

## Overcoming Sin

James 1

By [Dr. Sinclair Ferguson](#)

Please open your Bibles again to the first chapter of the Book of James. Those of you who are seasoned preachers or who are taking careful notes will have realized that in the first hour we got only half of the first message, and so I've been left in somewhat of a quandary as to whether I should finish the first one or start the second one! The more cynical among you will think, "He's discovered that one they were giving away free is the one he was going to preach as the second message..." but I can assure you that is by no means the case. And I hope I have chosen the better part, since there's a free message there if you want it, to finish the first message.

So we're going to turn to part two, and let me read again from the end of that section we read earlier on, which comes to a climactic promise in the words of verse 12:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial; for when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shadow due to change. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures. Know this, my beloved brothers.

James' concern, as we have already seen as he enunciates it earlier on in this wonderful letter, is that Christians should go on to maturity. "Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

One day I was trying to help my wife, which is my case is almost always a mistake in judgment. We were in Scotland at the time, and she was hanging out things on the washing line—not because Scotland does not yet have tumble dryers, but because Scots are cheap and mean. And as I tried to help her hang things on the washing line, she turned to me, and with characteristically

devastating grace, said, “You know, what I really needed from the Lord was a practical man, and I'm still not sure why He gave me the least practical man He's ever created.”

And if you're anything like that, whenever you venture into the do-it-yourself business, the last thing that you want to do is to test your workmanship, because you have no confidence that your workmanship will be able to stand the test.

Over and over again in Scripture, it becomes so plain that God's real workmanship, His lasting workmanship...and because it's lasting workmanship, as it were, to make sure not to Himself, but to us...He has no lack of confidence in His workmanship, but to give us confidence in His workmanship, He tests His workmanship. He puts it under strain. He puts it through trials. And in those trials God does not gain confidence in His workmanship, but we gain confidence and stability and strength in our workmanship.

And it's evident from what James has to say here in these first sections of his little letter that he understands that that testing of God takes place providentially in different ways. But is the testing that God brings upon us in providence in the sufferings that we experience externally? But he's speaking in these verses about various kinds of trials, and he recognizes also—and this, I think, is the reason for his very careful language in verse 13—he recognizes also that God in His sovereign providence allows His children not only to face the external trials, but to encounter internal trials; not only suffering from without, but temptation that arises from within. These two are parts of the trials, the testing, of the Christian life.

And James is insistent in this context, of course, to emphasize that when we are thus internally tempted, internally tried, we need to be able to distinguish between the principle that God never Himself solicits us to sin, on the one hand; with, on the other hand, the principle that God permits such trials of our faith in order that as we resist the stress of temptation, and as the stress and pressure of temptation may grow and develop in our lives, we resist it increasingly. It is in this way we build up, as it were, spiritual muscle and grow to maturity.

I remember a good number of years ago now, a young pastor in the PCA. At the end of a weekend in his church, somebody I had taught at seminary sitting down, weary as I was at the end of much preaching over the weekend, and saying, “Now, before I let you go to bed I have one last thing to ask you.” And I was altogether unprepared for the question he posed, and since he died shortly afterwards, profoundly grateful for the impression it made upon my life when he said, “I want you to take me through the steps that will enable me to overcome temptation and sin. I want you to take me through the steps that will help me to overcome temptation and sin.”

And just as we're thinking in connection with external suffering, how important it

is for us when we face ourselves, or when we seek to encourage and help others who are facing it. So in terms of this internal stress, this internal trial of temptation, it is as though James is sitting down beside us as our pastor and saying, 'One of the things you need to be able to know is to know how to face, and to resist, and to overcome temptation.' And I want us to see in these verses from verse 12 through to the end of verse 18, that for all practical purposes, he's wanting to teach us three things—three things that we absolutely need to know and understand if we are going to grow in our ability to resist temptation.

