

## **James 1: Getting Vaccinated Against Sin**

By [Rev. Charles L. Jacob](#)

James, chapter one, beginning at verse 13. This is the Word of God.

When tempted, 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 desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created.

"All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever. Amen."

Well, it's summertime, and many of you will find yourselves swimming with your families. You've got memberships at clubs or neighborhood pools. As I was reflecting on my own childhood days at the pool, I remembered a couple of stunts that seem particularly appropriate this morning.

If you keep your eyes open at the pool, you'll probably see some kid doing exactly what I used to do. These are time-honored practices. First, if you want to feel what it's like to "run on air," you get a good running start on the diving board and launch yourself across it. You watch those little legs keep pumping as if they're still running—until, of course, they crash into the water.

Then there's the other experiment—usually attempted when the lifeguard isn't watching. You climb back onto the pool deck, get another running start, and think, I wonder what it's like to walk on water. Off you go, legs churning, hoping to get at least a step or two in before the water pulls you under. As a former lifeguard, I've seen plenty of kids try it, and I've stopped more than a few in their tracks.

It's a stunt we do all the time as children. But I wonder how many of us view the Christian life in the same way.

For some, the Christian life feels like trying to walk on air or walk on water. You get a running start—Sunday morning gives you a head of steam and a renewed resolve to live better for Jesus. But by the time you reach the parking lot, you're already crashing into the water because the fellow ahead of you won't take the gap to turn left. Suddenly you're irritated, and everything from the worship service seems forgotten.

Or you try to “walk on water,” and you get discouraged. And James here is dealing with a profoundly relevant subject. What is more relevant than temptation?

All of us face it. Daily—dare I say hourly—we are besieged by temptation. We all know what it feels like to be caught in a kind of magnetic force field. You know the feeling: suddenly you're being drawn to do something or say something—or to avoid doing something you ought to do. You feel this pull, seemingly inexorable, toward the wrong thing or away from the right thing.

So you try to resist. You remind yourself, “James 4 says resist the devil and he'll flee from you.” And you do resist—for a while. But what you find is that the pull only seems to grow stronger.

And then, if you're anything like me, all too often you succumb. You do what you shouldn't do, say what you shouldn't say, think what you shouldn't think—or you fail to do, say, or think what you should. And afterward you're filled with regret and remorse, wondering whether this Christian life is really for real, or whether it's just another attempt to run on water.

James is dealing with this profound subject. Verses 13–15 describe the path to defeat in the heat of temptation. Verses 16–18 describe the path to victory. So let's look at these two paths together.

### **The Path to Defeat: Doubting God's Goodness**

If I could summarize the path to defeat in three words, it would be these: doubting God's goodness.

Is it not easy for us to doubt His goodness? If you're honest with your own heart, you'll find that all of us struggle with doubt. Not having the job you want. Not having the home you want. Not having the husband or wife you want. Not having the children you want. Not having the life you want. Not living in the city you'd prefer. There are endless grounds for disgruntlement.

Not getting the prognosis you hoped for. Not having the health, talents, or gifts you wish you had. You hear testimonies of how God has dealt kindly with

others, and you think, God has surely been good to them—but somehow I didn't get the leftovers. There was nothing left on the plate for me.

So you begin to believe God may be good to someone else, but you're not so sure He's being good to you.

Or you look out at the world—one atrocity after another. A mother killing her children. One tribe slaughtering another—half a million in Rwanda in a matter of weeks. Memories of the Holocaust. Our African American brothers and sisters know firsthand the weight of injustice in our own land.

I must confess, in recent years I've found myself wondering how fragile justice really is. As a child, I thought, Surely if twelve jurors reach a unanimous verdict, that must be justice. But DNA evidence has shown us that many people have gone to prison for crimes they didn't commit—some for years. Was God good to them?

One of the men who disciplined my brothers and me came to faith in prison. He was an African American man who went back to prison for a crime he didn't commit and remained there for years until he was finally released. Was God good to him?

There are countless ways we come to doubt God's goodness.

And when we're struggling with temptation—especially those of you who have wrestled with habitual sin for years—you begin to wonder not only whether God is helping you, but whether He might even be against you. Why has He made me this way? You begin to blame Him for your temptations.

### **Doubting God's goodness.**

And once you doubt His goodness, you begin to take matters into your own hands. If God isn't doing a very good job, I'll have to order my life myself. So you start looking for happiness, pleasure, significance, comfort, or security in things apart from God and His ways.

If you're an unbeliever this morning, holiness may sound repressive—chains, misery, stifling rules. Nothing about joy, delight, or love.

But I would submit that Christians go through the same process. You may not want to cast overboard all of God's ways. You may not want to throw everything into the sewer. But do we not at times think, God's way is good... but could I just supplement it? Just a little pinch of sin over here?

That's why we sin. No one wakes up saying, "I want to be miserable tonight." We sin because we believe it's the path to happiness. We don't want to

abandon the whole thing—we just want to “supplement” it. Like someone with a healthy diet who thinks, “I’ll just add a few vitamins,” we think, “I’ll just add a little sin to spice things up.”

Why? Because we’ve lost full confidence that God’s way is best.

Do you think Adam and Eve wanted to be thrown out of the garden? Of course not. It was the Garden of Delight. They didn’t want to trade all of that for one piece of fruit. They simply thought, “God has given us a great garden, but He hasn’t given us everything. So we’ll just add one thing. Just one.”

And so it is with us. When we doubt God’s goodness, when we doubt His sufficiency, when we doubt that His way is not only right but best, we begin to supplement. Look at your own life—your sins, your patterns of sin. They are evidence that in those particular areas, you doubt that God’s way is best.

