He took the crown off His head and said, "Here you wear it."

When we really know Jesus, then we will understand that temptation is all about OUR needs and OUR wants and OUR happiness. The antidote to temptation is to live a life about OTHERS' needs, OTHERS' wants, OTHERS' happiness.

Put this all together and I say, "Wow, this is the God I want to follow." Jesus today says to you, If you have blown it, AND HAVE GIVEN INTO TEMPTATION you are forgiven, but yes, go and sin no more... for then you will be closer to me and be transformed, and here now, take and receive my crown of the life for I offer it to you. Let's pray.