### **I. We must accept responsibility for our own sin.**

The first and most obvious one is what he says in verses 13 and 14, and that is that we must accept responsibility for it in ourselves. Now, James, I presume, is not altogether blind to the fact that Satan is a tempter, but he is not here concerned about that dimension of temptation in which Satan is engaging; although, as we shall see, this passage has a great deal to teach us about that context. What he's focusing his attention on is this: that when we are solicited by temptation, we are solicited because there is a remainder of sin upon which temptation lands, and by which it is able (in his own language) to seduce us.

Now, what does that mean in practical terms? That I accept responsibility for temptation? It means this: that I recognize the nature of indwelling sin for what it actually is. One of the fascinating things about the way in which particularly the New Testament letters speak about sin, at least to my mind, is the frankness with which they speak about the sins of Christians; the frankness with which the New Testament names the sins with which Christians are constantly struggling.

Having re-entered American televised religion in the last year and a half, I've been impressed all over again by the "name it and claim it" character of television Christianity, of the good life that is offered to those who will only claim it. And I've sometimes thought that we Reformed Christians should start a new kind of cult; not the "name it and claim it" cult, but the "say it and slay it" cult, and understand the depth of our own sin as we face temptation, and understand that one of the chief bastions against falling to that temptation is naming our sin for what it actually is--saying the word; expressing the truth. And this, at the end of the day, is what James is concerned that we should do here: that when we are tempted, we should not say 'I am being tempted by God, for God is not tempted with sin nor does He tempt us' in the sense of entice us to sin.

The enticement to sin is connected with the reality of the sin in my own heart, and so long as I am deceived about that—you notice he goes on to speak about being deceived—so long as I am deceived about that, so long will I fail to deal with my sin. So he says, you notice, in verse 16, "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers." Do not go through your Christian life pretending that the reality of your life can be disguised; that the secret sin of your heart can be covered over. 'No,'

he says. 'My beloved brothers, understand that when you are tempted, you are tempted because of what remains in your own heart as ongoing, lingering sin. And call it the way it is. Call it the way it is.'

I'm always struck by the fact, since I happen to have a passing interest in playing golf, I'm always struck by the fact that there are men who, on the golf course, will go livid if you cheat, who I know are cheating on their wives and hide it over as incidental. And part of all that James is concerned that we should begin to understand about the nature of Christian growth is that it begins with a proper understanding of ourselves; that even though we are Christians, there remains sin powerfully within our lives, and it is sin, still. And so when we are tempted, the first thing we need to realize is our own weakness: that it's there.

You remember how the Lord Jesus says, when Satan comes to Him, He says, 'Satan has no ground to land on in Me.' But that's not true of you and of me. Satan has ground to land on. I need, in the first instance, to recognize that it is there.

## **II. We need to understand temptation.**

But then secondly, and this is the thing that James is most profoundly concerned about here, if I'm going to be able to deal with temptation, I not only need to learn to accept responsibility for my sin, but I need in the second place to learn to understand the temptation cycle.

One of the things that James seems to be saying here, because in what he says here there is a very direct parallel to the two great Old Testament illustrations of individuals falling to temptation. He's saying to us, 'There is a pattern, there is a cycle. Sometimes temptation may overtake you so suddenly that you do not realize that there is a pattern to that temptation. But if you're going to learn to resist temptation, one of the things you need to do is to learn to understand how temptation works: to see its dynamic, to recognize its operation so that you can resist its force when you meet with it.

And he outlines that for us here in verse 13: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted with evil...He himself tempts no one." But, here is how it happens. *"Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death."*

And you notice in what he says here as he urges us to understand the 'temptation cycle', as I've called it, he's urging us to understand that temptation moves sometimes slowly, sometimes swiftly and suddenly, through a cycle of stages.

It begins, he says, with attraction. Each person is tempted when he is lured. The Bible has a good deal to say to us to command the principle of admiration of that which is good and that which is true, and that which is beautiful; but the Bible is also conscious that, in the lives of sinners, admiration so readily becomes a false attraction, when that which is attractive to us becomes an enticement within us.

