

Introduction

In 2013, the Barna Research Group conducted a survey to find out what the top temptations of Americans are. Here is a sampling of those. 60% of Americans are tempted to procrastinate, 55% to overeat, 44% to spend too much money, 44% to spend too much time on media, 41% to be lazy, 26% to gossip, 12% to lie or cheat, and 11% to **"go off"** on someone via text or email.

That survey assumes that all of us have temptations and that's right isn't it. We do. But if we're disciples or friends of Jesus, we can triumph over temptation and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

What Temptation Is

Our text, James 1:13-15 is one of the Bible's classic statements on temptation. It uses the verb **"tempted"** or **"tempt"** four times.

To triumph over temptation, we must first understand what it is. So let's define it with precision. It has two components or parts. One is the thought of sin. The idea of some particular sin crosses our mind. That thought then leads to the second component, the inclination to sin. We feel the **"want to"** or urge to do it. At that point, we're being tempted. Temptation is the thought of sin plus the inclination to sin.

The roommate of a Christian college student kept pornographic magazines in his dresser drawers. The Christian admitted that he thought more than once about looking at them and that he felt inclined (wanted) to do so. He was being tempted in other words.

He illustrates what temptation is. It's the thought of sin plus the inclination to sin.

The Cycle of Sin

In verses 14-15, James teaches what I call **"the cycle of sin."** This cycle, by implication, reveals two of the most vital truths about

temptation we'll ever learn. So let's examine it. It has four steps.

The cycle begins with what verses 14-15 call "**lust.**" That word here refers to wrong desire. Suppose I'm talking with a group of runners who are bragging about their 10k race times. Being prideful, I desire to impress them with my 10k race times. That desire is wrong. It's lust.

Lust is the first step in the cycle and leads to the second. We get "**carried away and enticed**" by it so that it "**conceives,**" verses 14-15. The word "**conceives**" connotes the assent of our will. Or to put it another way, we say "**Yes**" to lust, to the wrong desire we have. We intend to satisfy it if we can. This inner "**Yes**" is the second step in the cycle of sin. Suppose my 10k race times aren't as good as those of the runners with whom I'm talking. But desiring to impress them, I get the thought of sin. I can say my times are better than theirs. Having that thought, I feel inclined to do it, and say "**Yes**" to the inclination. I intend to lie and will if I can without being caught in it.

Verse 15 reveals the third step that follows naturally from the second. Lust conceived "**gives birth to sin.**" We not only intend to commit the sin but do. We act contrary to the nature and will of God. Intending to lie to the runners, I complete my intention by doing it. I exaggerate my race times in order to impress them.

That sin then "**brings forth death,**" to quote verse 15. That's the fourth and final step in the cycle of sin and sin's ultimate consequence. Death refers to separation from God, more specifically, the inability to act upon God and to be acted upon by Him. If I, as a follower of Jesus, don't repent of my lie to those runners, it drives a wedge between Him and me. It creates relational distance between us.

Temptation Is not a Sin

That's the cycle of sin and I'd like you to note two things.

The first is where temptation fits into it. It's part of the first step. Verse 14 links it directly to lust. Lust leads to it. Wrong desire prompts the thought of sin and the inclination to sin that follows it.

Note a second thing – where sin first occurs in the cycle. It's in the second step when **“lust has conceived.”** Sin is a matter of the heart or will. It's when our will assents to the wrong desire, therefore, that sin occurs. It's when we inwardly say **“Yes”** to that desire.

Now let's pull this together and see what we have. Temptation occurs in the first step. Sin first occurs in the second step. The steps are sequential. That means that temptation precedes sin, which clearly implies it isn't a sin. That's the first vital truth that the cycle of sin teaches us. Temptation isn't a sin.

Many Christians don't grasp or believe that, to their detriment I'd add. The Christian college student I mentioned was a classic case in point. His will never assented to the thought of sin he had and the inclination that followed it. He never once looked at any of his roommate's magazines even though he had the chance. He hadn't sinned. Yet, he came to me wracked with guilt and deeply troubled because he believed he had. He needed to know and I told him. Temptation itself isn't a sin. That's the first vital truth that the cycle of sin teaches us.

Temptation Is Internal not External

The second is this. It's internal to us not external. That is the most significant insight about temptation you'll ever learn.

Let me ask you a question. What is the root cause of temptation?

Some people, as verse 13 implies, think it's God. They believe He places enticements to sin before us to test us what's in us.

Other people think the root cause is Satan. As did Flip Wilson, they say **“the devil made me do it.”** He's the great tempter.

Still other people think it's **“the world.”** Something in the world made us do it. We lusted because someone dressed suggestively, went off on someone because he or she acted stupid, envied because someone rubbed their good fortune in our faces, retaliated because someone wronged us and so on.

God – Satan – the world. Those answers to the question **“What is**

the root cause of temptation?" have something in common. They presuppose that temptation is something that's external to us. Things outside of us are what tempt us. That's what most people believe.

