

FAITH TRACKS

JAMES 1:12-27

You have two choices... You can go or you can stay... you can listen or you can leave... you can log on or you can sign off... you can say yes or you can say no... you can speak out or you can stay silent... you can stand up or you can walk away... You are in a temptation situation... And it's your choice as to what you'll do!

The temptation situation is different for each one of us. We're all prone to different temptations. Recently, a survey asked the question, "What's the hardest thing in life for you to control? The top response was weight, 38% of folks had a problem controlling their weight - 32.3% said spending - 16.9% identified fear - 10.8% had a hard time managing anger – just 1.5% struggled with substance abuse." I'm sure in reality these percentages are higher. But my point is we're all tempted differently. The temptation situation varies from person to person.

When was the last time you found yourself in such a situation? You did a double-take – you were lured in and baited – your pulse raced and palms got sweaty – there was a lump in your throat - you were forced to make a decision... How did you fare? What choice did you make?

The book of James is about faith that leaves tracks - that bears an imprint. Think of this letter as a walk in the woods, and James is our scout. He points to the hoof prints by the stream where faith took a drink... He shows us the tracks on the path where faith decided to cross... He reveals the matted down grass where faith laid down to rest... Through the scout's eyes faith has been everywhere. It's crisscrossed the whole forest. And this is the impact real faith should have in our lives.

Last week we saw faith's impact on how we approach trials and manage money - but faith also effects how we'll fare in the temptation situation... When a Christian gets tempted real faith wakes up - kicks in - goes active... leaves tracks... Pretend faith is nowhere to be found. James begins his discussion on temptation by stating a positive. He wants us to know the outcome for those who overcome temptation... Verse 12, "Blessed (or happy) is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." There is a reward if you resist!

The NT mentions five crowns or rewards to which we can aspire... In 1 Corinthians 9 the imperishable crown goes to a believer who lives a disciplined life... In 1 Thessalonians 2 the crown of rejoicing is awarded to a Christian who shares his faith... 1 Peter 5 the crown of glory that's given to the faithful elder who feeds God's flock... In 2 Timothy 4 the crown of righteousness goes to those who lovingly anticipate Jesus' return. And James 1 the a crown of life belongs to folk who endure temptation.

Isn't this ironic, "the crown of life" is awarded to those who avoid the path to death. Temptation is the first step in the long slide to destruction. Satan likes to blur black and white into gray. He obscures the lines. He likes to justify the compromise. He provides excuses and rationalizations. But according to God's Word the temptation situation presents a stark contrast. There's always a clear choice – a crown of life or a path to death?

When a person gets crowned he goes from commoner to royalty – from a subject to a ruler. Crown a person and he's now part of the ruling class. The person who wears the crown is the only person who's truly free. Don't you want to gain some self-control? Don't you want to take charge of your life again? Aren't you tired of being a slave to whatever it is that controls you? A crown of life is what you need to be free. And you can receive it by learning how to handle yourself... in the temptation situation...

Certainly, it's wise to avoid temptation when possible, but to think we can avoid all temptation is naïve. In a fallen world there'll always be temptation. Verse 13 James writes, "Let no one say when he is tempted..." Notice it's not "IF he's tempted, but "WHEN he's tempted..." At some point everyone faces the temptation situation...

Some people assume that when they become a Christian they'll no longer be tempted. Not so! Just the opposite is true. Temptation intensifies. Once you choose sides the battle begins. As long as you're under the devil's thumb he doesn't focus on you or worry about you. But the moment you decide to live for Jesus you're a threat. He targets you for temptation.

Once a pastor and a new believer were out duck hunting when the novice Christian asked the pastor about this very issue... temptation... The pastor explained, "If two ducks are flying overhead, and you shoot both – kill one and wound the other – which duck will you fetch first?" The ole boy answered, "Obviously, the wounded one. The dead duck ain't going anywhere." And that's Satan's approach to who he tempts. The person who's dead in sin is no threat to Satan – he ain't going anywhere. But if you love Jesus you're out to be a witness and change the world. And you can count on Satan to set traps and spring temptation.

You will be tempted, but when it happens, James tells us, "Let no one say... I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone." When I'm tempted here's the first truth I must remember – a responsibility rests with me! I can pray to God, and ask Him for His help.. and He'll give it... God even provides "a way of escape." But in the temptation situation there are choices I have to make! I can't blame God. I've heard people who were tempted talk like God was suppose to reach down from heaven, and grab them by their belt loop and drag them out of the situation. "I failed because God let me down..." Or "God put me in a no-win situation." James makes it clear that God never puts us in a no-win situation! People like to play the blame game...

This is what the first man, Adam, did after he sinned in the Garden. When Adam buckled in to temptation he blamed God for his failure. He complained, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." It was the woman... God gave him. Adam blamed God.