You remember how that was the case very obviously in the situation that David experienced; a woman who was beautiful, but who became an object of enticement. A legitimate admiration for something beautiful that God had made that became a twisted lust in the heart of the king. And it's clear what happened, and what always happens: that instead of seeing objects of creation, objects of admiration and beauty within the context of God as Creator, we see them within the context as ourselves as the desirer.

And it was exactly the same thing in the Garden of Eden, the other great paradigm of temptation in the Old Testament Scriptures. As in the course of his seduction of Eve in those early verses in Genesis 3, you get the impression that the serpent engages Eve in conversation, and as they are engaged in conversation, so the narrative goes, somehow or another the serpent has maneuvered Eve now to be standing before the tree about which they have been speaking. And as they stand before the tree, she looks at the tree and she finds that the fruit of the tree is a delight to the eyes. It looks as though it would be delicious upon the lips, and upon the taste buds. And the tree is no longer viewed in terms of what God says about it, but in terms of what Eve wants from it. And she has been attracted and enticed, and allured. And so, says James, the second part of the cycle kicks in. "Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed; and when he is enticed, he becomes deceived." That is the function of the urgency of verse 16: "Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers."

If pastors could have dollars for those who have sat in their offices, head in hands, and said, "I don't know what came over me. I don't know how I could have done it." This is the very thing of which James is speaking here. The rush of blood to the head, the blurring of the vision, the beginning to see things in the light of my desires rather than in the light of God's word; the dumbing of the voice of God that insistently cries, "Do not be deceived!" And the desire becomes entangled in my affections, and right thinking disappears from my mind; and that which God wants to be placed outside of my life comes to the very center of my life, becomes the lenses through which I view everything. And the enticement has become a deception from which I may be incapable of escaping.

Have you ever read these words of John Bunyan's?

Sin, rather than 'twill out of action be,  
Will pray to stay but a while with thee.  
"One night, one hour, one moment!" will it cry.  
"Embrace me in thy bosom, lest I die!"

"Time to repent," saith it; "I will allow  
And help if to repent thou knowest not how."  
But if you give it entrance at the door,  
It will come in and may go out no more.

It is so characteristic of Satan, and so characteristic of our self-deception that when he says about anything, 'It's a small thing, and no one need know, and it's only this once.' And we yield, and he returns to us and he says, 'It was no small thing! And all shall know, unless you engage in compact with me, that we may keep this secret.' And the Christian believer finds himself blackmailed by Satan, in bondage all over again and in need of a mighty, supernatural work of God's grace if there is going to be deliverance from the bondage it has created.

And so, enticement becomes deception, and deception becomes conception. "When sin is fully grown, it brings forth death."

I've often wondered if James was actually thinking about the story in II Samuel 11 and 12, because that's exactly how it goes. There's attraction, and deception, and then death. And not only the death of Uriah the Hittite, but the death of the child of David and Bathsheba. It brings forth death. And so there is this conception of, as it were, a beast that takes hold of my life as the sperm of desire and the egg of opportunity unite.

Thankfully, there are times in God's providence when I may have the desire to fall into temptation, and have no objective opportunity—and sometimes there are objective opportunities and no desire—but when there is both opportunity and desire, I dare not be deceived about the real nature of falling into sin, and the bondage and spiritual death that will be the result. James, with such sobriety and solemnity because he has such a deep pastoral heart, is concerned that this temptation cycle will come to its consummation and end in this kind of spiritual death.

And it leads, as some of you know, to terrible desperation. The evil one who has first said, 'It's a small thing and nobody will know,' comes back again to visit us and say, 'This is a great sin, and there is no hope.' And there are Christian men who have gone long years under the heavy burden and awful paralysis of being hopeless Christians, out of whom the melody has gone in their lives. James, as the pastor of these people dispersed, as he realizes they no longer have perhaps the ministry of God's word that they once had, is absolutely desperate that these brothers and sisters will understand how temptation works.

