

## 'On Temptation'

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*Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ*

*Blessed are those whose hearts are pure; they shall see God. – Mt.5,8*

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### Collect:

Almighty and ever-living God, you are the author and giver of all good things. Graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of your great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Christ, whose glory fills the skies (MP79)

- 1 Christ, whose glory fills the skies,  
Christ, the true, the only light,  
Sun of righteousness, arise,  
triumph o'er the shades of night:  
Day-spring from on high, be near;  
Day-star, in my heart appear.
- 2 Dark and cheerless is the morn  
unaccompanied by Thee;  
joyless is the day's return,  
till Thy mercy's beams I see;  
till they inward light impart,  
glad my eyes, and warm my heart.
- 3 Visit then this soul of mine;  
pierce the gloom of sin and grief;  
fill me, radiancy divine;  
scatter all my unbelief;  
more and more Thyself display,  
shining to the perfect day.

Words by Charles Wesley

Reading: **James 1, 13-18**

Sermon:

Dear friends, brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ

James addresses here the issue whether the cause of temptation is not ultimately God. Among those he writes to, the explanation of the experience of temptation is that God is the cause of it: *'God is tempting me'*.

Well, the reflections and thoughts of many today on the temptation to deviate from the path of faith and the Word of God may well resonate with this explanation. They reason something like this: "I have done well so far, kept to the straight and narrow. But now I feel this strong temptation to do what I know God's word calls wrong. (It may be a temptation to financial dishonesty or greed, to doing what one knows is wrong before God because of the fear of missing out or a fear of people, or to anger and violence, or to sexual immorality and impurity, or to lying and stealing etc., even to idolatry) Why should this be so for me who is a believer? Surely God is behind this. Perhaps to test me and teach me perseverance? Perhaps because He wants me to be free and not be legalistic, not be a Pharisee? God is tempting me, so that I should grow and become mature in my faith. Perhaps this temptation is leading me to realise that God is greater than what I think."

However, when, experiencing temptation like this, I say, *'God is tempting me'*, will I not then assume that God will own what I think is his responsibility and make a way for me – stop me from yielding to the temptation if it is wrong? And will I not explain my fall, if I do fall, in a way that mitigates my own responsibility and perhaps suggests that it might be ok?

James recognises the danger here, and rightly so. And he answers by making two points. First, it needs to be understood that this is bad theology, because it makes God the author of evil intent. For that is what temptation is: intending what stands recognisably against the will of God. How could God tempt anyone and still be utterly holy? How could He say to his people, *'You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.'* (Lev.20,26)? God's holiness would be less than holy. Saying *'God is tempting me'* is bad theology in the sense that it gets God wrong! And the problem of bad theology, in whatever way or aspect it gets wrong who God is, is always this that it issues in bad faith.

There is ever so close a connection, which only faith is truly aware of, between knowing God and knowing oneself, and this means that getting God wrong is to get ourselves wrong. Faith must be grounded in a knowledge of God that is true. Otherwise, it will not be equipped to persevere in temptations and trials, because it will not know the true nature of what temptation is aimed at: the forsaking of God and the hiding of sin. The believer will continuously fall over the hurdle that is his self.

Let us also consider that the goodness of God appeared in Jesus Christ who had this to say about tempting others: *"If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung round their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come!"* (Mt.18,6-7) But he who said this was not found himself to tempt anyone.

So James refutes the attempt to explain temptation by saying, *'God is putting me up to it'*. *"No one,"* he says, *"should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, or does he tempt anyone."* By missing the truth of who God is and who He is not, we miss the truth about temptation and about our proneness to being tempted. But if our explanation of thing is wrong, or faulty or deficient, how can we deal with it in a way that is heading in the right direction?

But hearing James say so categorically that God does not tempt anyone, we may ask as many have done: “Why, then, does Jesus teach us to pray, ‘*Lead us not into temptation*’? Does that not suggest some causal involvement on God’s part? But James and Jesus are not opposed here. If I know that something is a temptation to my child, I may well, as I lead her, decide not to put her in the way of it, because I know that failure would mean corruption (I would only be setting her up for blame and punishment and nothing else!). Equally, I might decide to lead her that way knowing it will be useful for instilling such precious values as trust and self-control. But what would I think if my child said: “Father, I don’t think I can deal with this temptation, I’m not strong enough and I fear I would bring dishonour to you; don’t let me go there”? Would that not tell me something about strength, about being more ready than not, because of the attitude it shows towards presumption? And that is the meaning of this petition in the Lord’s Prayer. It is a prayer that recognises presumption and holds against it. (Which is what the people don’t understand who argue for changing these words when trying to understand this petition) They are the words to God of those who say: “I don’t presume to be strong enough, I don’t presume not to need your help; don’t let me go where I’m bound to fall and bring dishonour to your name, let not evil achieve its way with me, but deliver me from it.” The need for us to ask God not to lead us into temptation lies not in the fact that God is the explanation of our temptations, but in the way temptation works on us and in us.

This is where James goes next. After saying that the right explanation of temptation is not that God causes it, he then says what is (the right explanation) so that our dealing with temptation may be rightly directed. “*Each person,*” he says, “*is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.*”

In other words, we must understand that when we are tempted, it is because of something that is inside each and every one of us, something without which we wouldn’t be tempted – our desire. The question “Can I tempt you with a drink?” isn’t meaningful to someone who doesn’t know the desire for a drink.

The temptations that bring faith to fall connect to the desires in us that are evil. It is these desires, therefore, that we need to watch and guard against. Because, as James points out, it is the nature of desire to want to be satisfied, and the only thing that will satisfy the desires that are evil is sin (nothing else will). And sin, when affirmed and indulged through the satisfaction of evil desire, will be the death of faith.

As we are all subject to temptations (we all have to pray ‘Lead us not into temptation’), this goes to show that such desires are inside us all. It is vital, surely, that for persevering in trials and temptations we should know ‘our enemy’! Nothing eases the path of temptation like a lack of knowledge about the enemy. But by ‘our enemy’ is meant our own evil desires. And we know that we have such desires and what they are when we learn that law of God revealing his will for us, saying ‘*You shall not covet...*’. There I learn of the desire in me that covets what stands against God’s will and which in being satisfied gives birth to sin.

Dear friends, let us not be deceived or deceive ourselves about such matters. These desires are strong and persistent and their purpose is clear. We deceive ourselves about who God is (and who he is not) when we associate the things that tempt us, and the desires they answer, with God’s good gifts. On the side of help, let us remember, and in faith hold fast to, his good and perfect gift that is his Son Jesus Christ through whom, as we turn to him in repentance of our sins, we receive grace: to desire not what is wrong but what is right and find satisfaction not in sin but in righteousness and an

end not in the death of faith but in the life of faith.

AMEN

Lord God, from whom is every good and perfect gift. You do not change like shifting shadows, but are constant in your purposes for the world and your will towards us. You cannot be tempted by evil, and it is by grace alone that we who can be and are tempted by evil should nevertheless be the object and aim of your redeeming work and love through Jesus Christ. We praise the might and purity of your enduring mercy. Grant us, we pray, not to engage in all those diversionary tactics whereby we hide from ourselves the evil of our desires and therefore also the power of your mercy to help us in our need. Fill us, we pray in Jesus' name, with your Spirit, so that in the trials and temptations of this day we may stand, to the praise and glory of your name. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [ what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;  
we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;  
we plead for the lost, the broken, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;  
we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for our communities;  
we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand;  
we pray:]

***'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen***

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*Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts  
and minds in Christ Jesus.*

*And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be  
among you and remain with you. AMEN*

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