They're wrong though. I point out again that verse 14 links temptation to lust. It's lust that leads to it. Wrong desires prompt the thought of sin and the inclination to it that constitute temptation. But lust obviously isn't external to us. It's internal. It follows, therefore, that the root cause of temptation isn't something outside us. It's something inside us, lust. Being tempted to sin isn't primarily a matter of God, Satan, or anything in the world. It's primarily a matter of our own inner condition, our desires and the thoughts and inclinations to which they lead.

That implies something and this is a million dollar insight. Things external to us, in and of themselves, don't have the power to tempt us. We have to give them that power. How do we give them that power? It's by what we permit to be in us.

Jesus illustrates what I mean. He told His disciples that He was invincible with regard to Satan's temptations and explained why in John 14:30. Satan "**has nothing in me.**" Satan, in other words, didn't have anything in Him to work with in tempting Him. There was nothing in Him that was on Satan's side. What was not in Him, wrong desires, made Him impervious to the influence of Satan and the world.

It's the same with us. Things external to us can tempt us to sin. But they can only if they have something in us with which to work – only if they have something in us that's on their side. That something is lusts or wrong desires. Without that, nothing outside of us, including Satan, can tempt us to sin.

Card Hub., for instance, reports that American households accumulated \$57.1 billion in new credit card debt in 2014, making the average household credit card balance, \$7200. Let's face it. Credit cards are a temptation. They tempt people to spend too much money on things they don't need. But they do only if the people are materialistic –

only if they covet, inwardly, more than they need. If they have the inner condition of simplicity instead, credit cards aren't a temptation at all.

The moral is this. Nothing has the power to tempt us unless we give it that power. We give it that power by the lusts that we permit to be in us. It's what is not in us, wrong desires, that makes us invulnerable to particular temptations.

Triumph over Temptation

That's a life-altering insight. It implies that we can triumph over temptation and reveals how. We weaken or even destroy the lusts in us that enable it. We weaken or destroy them by doing two things.

First, say "**No**." Many of our desires are normal and good like the desires to eat, to fellowship with people, to speak, to be respected, and so on. Those are natural appetites that we must satisfy for the sake of health and life. To say "**No**" means to abstain to some degree and for some period of time from satisfying them. Paul, for instance, exhorted Christian spouses to abstain from sex "**for a time**" (1 Corinthians 7:5). Or Jesus endorsed fasting from food for a time (Mark 2:20).

Abstaining from natural appetites that way, in the context of discipleship to Jesus, is powerfully transforming. As Bishop Thomas Wilson of the Isle of Man wrote: "**Those who deny themselves will be sure to find their strength increased, their affections raised, and their inward peace continually augmented.**" That's a penetrating insight that gives us a methodology for triumphing over temptation. We routinely say "**No**" to desires we can so we can eventually say "**No**" to desires we can't. Two dynamics are at work here. One is psychological. The act of abstaining itself is inherently transforming. The other is supernatural. The act of abstaining opens us up to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit.

Knowing that, I routinely say "**No**" to desires I can say "**No**" to. I'm talking with a person or persons and want to say something. But I don't. I want to eat a certain food or an amount of food. But I don't. I

want to buy something I don't need. But I don't. I want to watch something on television. But I don't. I say "**No**" to desires I can so I can eventually say "**No**" to desires I can't.

There's a second thing we can do to weaken or destroy the lusts that empower things to tempt us, and it's primary. Consistently and intensely engage Jesus. Something profound happens when we do. As He Himself explained it in John 10:13-14, if we drink of Him, we'll never thirst again. That metaphor suggests the unequalled satisfaction and joy engaging Jesus brings us. That satisfaction and joy makes the things of earth "**grow strangely dim**" as the old hymn says it. Temptations to sin, as a result, hold little appeal to us or even no appeal at all.

Discipleship Journal conducted a survey about Christians and temptations. Its most significant finding, in my opinion, was this. 81% of the respondents said that their temptations were strongest when they "**neglected their time with God.**" That implies that our temptations will be weakest when we spend our time with God and that's right. That's true in my life and it's likely true in yours as well. Consistently and intensely engaging Jesus makes us satisfied and joyful, which weakens or even destroys the wrong desires that empower things to tempt us.

That then is what weakens or destroys lusts. We say "**No**" and engage Jesus. For most of my life, for instance, I desired to outshine others, which made things like the criticism, praise, and success of others, my own personal failure, and competition strong temptations to sin. But saying "**No**" to other desires I could say "**No**" to and engaging Jesus have significantly weakened the strength of that desire and those temptations. In days gone by, I couldn't resist saying "**Yes**" to them and they prevailed. Now, I can easily say "**No**" and they don't.

Conclusion

It's clear then. You and I aren't helpless against temptation. Say "**No**" to the desires we can and consistently and intensely engage Jesus. We'll triumph over temptation if we do.