Why is he dealing with this in such detail? For the simple reason that he wants us, as it were, to see what temptation looks like in slow motion, and so have embedded in our minds the subtle way in which temptation moves from stage to stage until inexorably it comes to death and hopelessness, and despair; so that we recognize it in its first risings, and learn to see the first risings of temptation

not in the light of what we then experience, but in the light of where they are eventually going to lead, should we follow them. Because like Eve in the Garden of Eden we find ourselves standing and talking and negotiating, and do not realize in the course of the conversation that we are pressed into a corner where we either need an influx of special, supernatural energy to make us turn and run, or we yield.

### **III. Why we need to remember these things.**

Now why speak about these things? Well, James speaks about these things not because he wants to burden these Christians, some of who have stumbled, doubtless, and fallen; not because he wants to burden with guilt, but he wants to teach them to learn how to overcome temptation.

How do you overcome temptation? Somebody says, as you drive home tonight in the car, the two of you, 'You know, I have been struggling with temptation.' What are you going to say to him? How do you overcome temptation?

Well, let me suggest that in these very words he says three things to us that are of enormous help to our Christian lives.

The first is this, and it's really what we've already seen: it is vital for us to understand the nature of the temptation cycle. In this respect, as the Book of Proverbs says, 'knowledge is power.' And the reason we are weak is because we do not understand what is happening. And the reason we are not able to help others is because we have lost the facility to analyze the way in which temptation works, and so he very carefully takes these Christians through the temptation cycle in order that they may see what is happening, in order that they may pause and ask, 'Where are we in this, that we may understand the appropriate remedies that need to be taken to get out of this, and to resist temptation, and to flee from evil, and to resist Satan?'

There is a second lesson James is teaching us, and the thing that's so striking is that it's so interestingly akin to the lesson he was teaching us we needed to learn when we face suffering of a more physical kind. In that context he said, 'You need to seek wisdom from a God who gives generously.' And here he says, within the context of emphasizing 'you need to understand how temptation works in this temptation cycle,' he also says, 'you need to be convinced of the unchanging goodness of God.' And that's the connection between what he is saying here in verse 16: "Beloved brothers, do not be deceived..." and what he goes on to say.

Why does he so suddenly move from speaking about temptation to speaking about "every good and perfect gift coming down from above, from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation of shadow due to change"? Because he

wants us to see that one of the strongest bastions that enables us to resist temptation is the absolute conviction that our God is good; He works everything in our lives together for good, and He wants good for us. Otherwise, we fall to the same seduction to which Eve fell in the Garden of Eden when Satan said to Eve in the Garden of Eden, 'He isn't really good, and He doesn't really want the best for you.' That is what the temptation in the Garden of Eden was all about, isn't it? It's not just that the serpent was denying the truth or the authority of God's word; he was denying the truth about God Himself!

This, I think, is perhaps what Paul really meant when he said that 'they exchange the truth about God for the lie.' What was the truth about God? The truth about God was that He had given them the whole garden, and said about one tree, 'Don't eat from that tree.' What Satan said was, 'God put you in this garden with all these trees, and now said you are not to eat of any of the trees of this garden.' What was he really saying? What was the innuendo? The innuendo was, 'Your God isn't really good. Your God isn't really kind. Your God isn't really generous. Your God doesn't really love you.' And of course she fell!

Of course she fell! Because if we are not absolutely convinced, my brothers, that our God is really good, we've no defense against Satan, and we've no defense against the allurements of our hearts when those hearts are enticed towards that which is displeasing to Him, because at the end of the day we say, in relationship to such a God, 'This is better for me.' And James is saying, 'Brothers, it's never better for you! His is always better, because every good and perfect gift comes down to you from above, from this absolutely unchangingly good God!' And you know, when you believe that, you can face the enticements of the evil one and the seductions of this world in whatever particular form they come to you. You can face them down, eyeball to eyeball, and say, 'God is good, and God's way is indubitably best.' It is a great bastion against the onslaught of the evil one, but you see, James is saying you need to know how he works. He's wanting to persuade you and convince you that this way is best, and to divert your eyes from what God says in His word and what God is in His character. As you gaze upon the Father of lights in whom there is no shadow due to change, and gaze into His face of infinitely glorious goodness, in all your weakness and temptability you look at Him and say, 'Father, this is causing me to ache, and its tearing me apart, because I still have these sinful desires; but You are good. You are good.'

