



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

The Trouble with Me Is . . .

James 1:12-18

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Introduction

1. I know several teachers who have had a student tell them that if they had not given a test, he could not have failed it. I also know students who believed (rightly) they had been treated unfairly because some test questions were designed to trick them into giving the wrong answer, as if the teacher was trying to “win” some contest.
2. As we continue in James 1, we sense that some readers may have had similar thoughts.
 - a. To build steadfastness as they moved toward being perfected, James told them they were to meet their trials with joy (1:2-4).
 - b. All who steadfastly met their trials would be “blessed” and “receive the crown of life” God has promised to all who love him (1:12).
 - c. Since some evidently felt a lack of what they needed to meet their trials, James told them to ask God, but to ask and live with an unwavering faith commitment (1:5-8).
3. But, what if they still failed? Was it even fair to have trials? Couldn’t God just bless them without such trouble? What if the trials were really God’s “trick questions”?

Body

I. Could God Be to Blame?

- A. “Trial” (2, 12) and “tempt” (13-14) translate the same Greek word (πειρασμός, πειράζω; *peirasmos, peirazō*); depending on the context, it sometimes means simply “to test,” but elsewhere is the negative “tempt,” testing to entice evil.¹

¹ The same was once true of the English “tempt,” but the neutral meaning has fallen away. Dictionary.com. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Douglas Harper, Historian. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tempt> (accessed: March 23, 2011).

- B. The Old Testament shows that God does at times test his people (e.g., Gen. 22:1; Judg. 2:22; 2 Chron. 32:31 - *πειράζω* is used in the LXX in each case).
- C. Both the Old Testament and other Jewish writings show evidence of people trying to blame God for their sin (e.g., Adam, Gen. 3:12).²

II. God Is Not To Blame.

- A. James employs another imperative verb³ to warn against blaming God for temptations that seduced them to sin (the use of “evil” - from *κακός*, *kakos* - shows that the meaning of *πειράζω* here has shifted from “test” in v 12 to “tempt” in vv 13-14).
1. Reason one: “God cannot be tempted with evil.” Cf. Hab. 1:13.
 2. Reason two: “and he himself (*αὐτὸς*, *autos*) tempts no one” (v 13). It’s similar to the figure Paul uses with regard to doctrine (Eph 4:14).
- B. He also declares that God is interested only in giving good gifts, something he has especially done where his people are concerned (vv 17-18).
1. Using synonyms (probably for emphasis⁴), he affirms that “every good (*ἀγαθὴ*, *agathē*) gift and every perfect (*τέλειον* *teleion*) gift is from above (*ἄνωθεν*, *anōthen*), coming down (*καταβαῖνον*, *katabaion*) from the Father of lights.”
 - a) Describing the gifts as “good” and “perfect” links v 17 to the perfection growing from steadfastness and God’s unreserved giving in vv 4-5.
 - b) “The present tense of the participle ‘coming down’ (*καταβαῖνον*), suggesting continuous or repeated action, indicates how God consistently lavishes his gifts on us” (Blomberg & Kamell, 105).
 - c) The reference to “Father of lights” reminds the readers that this is the God who brought those heavenly lights (sun, moon and stars) into existence.
 - d) But, unlike those lights with their varying positions and shadows, God’s nature is unwavering.⁵
 2. But, James is concerned with more than creation gifts.
 - a) Just because he willed⁶ to do so, God “brought us forth” (metaphorical use of *ἀποκύω*, *apokyeō*, to give birth to; cf. v 15) to be his special people.

² Sirach 15:11-12 warns: “Do not say, ‘Because of the Lord I left the right way’; for he will not do what he hates. Do not say, ‘It was he who led me astray’; for he had no need of a sinful man” (RSV).

³ Literally, “And let not the one being tempted say. . .” (*λεγέτω*, *legetō*, verb imperative present active 3rd person singular from *λέγω*, *legō*).

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg & Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, 73.

⁵ The phrase here is challenging and has been much discussed, but the point is plainly to convey God’s unwavering nature. The terms in view can be illustrated by the changing shadows on the moon or the moving shadow of a sundial. See e.g., McCartney, 112; also BDAG on *τροπή* (*tropē*), the process of turning (p. 1016)

⁶ “Of his own will” is *βουληθεὶς*, *boulētheis*, an aorist passive participle which is “probably causal” (Blomberg & Kamell, 75).