Did you hear of the obese man who bought donuts for the folks at work? When he went on his diet his co-workers figured he would have to stop his habit. But the man enjoyed buying the donuts, and blessing his friends. So one day he prayed, "Lord, if you want me to pick up donuts for the guys at the office let there be an empty parking space in front of the bakery." And sure enough, there was an empty parking spot!... The guy found it on his 9th trip around the block. God must've wanted him to buy donuts!

I hear that kind of foolishness all the time... "If God hadn't put that woman in the cubicle next door I never would've committed adultery..." "If God had given me better parents I wouldn't have done drugs..." "If God had blessed my business I wouldn't have fudged on my taxes..."

Listen to a paraphrase of verse 13, “Don’t let anyone under pressure to give in to evil say, ‘God is trying to trip me up.’ God... puts evil in no one’s way. The temptation to give in to evil comes from us and only us...”

You’ll never be victorious over temptation if you play the blame game. People blame their parents, their upbringing, their environment, their job or lack of job – you name it they blame it. Everybody today is a victim. I read of a Tampa man who filed a lawsuit against his employer, Anheuser-Busch. He blamed his alcoholism on the company. Since all employees are given four cases of free beer each month, in this man’s mind, it was the company’s fault he was addicted to alcohol. The lawsuit sounded as if the CEO of Anheuser-Busch came to the man’s house every night, popped a top, and forced the guy to guzzle...

Flip Wilson use to blame the devil for his sin. His famous line was, “The devil made me do it.” I’ve heard Christians who had the same excuse. They were possessed by a demon. They needed someone to cast out the evil spirit. Ridiculous, they didn’t want to admit their lack of self-control.

Once a little girl who was told not to eat the cookies - but she was hungry, so she bit... Later, when her mom confronted her the little girl whimpered, “I just climbed up to smell them, and my tooth got caught.” It’s the cookies fault! They jumped off the platter and hung on her tooth. Here’s the first truth to recall in a temptation situation - I’m responsible. My faith is being tested, and I’m going to have to make the right choices.

James is clear, it’s not God who tempts. He says in verse 14, “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.” Here’s where we get into trouble... when we’re “drawn away.”

The initial temptation is not a sin. Even Jesus was tempted. It’s not a sin to see a gorgeous girl - even recognize that she’s pretty... It’s not a sin to want a drink... or try to make more money... or enjoy people liking you... But after the initial awareness what you do determines if it becomes sin. Sin is pleasurable. If it weren’t fun it wouldn’t be a temptation. As long as you have a pulse you’ll be tempted. But faith sees beyond the temptation. Faith leaves tracks. It keeps me from acting on the temptation in a way that will shame me, hurt someone else, or embarrass our Savior.

Martin Luther once said, “Evil thoughts are like birds. You can’t keep them from flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.” To dwell on a thought - to roll it over and savor its taste – this is what turns it into a sin. Sin begins only when you yield to the temptation. James speaks of when we’re “drawn away by (our) own desires and enticed.” Entertain an thought long enough and it’ll flare up into a desire.

Understand temptation always begins in the mind. Our thought life is the first battlefield. You can’t always shield yourself from tempting thoughts – at times they come out of nowhere - but we don’t have to latch on to those thoughts. The downward spiral begins when we hold on to an evil desire. When we ponder what it would be like to have that extra money - or hold her in your arms - or be popular with the “cool” crowd... allow a desire to pull you from God – and a terrible cycle of destruction is set in motion. Play with a temptation long enough, and you start to slide down a slippery slope. And beware, you’ll eventually come to a point of no return!

Temptation is like buying a soda from a soft drink machine. Say the can costs a dollar and you've got four quarters... You can drop the 1st quarter in the slot even before you're sure you're really thirsty. Same with the 2nd quarter and 3rd quarter. Maybe you don't like the selections or prefer a bag of chips. You can even deposit the last quarter in the machine and still opt out. Just hit the button and it'll return your money

But once you push the select button, and the can starts sliding down the shoot – no matter what you do – you can beat and shake the machine all you want – but at that point you're going to get what you've asked for! The machine has already taken your money. You can't get it back. This is what happens in the temptation situation – it's a quarter here, a quarter there - but eventually you come to a point of no return...

James describes the progressive nature of temptation in verse 15. Once you're enticed, or hooked, **"Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."** When aroused desires conceive they have unplanned consequences. They give birth to unwanted outcomes... An evil thought inflames a desire. That desire draws you away from God... then one day you wake up in a place you never wanted to go... with people you don't like... suffering ramifications you never planned... facing a future that seems hopeless.