I remember, a number of years ago I was speaking at a pastors' conference in the church in Minneapolis where John Piper is pastor. And in that church they have a choir—I think it's called "The Choir of the Nations." It's a multi-ethnic choir, and their style of singing is multi-ethnic. And we were sitting at our meeting at an evening at this conference when the choir was singing, and one of the things they were singing was a kind of calypso song; and the choir was singing antiphonally with a man who was kind of 'grooving' a little around the stage—I think he was of Caribbean origin, and they were singing, and he was singing and grooving around, and the choir was responding, and he was singing and the

choir was responding—there was a good deal of swaying going on! And I think John Piper wanted to shock me! And he leaned over to me, and he pointed at the man who was grooving around and he said, “You see him?” Well, I couldn't miss him! He said, “He's one of my elders.” Well, I've tried to learn to be fairly unshockable, and at the end I leaned over to him and I said, “Do you ever rent out your elders to other churches?”

And I suppose the amusement of the situation underlined for me the words of the song, because the words of the song were, “Our God is good, all of the time, all of the time.” And the antiphonal singing of the choir was —‘if you're a teacher, you need to know this!—if you're a mother you need to know this!—if you're a father, you need to know this!—if you're a doctor, you need to know this!—whatever you do, you need to know this: my God is good, all of the time, all of the time! Our God is good, all of the time, all of the time!’

James is saying, ‘It is a tremendous bastion in the Christian life to be utterly convinced that your God is good all of the time.’

But then, you see, there is a third thing here. We learn to overcome sin because we understand the nature of the temptation cycle. We see how it works, and we watch what it's doing. We learn to overcome sin because we develop in the gospel a conviction about the unchanging goodness of God. And we overcome temptation and sin, thirdly, because, as he says in verse 18, “...of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creatures.”

What's he saying? And what, in particular, is he saying to my life when I have fallen, and brought shame upon my life? He is saying, ‘If you're a child of God at all, it is because by a sovereign, monarchistic work of His grace that has been effected in your life by the word of truth; by the word of truth He has brought us forth to the birth, so that we should be a kind of first fruits of His creation.’

And you see, in miniature he's making the point that particularly the Apostle Paul makes at great length: that one of the great bastions against falling into sin, and one of the great bastions to resist temptation is to understand that God has made you a new creature in Christ. It's James' cameo version of what Paul says in Romans 6: we don't go on living in sin, because in Jesus Christ we've died to the dominion of sin, and we've been raised into newness of life. And being raised into newness of life, sin no longer has dominion over us; and if sin no longer has dominion over us, we face it down, and we say, ‘You no longer reign over me. You shall not drive me to despair, because I am a new creation in Jesus Christ, gloriously new!’ Which is why, so often when men fail, they express themselves in words like these: ‘I just forgot who I was.’ And that's the truth. We just forgot who we were.

And if we're only to remember who we were in Jesus Christ, part of His new

creation, born again by the power of His Spirit, experiencing new affections and love for Him, enjoying the blessings of fellowship together, knowing the ecstasy of worship, experiencing His watchcare over our lives because we are His dear blood-bought children; if we only remember who we really are in Christ, we would be able to say to temptation, 'Am I a dog, that I should do such a thing?'

Some of you, like me, deeply appreciate the writings of John Owen. And Owen says in one of his works, he says, 'You know, there are actually at the end of the day only two pastoral problems.' If you're a little jaundiced, you say, 'Well, it shouldn't have taken you twenty-four volumes to help me understand it! But he puts it like this: he says, 'You know, at the end of the day there really are only two pastoral problems. Pastoral Problem No.1 is dealing with the unconverted; Pastoral Problem No. 2 is dealing with the converted.'

