

James 1:12-18 (First Sunday in Lent—Series B)
“Overcoming Temptations”
Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield, CT
February 21, 2021

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Epistle lesson recorded in James 1:

¹²Blessed is the man who endures testing, because when he has been proven sound, he will receive the crown of life, which [God] promised to those who love Him. ¹³Let no one when he is tested say, “I am being tempted by God,” for God is untemptable by evil and He Himself tempts no one. ¹⁴But each one is tempted by his own desire when he is lured away and enticed. ¹⁵Then, when the desire conceives, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is brought to term, gives birth to death. ¹⁶Do not be led astray, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷Every good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of change. ¹⁸By His will, He gave us birth by a word of truth in order that we would be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

What is temptation? According to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, to be tempted means to be enticed to commit an unwise or immoral act, especially by a promise of reward. My favorite example of this is cookies in the cookie jar. You are not supposed to eat cookies right before dinner. You’ll spoil the luscious supper that has been made for you. But there sit the cookies in the cookie jar. You are tempted to just eat one or two. Why? Because you like cookies. Cookies taste good. That’s the reward. Cookies give you pleasure. So, you are tempted to disobey dad and mom and eat cookies right before supper.

But you haven’t acted yet, so you haven’t done what is wrong. You haven’t yet sinned by disobeying your parents which is breaking the Fourth Commandment. So the fact that you are tempted is not sinful. In the *Large Catechism* Pastor Luther correctly reminds us that “to feel temptation is, therefore, a far different thing from consenting or yielding to it. We must all feel it, although not all in the same way. Some feel it in a greater degree and more severely than others. . . . Such feeling, as long as it is against our will and we would rather

be rid of it, can harm no one. For if we did not feel it, it could not be called a temptation. But we consent to it when we give it the reins and do not resist or pray against it.”¹

Temptation, then, to use the words of James in our Epistle, presents the desire to us. You have a desire to eat yummy cookies. You want them right before dinner. However, to honor your parents means that you set your desire aside and lovingly obey them. No eating cookies right before dinner. So far so good. No problems. You feel the temptation. You note your desire. But that desire for what you want overrides your obedience to God and parents. The temptation has highlighted your desire. Your desire has conceived in your heart an impulse of self-seeking pleasure contrary to what you should do. You walk over and take the lid off the cookie jar. You eat two cookies right before dinner. Your desire has given birth to sin. Eating the cookies is not in and of itself sinful. Eating the cookies in direct disobedience to your parents who said, “Thou shalt not,” that is sin. You disobeyed and did not honor them. You also disobeyed God who have given you parents for your blessing and benefit.

Now I don’t want you to think that with this extended example that I’m trying to minimize sin. Feel free to insert any thought, desire, word, or action that goes against God’s commandments. You are tempted to curse or swear thoughtlessly. You are tempted to have sex with someone whom you are not married to. You are tempted to cheat on a test, stealing answers from a friend. The temptations are there, all around us all the time. They present the desires to us, desires that are contrary to the holy Commandments of God. Those desires are impulses, lust, a self-seeking the things that we want, that we feel will reward us at the expense of putting God and His Word first and loving others. James writes by the power of

¹ Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 421.

the Holy Spirit, "But each one is tempted by his own desire when he is lured away and enticed. Then, when the desire conceives, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is brought to term, gives birth to death." The wages of sin . . . death. The person who sins . . . shall die. Physical and spiritual death; temporal and eternal death. That's what happens when we yield to temptation. We sin. We disobey God. We act as if we matter most and God and other people matter least. When you eat the cookies from the cookie jar right before dinner, you're telling dad and mom that you don't care what they asked of you. You're telling God that you're not interested in honoring the parents He gave you to love and care for you. Failure to fear, love, and trust in God. Failure to love others, in this case, your parents. Temptation highlights our sinful impulses, lusts, and desires. Those desires lead us to take action that is opposed to the Word of God. We sin. And so we earn for ourselves death.

How can this be overcome? How might you and I be able to overcome temptation so that it doesn't result the sins that we think, say, and do? James began our text today, "Blessed is the man who endures testing, because when he has been proven sound, he will receive the crown of life, which [God] promised to those who love Him." Perhaps we should read this, understanding "Blessed is the person who endures *temptation*." (Testing and tempting are both translations of the same word.) So you and I want to be blessed and receive the crown of life because we've been proven sound. We want to be tested in the forge and come out pure and strong.

But that's not my reality. Every day I face temptations and every day I find myself yielding to them, letting my sinful desire have its way, giving birth to sinful thoughts, words, and actions. We've fallen time and time again. Forged in fire? Hardly. More like brittle sticks than strong iron. Is it hopeless to even think about overcoming temptation to sin?

“The Spirit immediately drove [Jesus] out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan” (Mark 1:12–13 ESV). What had just happened in the life of Jesus before the Spirit threw Him out into the wilderness? His Baptism in the Jordan! And what is one aspect of our Lord’s Baptism? The hymnwriter penned: “Now rise, faint hearts, be resolute; This man is Christ, our substitute! He was baptized in Jordan’s stream, Proclaimed Redeemer, Lord supreme.”²

Jesus Christ is our substitute in His life as well as in His death and resurrection. When we are faint with fear because we cannot overcome temptation and sin by ourselves, there stands Jesus in your place and mine. He knew temptation for us. And He overcame all temptation for us.

Hebrews 14:15 tells us that Jesus in His earthly life was tempted in every way that we are, yet without sin. Jesus overcame temptation for us so that He might give us the credit for having done so. Jesus also took upon Himself each and every time we yielded to temptation. He bore in His own body our sins of lust and greed, selfishness and hatred, cursing and swearing, stealing and lying. And He took our sins all the way to death. He took the punishment of death and hell upon Himself. He died on the cross, not for His sins, not because He yielded to temptation, but because we have, do, and will. All your sins that you ever have or ever will commit were nailed to the cross with Jesus. His blood poured out of His body covering them all so that you are forgiven. Your sins taken by Jesus in exchange for His righteousness. By His wounds, you are healed and cleansed of your sins.

² LSB 405, Text: © 1993 James P. Tiefel. Used by permission: LSB Hymn License no. 110000752

But the Good News doesn't end there. James writes, "By [God's] will, He gave us birth by a word of truth in order that we would be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures." Remember, desire gave birth to sin and sin gave birth to death. The forgiveness of sins won for us by Christ gives birth to a new person, a new creation in Christ. You are now that new person. In Holy Baptism, your sinful nature is daily drowned and dies and a new person arises and emerges to live before God in the righteousness and holiness that Jesus has given to you.

As His reborn children through faith in Jesus, our Lord has taught us to pray that He will provide a way out of temptation and graciously help us so that we do not sin. This we do in the Lord's Prayer, "And lead us not into temptation." "*What does this mean?* God tempts no one. We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice. Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory" (*Small Catechism*).

By the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to overcome temptation. And on the Last Day, we will win the final victory over sin and death with our bodily resurrection. We will wear the crown of life solely because of the merits and mercy of our Substitute, our Savior from sin and death, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.