James describes it vividly, **"desire conceives and gives birth to sin."** The egg of desire gets fertilized with the seed of rebellion – then suddenly you'll holding an active, crying, out-of-control, real-live baby sin. What was once just a thought - conceives - and turns into a full-blown, real-life situation – complete with all the accompanying consequences. Up until this point, you could've dealt with it privately, with minimal embarrassment. But it's hard to hide a baby. Now the sin is out in the open. Dealing with it involves other people. It's a mess. I've heard it said, **"Forbidden fruit is responsible for many a bad jam."** James would agree!

And it can get worse! Baby sins grow up. James warns us, **"and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."** If you don't confess, and live a life of repentance that full-blown baby action will get worse. It'll grow up into a full-grown life of evil. Habitual sin sets in. Addiction occurs. You're trapped. Steve Farrar writes, **"Sin takes you farther than you want to go, keeps you longer than you want to stay, costs you more than you want to pay."** It's like sliding off a cliff. When you first feel your feet give way you can steady yourself... Start to slide and you can still reach out and grab a rail... But there comes a point when it's a free fall. You can't stop on your own. As James puts it, **"when (sin) is full-grown, (it) brings forth death."**

Here's James' conclusion - temptation is beatable. But it's truth that sets us free. Anytime a person overcomes temptation you'll find faith tracks. How do you resist temptation? Well, how are you forgiven... how are you filled with the Spirit... how do you grow... It's all a result of faith.

This is why James tells us in verses 16-17, **"Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning."** Faith diffuses deception. It vaporizes the power of sin. When forbidden fruit gets dangled in front of me – when temptation teases, and tantalizes, and arouses a desire – in that moment, I need faith. I have to believe that **"every good gift and every perfect gift"** is from God. It's easier to say no to temptation if there's a better offer on the table. Sin is the easy way... the quick fix... the immediate release... the escape from responsibility... But Every **"good and perfect gift"** is of God.

Ultimately, all temptation is a short-cut.

When Satan tempted Jesus he promised Him the kingdoms of the world. Ironically, Jesus already possessed those kingdoms. But Satan's temptation was "You can have it now." Satan was saying to Jesus – bow to me – and there'll be no cross, no hurt, no waiting, no pain, no betrayal... And this is always Satan's temptation.

You can have sex... without the commitments of marriage.
You can have money... without the hard work of an honest day's pay.
You can have joy... without the quiet of being alone with God.
You can have power... without learning to rely on the Holy Spirit.
You can have character... without the endurance gained through trials.

The great power of temptation – whatever form it might take - is that Satan offers it right now. That's his trap. That's the bait. That's the noose. And when you take it... you'll hang yourself. The Father God in heaven is the author of "every good gift and every perfect gift," whereas Satan always gives out "gag gifts." The jokes on you.

I heard of an impulsive shopper who took her credit cards and froze them in the middle of a huge block of ice. This way whenever she was tempted to make a purchase she had to wait until the ice melted. The delay gave her time to think. Did she really need the item on sale? When temptation rises we need to pause and think! As James says, "Do not be deceived..." The good and perfect stuff comes only from God. I love Psalm 84:11, "No good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly." We hear God's promise... "No good thing will He withhold!" But in the moment – in the heat of the battle - you've got to act on God's promise. In the midst of the temptation situation... you've got to have faith!

God's promises are always true. James proves this in verse 18, "Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." We're Christians due to the will and word of God. We believed - took God at His word! We were saved by His promise. James calls the believers "firstfruits of His creatures." Christians are a new order of human being. We're alive to God. Born again spiritually. Do I believe in aliens? Absolutely! You and I are aliens on a fallen planet. We're lights in the dark. We're citizens of heaven living on earth.

Verse 19, "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak..." This is not normal human practice, but alien behavior. Among the talk show generation – in a world of constant tweeting and blogging – people are quick to speak and spin, and sloooow to really listen. God created the human body with two ears and one mouth for a reason. Obviously He wanted us to do twice as much listening as we do talking.

Last week Justice Clarence Thomas logged his 5th full year of silence in the Supreme Court. Cases are argued for an hour, during which the justices interrupt the lawyers and pepper them with questions. The average Supreme Court case gets interrupted by 50 questions from the judges. When asked about his silence, Thomas explained, "You should allow people to complete their answers and their thought. I find the coherence you get from a conversation far more helpful than the rapid-fire questions." Imagine, allow someone to complete their thought. What a novel idea!

Did you hear about the professor who could speak multiple languages? He was given the ultimate compliment - someone said, “The man knew how to stay silent in seven languages.” It’s probably easier to learn a new language, than it is to learn to hold your tongue in the one that you know.

Every believer should be “slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” Here’s a vital verse. We’re told, “the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.” “Next time I see him, I’m going let him have it with both barrels...” “I’m going to give that girl a piece of my mind...” “I’ll lower the boom...” And what will you accomplish? You’ll feel justified... You’ll get it off your chest... But will it produce the righteousness of God in that situation? Nine times out of ten you’ll make matters worse. We fly off the handle. The truth comforts and heals, but used wrongly it can wound and bruise.

