
Prayers

To God

Pray in repentance for all that goes wrong in your life. Pray in silence so that you may hear the Lord's voice, and then offer Him your love this day and put it into practice.

For myself

Praise God for the miracle of life, and for the miracle of your own life. Rejoice in all He has done for you and everything you have right now, your life, your health, your friends, and your home.

For others

Weekly theme: the environment

Lord God, we pray for those who suffer because of natural disasters, whether this is famine or flood, or the failure of crops for whatever reason. People lay blame on You when agriculture fails, but are reluctant to give You the honour when crops yield in abundance. May we therefore seek You through both the good and the bad of this life, and live by Your sure and certain guidance; through Christ our Lord: **AMEN**

Meditation

Watch over us, Lord God, in the paths we take;
That we may be wise in all our decisions.

Watch over us, Lord God, as we speak to other people;
That we may be honest in the things we say.

Watch over us, Lord God, in the company we keep;
That we may be careful to keep close to You.

Watch over us, Lord God, as we do our work;
That we may build up Your glorious Kingdom.

Watch over us, Lord God, when our passions overflow;
That we may be committed, sincere and faithful.

Watch over us, Lord God, in our hopes and dreams;
That we may accept Your plans for our future.

Bible Passage

James 1:12-16

¹² Blessed is anyone who stands firm through temptation, for this person is of proven worth and will receive the crown of life He has promised to those who love Him.

¹³ Never say, when tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God is not tempted to do evil. He tempts no one Himself. ¹⁴ However, each is tempted by being lured and trapped by their own wants; ¹⁵ then, when this desire has taken hold it gives birth to sin, and when fully grown, the sin gives birth to death.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my friends.

Review

James continues by giving some forthright advice for the Christian, and as we saw yesterday, there is a strong connection between his teaching here and that of Jesus. Though the connection is more with an incident in Jesus' life than with any parable or saying. As James encourages the believer to stand firm against temptation (1:12,13) and warns of its power (1:14,15), we can hardly read without recalling the very first story of Jesus' active ministry, about His temptations in the wilderness.

Just as Jesus could not begin His ministry until He took His stand against Satan and his temptations (Matthew 4:1-11), so James will go no further in his letter until he has encouraged the Christian to stand firm against temptations and Tempter's power. In His own life, Jesus had to defeat the enemy decisively in order to do His work, and likewise, the Christian must recognise the evil power of temptation and deal with it. When we put all this together, the general message of these verses comes to the fore; without being able to take a stand in faith against sin and temptation, the Christian cannot do God's will.

James again reminds us of Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, when he says '*Blessed is anyone who stands firm through temptation, for this person is of proven worth ...*' (1:12). Apart from James' characteristically blunt language, these words could almost follow on from one of the 'beatitudes', for example, '*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*' (Matt 5:10)!

The advice to resist temptation is primary advice for the Christian. This is because the troubles of this world and the evil within it will always have an impact, and God's people must be prepared to face these things at all times. Without hard won experience in making a stand against what is wrong in this world, whether personal temptations and sin, or rampant world evils such as war or torture, the Christian has no firm basis of faith. Too often, those who have been saved for many years fall by the wayside when trouble comes, because they have not been enabled to deal with life's difficulties as a first priority of living, practical faith.

Here, James describes the Christian life as one that looks forward to a '*crown of life*' promised by God to those who '*love Him*' (1:12). The picture is incomplete, and we fill in the gaps to imagine that James is talking the race of life with a prize at the end. Paul hints at this idea many times (Acts 20:24, 1 Cor 9:24, Gal 2:2, 5:7), but paints the picture more fully in his first letter to Timothy, where he says,

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day ... (2Ti 4:7-8)

It may well be that this picture of Christian life a race towards a heavenly prize was a common theme amongst early Christians. So when James speaks of the '*crown of life*', he knows his readers will 'fill in the blanks' to get the full picture. We can only presume this, but the message here seems clear enough; the one who takes action against the Tempter and his power is the one who wins the 'crown' of eternal life.

Because this is important, James proceeds to say some more, revealing a deeper picture of the power of sin and temptation, and the importance of standing against it (13-15). The first insight is this; some blame God for what goes wrong in life, He is reckoned to be responsible even for the sins they commit! Today, some will excuse their sins by saying 'I was born like this', which is not far short of 'its not my fault, God has done this or that in my life', or as James says here '*I am being tempted by God*' (1:13). Each of these accusations is a form of deflecting personal responsibility for sin.