Pastoral Problem No. 1 is persuading those who are under the dominion of sin that they are under the dominion of sin; and Pastoral Problem No. 2 is persuading those who are no longer under the dominion of sin that they are no longer under the dominion of sin, but that they are the first fruits of God's new creation. And as the first fruits of God's new creation, the guarantee that those first fruits will become a glorious final harvest. And it's when I see that that I begin to have power to resist temptation.

My wife, who would not be pleased to feature in this exposition of James once, never mind twice, says to me with some regularity, "Sinclair, you've stopped thinking. You've stopped thinking. You've stopped thinking." What's she saying? She's saying, "You're forgetting who you are." And that's what James is saying: "Beloved brothers, don't forget who you are, because you are these glorious new creations in our Savior, Jesus Christ, the first fruits of the final heavenly glory.

And armed with these three pieces of equipment and understanding of the way in which temptation works...my brothers, Satan has only so many tricks up his sleeve! The tragedy of my life is that when I stumble and fall I realize he's been using the same old trick again, and I need to learn to have embedded in my mind 'this is how he works.' He seeks to distort realities before me, by encouraging me to see things in terms of my own sinful passions and not in terms of what God says about them; seeing them in terms of how they might be related to me, rather than seeing them in terms of how they are related to God; and then he begins to insist whisperingly, 'You know God isn't really kind. You know God isn't really generous. If God were really generous, this would be yours.' So I need to know of the unchanging goodness of God, that it may be a bastion in my heart and I need to remember who I am; and I am no longer the man I once was. Of course, I am not yet the man I one day shall be, but thank God, I am no longer the man I once was. I have been brought forth as the first fruits of the new creation by an altogether good heavenly Father, by the word of truth.

And, knowing these things, we may be strengthened by His word not only to

grow in stability to maturity as we experience the external trials of life, but as secretly, and inwardly and personally we may fight and struggle, and labor and strive against temptation that is very specially shaped to our spiritual weaknesses. And even in the evil day when opportunity and desire are both present, we will be able to stand.

My brothers, what a glorious thing it would be—since we shall never again like this meet together...exactly these brothers together in the same room—what a glorious thing it would be at the end of our lives to be able to rehearse together how He had enabled us each to stand. May it be so.

*Our heavenly Father, we thank You that Your word comes to us in so many different, powerful ways in Scripture: at times in biography, and other times in song; at times in principles, at other times in arguments, by such varied personalities and characters. We want to thank You this evening for James, a brother of our Lord Jesus. It is not hard for us, our God, to imagine that when the Lord appeared to James in His resurrection that James would first have asked Him about the sufferings He endured and the temptations He withstood.*

*We thank You that we have a Savior who has known both: a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief; a second man and a last Adam who has felt the full weight of Satan's enticements, not least the whisperings that a God who would go and plan the way of the cross cannot be a good God.*

*We thank You tonight for the solemn resistance and purpose of our dear Lord Jesus, who was so convinced of Your absolute goodness, so sensitive to the temptation cycle, so committed to being the first fruits of all the new creation, that He stood firm. And we thank you, our blessed God, for the Spirit You have given to indwell us as the very Spirit who sustained Him. The word You have given to instruct us is the word to which He opened His ear morning by morning, and was instructed by it.*

*And we pray that as the armor that You have given us has been tested and tried, and found to be true in Jesus Christ, that by Your grace You would help us to wear it. And grant, our God, we pray, while we pray in ignorance we pray with faith; that those of us who have in these days inwardly yielded to temptation may be strengthened in repentance and restoration, and that all of us by Your mighty grace and power may be able to resist the evil one, and to trust unreservedly in the goodness of our God, knowing that we shall see the goodness of God in the land of the living. And this we pray for Jesus Christ, our King and Savior's sake. Amen*

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