I suppose, I’m the classic example of the guy who can be so right he becomes wrong! After four teenagers I’m sensitive to this phenomena. You get angry and rightly so! Your kids disobey you, and act stupid, and disobey God. And you want to beat them over the head with the truth. But my wrath seldom produces God’s righteousness! Spirit-led and temper-fueled don’t yield the same results. I see now how I could’ve better handled certain situations if I’d been... “slow to speak, slow to wrath...”

James adds in verse 21 “Therefore lay aside all filthiness, and overflow of wickedness.” The Greek phrase reads, “Get the wax out of your ears.” Which brings up another one of my problems... Over the last couple of years, about every six months, I have to go to the doctor and have excess wax sucked out of from my ears. It’s not a very pleasant procedure.

Here’s how the symptoms start... I get angry with our sound man. Last time it happened I came in on a Sunday and nothing sounded right. I’m thinking “Mark Nichols has lost his touch. What’s happened to the ole boy?” That Sunday morning every instrument sounded muffled and muddy! Then on Monday my muffled hearing turned into an earache. That afternoon I was at the doctor getting the suction applied to my ears. And guess what happened the next Sunday? Mark wasn’t such a bad sound man after all. What a difference it makes to get your ears cleared.

This is what happens when we “lay aside all filthiness, and overflow of wickedness...” – the muddiness and confusion dissipates. Clarity returns. We start to hear clearly again... the voice of the Holy Spirit... our wife’s concerns... our kids’ needs... Voices I was oblivious too, I hear again...

James adds “and receive with meekness (a surrendered attitude) the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” It’s not the spoken word, or the heard word - but “the implanted word” that saves. New life occurs when we surrender to the intent of God’s Word, and welcome its effects... Real faith belongs to a person who wants and is willing to leave tracks.

This is why James says, “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” Real faith isn’t just about good intentions, it provokes action. It becomes active, and aggressive. Faith leaves prints. We need to be careful not to allow a dichotomy to develop between our faith and practice. Some Christians have a set of beliefs, they never act on.

The Bible is God's inerrant Word... they just never read it or study it. We need to be cheerful givers... but they're stingy with their offering. Christians should witness... it's just been 10 years since you tried. God hates divorce... but if my spouse bounces one more check... The Church is a family... but I don't have time to call a hurting friend. Prayer is powerful... but rarely do I pray more than 5 minutes... Some church goers have an entire belief system that never invades how they really live. It has very little impact on everyday and everywhere.

DL Moody once said, "Every Bible should be bound with shoe leather." In other words, a biblical faith is not just hearing, or dissecting, or discussing Scripture... but doing it. The Bible is a How-to Guide. It's not just packed with abstract theology, it's practical instruction we're to follow. I like the acronym, "BIBLE: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth."

In today's church there's so much good Bible teaching we've spawned a whole class of professional connoisseurs – like wine tasters! They go from church to church sipping the teaching – evaluating - but they never apply! Like an overweight, uncoordinated sports writer who's never played a down of football in his entire life sitting in the press box criticizing the QB. I know I'm not the best teacher around, but I always manage to give you a nugget or two to apply and obey. Rather than grade, why not obey! James is afraid of a form of self-deception where you hear so many Bible Studies You start to mistake hearing for participation. To hear and to do are not the same! And God wants us all to be doers – not just hearers.

Verse 23 "For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was." You see your reflection in a mirror – you got a big bugger – but you don't clean it up. This is a hearer only. He's always gaining info he never acts on. Some of us have heard Bible Studies out the wazoo. We don't need to stop coming to the studies, we just need to start putting it into practice. "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does." The Law of bondage was the Mosaic Law. It provided rules without the power to obey those rules. But the New Covenant is the perfect law of liberty – it not only provides us wisdom to live, but the power to live. Which is all the more reason to be a doer of the word, not just a hearer.

Verse 26, "If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless." Faith that grabs hold of a heart will get control of its wagging tongue. Finally, verse 27, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." If you want to see faith, here's how it shows up - a compassion for the weak and a desire for purity and holiness.

For as far back as I remember, until the day she died, every Sunday afternoon my Dad drove downtown to visit his invalid sister named Ann. Ann lived in a nursing home. Dad would buy her a Coke, and they'd chit-chat. During the week Ann called the house incessantly just to make sure Dad was coming on Sunday. She was lonely and just wanted to talk. When we boys answered the phone, and got annoyed it was Ann again, Dad would quote us this verse in James. Pure religion "visits orphans and widows." It's one think to talk about God's love, it's another to live it out! This is real faith. It lives it out... in the temptation situation... in how we hear, and when we talk, and what we do... In all of life, faith leaves tracks!