And what becomes the binding authority for deciding which parts of God’s law you’ll keep and which parts you’ll forsake? James tells us: your desire. Your own heart becomes the authority. If God gets you 90% of the way, wonderful. You’ll embrace that 90%. And you’ll embrace your own way for the other 10%.

Once you begin doubting God’s way, and once you start seeking happiness apart from Him, you have located the center of temptation. It is right here—in your own heart.

And notice what James is saying: the center of temptation is not the devil. We often say, “The devil made me do it.” No, he didn’t. The devil may give you an opportunity, but it is your heart that makes you do it.

Temptation comes as an idea. But when your imagination and desires wrap themselves around that idea—If I have this, I’ll finally be happy—that’s the magnetic pull. And it comes from here.

So don’t blame the world. Don’t blame the culture. Don’t blame the devil. James says the problem is here—our own desires.

This becomes hugely significant when we think about how to deal with temptation. Because once your heart has become convinced that life and joy are found outside of God’s way, telling someone “just don’t do it” is like telling a drowning man not to breathe. It’s like telling a starving man not to eat. His heart believes life comes from this sin.

That’s what happens when sin deceives you. It convinces you that its way is the path to life, when in fact James says it is the path to death.

Let me speak to the gentlemen for a moment. One of the things we are tempted to do is derive all our life, significance, and identity from our work. If we accomplish something, we feel like somebody. If we fail, we feel like nobody—“another bum off the streets,” to borrow Rocky’s words.

So we begin to live as if our entire identity depends on how well we do at work. It becomes an obsession. And when you become obsessed, you begin to die to everything else around you. You die to your wife. You die to your children. Your heart grows numb.

**If you doubt that, ask your wife.**

When you become obsessed, you don’t even realize what’s happening. It’s like Pharaoh in Exodus 10. He’s suffering plague after plague, yet he keeps hardening his heart. Finally his advisors say, “Let them go. Don’t you realize Egypt is destroyed?” Pharaoh couldn’t see the destruction—because he was obsessed.

And so it is with you and me. If it’s not careers for men, it may be something else for women. I’ve known godly women who become fixated on a man—an unbelieving man, a man leading them away from the church. Everyone around her sees the danger, but she is convinced she must have him to be happy. And she is dying—to her church, her community, her family—and she doesn’t even know it.

When I was in college, a woman on my floor—an extraordinary athlete—discovered drugs. One morning she walked into my room with a broken arm. The day before she had been fine. She said, “I found a new freedom.” She had been high, climbed a tree, and jumped—believing she could fly.

You hear that story and think, “She’s crazy.” Dear friends, every time you and I sin, we are jumping out of the tree thinking we can fly. It’s that absurd.

My brother and I were once pulled over in Alabama. The officer lectured me for forty minutes and then let me choose my punishment: tailgating (four points, \$200) or speeding (two points, \$100). Sounded like a no-brainer. But he said, “You’d be surprised the choices people make.” That’s irrational. Yet that is sin. It deceives us into choosing misery.

**The Path to Victory: Rediscovering the Goodness of God**

So what is the path to victory? Rediscovering the goodness of God.

James knows his readers struggle—just like you and me—to truly embrace that God is good to us. So he wants to beat it into our heads and hearts that God really is good, and that He really does intend the best for us.

First, James says God is the exclusive source of goodness. “Every good and perfect gift” comes from Him alone. Not from sin. Having that man won’t satisfy you. Having the best career won’t satisfy you. Having the children you always wanted won’t ultimately satisfy you. Every good, every perfect gift comes from God—not from sin.

Second, His goodness is immeasurable. He is the “Father of the heavenly lights.” Think of Genesis 1. Billions of galaxies—many invisible except through the Hubble telescope. God has spun entire galaxies that appear to us as a single pinprick of light. That is how immeasurable His goodness is.

And you’re miserable because you didn’t get those shoes? God has given you the galaxies.

Third, His goodness is unchangeable. He “does not change like shifting shadows.” Nothing can get between God’s goodness and you. God cannot cease to be good without ceasing to be God.

Fourth, His goodness is redemptive. He has given us birth through His word—new life, new heart, new desires, new bodies.

And finally, His goodness is ennobling. We are “firstfruits”—uniquely belonging to Him.

Brothers and sisters, we too often try to deal with temptation by saying, “Just say no.” But that’s like telling a starving man not to eat. Or we say, “Get accountability.” Accountability is helpful, but it doesn’t change the heart. Or we say, “Just think differently.” So we quote Scripture like a mantra, hoping it will magically drive away temptation. The problem isn’t that Scripture isn’t in your head. The problem is that it isn’t in your heart. You’re not believing it.

As you head out today, you will face temptation again. Temptation is inescapable in this world. I long for the day when I will no longer sin, no longer even be tempted to sin—in fact, no longer be able to sin. That day is coming. But it is not today.

So when you find yourself back in the grip of temptation, ask yourself:

**\*\*What is it about God’s goodness that I don’t believe?**

What is it about the gospel that seems insufficient for my happiness? What is it about God that I think is coming up short?

There you will find the root of your temptation. When God is not sufficient, you will look elsewhere for satisfaction.

And when you start asking those questions, you will discover a hunger—an incredible, insatiable hunger to be satisfied. And if you keep your eyes fixed on Him, it will become a hunger for Him—a hunger to know His goodness more, to receive the benefits of the gospel more.

And Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

Dear friends, what tree are you trying to jump out of for “new freedom” today? I can tell you this: it is not freedom. It is slavery. It is bondage. It is insanity.

The gospel invites you to come and feast on the goodness of God. Forsake the pig slop. Come to the feast.

*This article was based upon a verbatim transcript of a sermon by Rev. Charles L. Jacob. It has been edited through the use of Copilot, as well as the theological editors at Third Millennium Ministries.*

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