Of course, each one of us has to contend with difficult personal circumstances, peculiarities or differences, but we get nowhere by blaming God for temptation to sin. As James says here, temptation is the first step towards evil (1:14), and evil is contrary to God's nature, indeed, '*He tempts no one Himself*' (1:13). Satan may rule on earth and tempt people to evil and sin, but although this is the truth about our fallen world, it is not His perfect will. As Genesis 3 teaches, God intends to defeat Satan and all evil. This is why Jesus must stand against the devil at the beginning of His ministry, and why the Christian must constantly resist him.

The problem of temptation is universal; '*each is tempted by being lured and trapped by their own wants*' (1:14). This is not just about material wants; it means so much more. 'Wants' encompasses the desire for more money and possession, expectations placed on others, and the most general of hopes and dreams. Perhaps the most difficult and potentially sinful of these desires is materialistic, for within the capitalist culture of the western world, the hope of gain can easily become an evil master dominating people and society. As James says, '*when this desire takes hold it gives birth to sin ... sin gives birth to death*' (1:15), and these words could be a prophecy of the death of capitalism! Certainly, as I write (late 2012), the generally assumed success of capitalism hangs somewhat in the balance.

But more than this, James' words apply to all who are called to love one another by Jesus. James knew that his brother had loved throughout His life until the world could not receive this and it killed Him. The sin of individuals within Judaism had compounded until the Saviour was killed on a Cross. Perhaps this is why James describes so stridently how sin works and leads to death (1:15). This is a message for all, especially for our families, where true love counts most fundamentally. People who know each other intimately through personal or church family should help each other to stand firm against the Tempter and his guiles, and to practice free unmerited love as taught by Jesus.

James concludes his advice about standing against temptation with these words, '*do not be deceived my friends*' (1:16). As we are about to find out as we read on in this letter, James knew full well that the Tempter was at large within the church, perverting love and dragging people down into selfishness and greed (1:20f.). His advice in this passage is not casual or lightly given. It is deadly serious and highly relevant. The enemy must be recognised and opposed.

Discipleship

Application

Standing against temptation

The first move of fighting against temptation is to spot the enemy, and some do not want to do this; no one will deal with an enemy that they do not perceive. So Christians who think that their faith is nothing but an aide to living will often not want to recognise that they face an enemy, or that Satan even exists.

But this is where our passage today helps. Scriptures such as this exist to remind us not of what we want but the truth about God and the whole of life, so passages such as this are an important reminder to God's people to be on the lookout for the enemy. Of course, it is one of a host of other Scriptures describing the effects of evil on the human soul, from the work of Satan in Job 1 and 2, to Jesus' temptations (Matt4:1f) to Jesus' own description of evil (Matt 12:26f.). All of these require our considered attention if we want to learn more about standing against temptation.

Temptations leading to sins

These are words encourage us to do what is right when we find ourselves trapped in personal sin of whatever kind. The passage describes sin as the consequence of temptation, and therefore suggests that we should be on the look out for temptation, and avoid it first and fight it second. Sin entraps, and temptation is an important warning to the soul. Yielding to it, even in its smallest forms, will always bring trouble and distress. In my opinion, the best way for Christians to help each other stand firm against temptation is for them to be honest about it and talk to each other. When a problem is brought into the open, it can be halfway to being solved.

Ideas for what to do

- Write down a list of the things which offer temptation to you and which may lead to sin. Use the list for prayer, or discuss with a friend how temptation works to produce sin. If possible, share experiences and pray with one another. Consider, how does sin creep up on a church? How can people in a church be helped to recognise those temptations which will lead them astray?
- Pray against the powers of temptation that assail your life and the life of the church community to which you belong. Pray that God will build up His people in faith to be strong against the enemy.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does the '*crown of life*' mean to you? Discuss this in your group and compare the different answers you all give.
2. Are our 'wants' always as negative as James indicates? How can Jesus redeem our wants in order to make them godly?
3. To what extent do you feel under the persecutions of the world in which you live?

Final Prayer

Let me hear Your voice tonight, faithful God and Lord of all. Speak to me so that I may know Your will, whether it be hard or easy, comforting or challenging, exciting or mundane; and let me value each and every word, the instruction You give for Your servant's life. Thank You Lord; AMEN