- (1) The image of the “firstfruits” recalls the Old Testament background of “the firstfruit of people, animals, and plants, which belonged to God and were either redeemed or offered to him (Ex. 22.29-30; Nu. 18.8-12; Dt.18.3; 26.2, 10; Lv. 27.26; Ezk. 20.40;...).”⁷ See Lev. 23:10-11.
- (2) Also involved in this image is the promise of a full harvest to come. (See also Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 15:20; 16:15; Rev. 14:4; 2 Thess. 2:13).
3. This occurs by means of “the word of truth,” giving an objective form to the promises (and their location) James has in view.

C. Why then do some fail to meet the test and succumb to temptation? James chastens the “fence-sitter unwilling to commit wholeheartedly to faith in Christ” (McCartney, 91; compare the stark choice he sets forth in 4:4).

III. The Blame Is Mine.

- A. Using vivid hunting and fishing metaphors, James turns the focus to each person.
 1. Temptation occurs as we are “dragged away (ἐξέλκω, *exelkō*) and enticed (δელιάζω, *deleazō*)” (NIV).
 - a) The imagery is reminiscent of the description of seduction by an adulteress in Proverbs 7:21-23.⁸
 - b) The figure reminds us that, while temptation is sometimes obvious, we are often unaware of the entrapment until it is too late (cf. McCartney, 107).
 2. Do not make the mistake of thinking there is no real allure in temptation, for what lures and entices is our own desire.
 - a) The word (ἐπιθυμία, *epithymia*) does not always have a negative connotation (see Luke 22:15; Phil. 1:23), but the context demands it here.
 - b) James speaks of it in the singular, adding to the force of the seduction metaphor.
 3. No one is exempt, nor can anyone shift the blame: each one is tempted by “his own (ἰδιος, *idios*) desire.”
- B. Once the seduction is accomplished, the temptation moves to sin and death; James changes to a metaphor utilizing the reproductive process.
 1. Desire (suggestion) conceives and gives birth to sin (experiment).
 2. Sin in turn, having been “perfected” (ἀποτελέω, *apoteleō*, another form of the word for “perfect” [τέλειος, *teleios*] in vv 3-4) (consent) “gives birth” ἀποκύω (*apokyēō* - see v. 18) to death – the opposite of the life promised (v 12).⁹

⁷ Peter Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, 90.

⁸ Proverbs 7 is followed by chapter 8's emphasis on wisdom, an interesting similarity to James's focus

⁹ The three stages, suggestion, experiment, and consent are from the Venerable Bede (Blomberg & Kamell, 72).

- C. To avoid the trap, “do not be [or stop being?] deceived” (πλανᾶω, *planaō*) (v 16).
1. The word had been used of the wandering heavenly bodies, or planets.
 2. That goes to the heart of temptation to sin: it promises what it can never deliver, preying on hearts that are all too easily misled (cf. Jer. 17:9).
 3. Its most insidious deception may be in leading us away from what should be our ultimate priority, unwavering devotion to God. Every distraction may not be inherently evil (though it can quickly lead there) (cf. Jas. 4:1-4 - and think of how many quarrels have arisen over what were not inherently evil things).
- D. We must examine our desires in light of what should be unwavering devotion to God.
1. It demands that each of us examine him- or herself.
 - a) What tempts you may not tempt me, and vice versa.
 - b) Instead of focusing on what others are doing – and perhaps belittling them for doing it, or being proud that I don’t – I must focus on what will drag away and entice me.
 2. Know too that this honest look should not overlook the so-called little things: “Many sinful actions begin as casual thoughts, but dwelling on them can turn minor temptations into major transgressions” (Blomberg & Kamell, 72).

Conclusion

1. It is said that *The Times* in London once sent out an inquiry to famous authors, asking the question, “What’s wrong with the world.” G. K. Chesterton is said to have sent this short response: “Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G. K. Chesterton.”¹⁰
2. It is that story that prompted the sermon title today, and which now allows us to complete it. In light of James 1, “the trouble with me is . . . me! ”
3. What can be done about that? James answers. Be vigilant, knowing the ease with which we can be deceived. Stay close to God. Be born by, or live in accord with “the word of truth.” If we can assist or encourage you as you battle your problem, we will be waiting as you come. While we sing.

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¹⁰ <http://www.chesterton.org/qmeister2/wrongtoday.htm>. Accessed March 25, 2011. This web site notes that, although this quote is generally attributed to Chesterton, is typical of his humility and wit, and fits well with the title of his 1910 book, *What’s Wrong with the World?*, no one has been known to have been able to document in the pages of *The Times*.