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UNDERSTANDING TEMPTATION

*“Let no man say when he is tempted,
I am tempted of God:
for God cannot be tempted with evil,
neither tempteth he any man:
But every man is tempted,
when he is drawn away
of his own lust, and enticed.
Then when lust hath conceived,
it bringeth forth sin:
and sin, when it is finished,
bringeth forth death.”*
James 1:13-15

The above verses show us that temptation is an attractive invitation to a fatal process. It can be reduced to an equation: Desire + attractive (but poisonous) offer = suffering → death. In other words, a person has a desire and sees something that looks like it could satisfy that desire. He takes what he sees

and finds temporary relief, but suddenly he begins to experience serious consequences that, unless there is intervention, result in death.

This process can be illustrated in countless ways. A hungry man is offered a plate of delicious food. He doesn't know that it is contaminated with poison. He eats with delight. But a few hours later he begins to feel intestinal discomfort. With no medical help, he is soon writhing in pain. And shortly, he is dead.

Leon was a young man with normal desires for acceptance and friendship. He turned to friends, however, whose activities were laced with sin. Leon eventually began doing drugs and chasing women. His racy lifestyle brought complications, including fights with rival drug addicts and, of course, it also brought the disapproval of his parents. One morning, to the horror of his friends and family, Leon was found shot in his apartment. It was never fully resolved if his death was a homicide or a suicide. Leon had been led away into sin by his desires, and the end product of sin was his ruin. Truly, temptation is an attractive invitation to a fatal process.

In spite of James's clear teaching about temptation, there are many misunderstandings about it. Have you ever heard any of these comments?

- *I just couldn't help myself.*
- *I never would have done it if she hadn't _____.*
- *Why did God even allow me to be in a place of temptation?*
- *I don't know what got into me!*

In all these examples, we see how squeamish we are about taking personal responsibility for our sin. We tend to think of temptation as something that comes to us totally from outside of us. We seem to feel better if we can pass the responsibility on to others, to our circumstances, to the devil, and even to God. But James shows us that temptation starts

in our own hearts. If we are going to overcome temptation, we need to start looking at it God's way.

TEMPTATION IS INSEPARABLY LINKED TO DESIRE.

“Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust” (James 1:14). The word *lust* in English has negative connotations. But the Greek word is used for both good and bad desires. The real problem is not that we have desires, or even that we have wrong desires, but that our desires are focused on the wrong things or on the wrong ways of satisfying the desires.

To be alive is to have desires. A dead person has no desire and therefore cannot be tempted. But because we are alive, our enemy can play on our desires to lead us astray. He urged Eve to fulfill the longing to be wiser. He stirred up David's desire for intimacy and pleasure. He played on the rich young ruler's desire for recognition and significance, or perhaps for security, in riches.

No matter what the objective may be or what is held before our eyes, the temptation rides on an inflamed desire.

GOD HAS GUIDELINES FOR HOW WE SATISFY OUR DESIRES.

As our Creator, God not only designed us with appetites and desires, but He also has given us guidelines for how we satisfy those desires. There is a right reason for eating, a proper relationship for sex, and right ways of building friendship; and because there are right ways of satisfying our desires, there are also countless wrong ways to pursue them.

The Bible warns against violating God's guidelines even

for such common appetites as food and drink. Solomon wrote, “Blessed art thou, O land, when thy king is the son of nobles, and thy princes eat in due season, for strength, and not for drunkenness!” (Ecclesiastes 10:17).

Many more guidelines are given to keep the desire for sexual pleasure in its place—warnings against fornication, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, sexual abuse, even warnings against joking about such matters. “But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Ephesians 5:3-5).

God’s guidelines are not to torment us or to withhold good things from us (as Satan suggests). Rather, He places restrictions and guidelines on our desires in order to preserve for us the most healthy and blessed way of satisfying them. He knows that if we choose adultery, for example, we will ruin our marriages. If we seek security in things, we will not experience the joy of trust in the Father. If we are gluttonous or drunken, we will not only increase health problems for ourselves, but will also make our lives less enjoyable and our bodies less able to carry out our responsibilities. If we learn to control sexual urges in our youth, we strengthen our ability to remain faithful in marriage. So God gives these guidelines to protect us.

WE HAVE DESIRES AT DIFFERENT LEVELS OF OUR BEING.

When we think about the wide range of human desires,

we can readily see that our desires operate on different levels. We have hunger and thirst on a physical level. We have a sexual drive, which, although it is physical in its manifestation, is deeply rooted in who we are as persons. On an emotional level, we hunger for acceptance, for belonging, for roots, for security, and for friendship. These hungers, although less tangible than the hunger for food or drink, are sometimes even more powerful. On a deeper level still, we long for something or someone to believe in, for something to give our lives to, for an object of devotion and worship.

All these desires in the root sense are not wrong.

Temptation is enticement to satisfy these desires in wrong ways, at the wrong time, or for the wrong reasons.

For example, Jesus was tempted to turn stones into food. The hunger for food was not wrong, but He was tempted to satisfy His appetite for the wrong reason—to prove that He was the Son of God (see Matthew 4:3).

Notice also that in temptation, our desires often overlap. We may eat (physical desire) to satisfy a hunger for recognition (emotional desire)—as the teenage boy who eats ten hamburgers at a sitting with his friends gawking in amazement. We may want sex or we may give in to sexual pressure to gain acceptance. We may seek God in order to be looked up to. Any desire—however legitimate or good in itself—can be an avenue into sin. We are constantly tempted to satisfy our desires in some illegitimate way or for some selfish reason.

THERE IS AN ORDER OF PRIORITY IN OUR DESIRES.

Although we have many desires, not all desires are equal. Or stated another way, our desires have an order of priority. The hunger for food is not as important as the hunger for