

Message Reflections

a little something extra to keep you connected to Jesus this week

Message Reflections accompany the [weekly message](#).

The book of James is short, just five chapters, but there is so much wisdom packed in there. Prior to this sermon series, if I had to sum up the book of James in a sentence, that sentence would probably have been “Faith without works is dead.” That’s not a bad summary of the book, and I feel like that would have been a fairly easy topic to write about without any concern for what kind of personal information I might have had to share. Want to hear about some good works? Sure, yes, I can do that. Let’s talk about volunteer work or fasting and praying or short-term mission trips. Not a problem. Except that’s not the topic we’re focusing on in James this week. This week is about testing and temptation. And I have to say, compared with a discussion about good works, this topic makes it a little harder to want to share any personal exposition.

But I’ll do it anyway. I’m not sure if the Bible says this (I should maybe do some research), but I think that there are particular sins to which each of us is inclined. A temptation that seems more, well, tempting. For some people it might be lying. Maybe it just seems easier to lie than to have a hard conversation. Maybe your deal is greed. You have more than enough of whatever you need, and just can’t bring yourself to be generous with what you’ve been given. Maybe it’s pride. You’re telling yourself that you just have a healthy appreciation for your own strengths, but really you’re using your giftedness to look down on others. Those three don’t tend to be my issues, but I’ll tell you which ones do: Envy. Impatience. Anger.

[The Screwtape Letters](#) by C.S. Lewis illustrates just what the enemy does with that information. In letters between Uncle Screwtape, a senior tempter, and his nephew Wormwood, a junior just earning his temptation stripes, Lewis shows how Satan uses our weaknesses to tempt us into sin. I’ll tell you what a letter to my tempter would say: *“Introduce her to people she perceives to have or be or do more than she does. Tell her if she just had what they do, everything would be perfect. While you’re at it, put her in the longest line at the grocery store (but make sure it looks like it’s the shortest), extend the duration of her red light, slow down her internet while she’s working, and encourage her kids to argue with one another. Put all those things on repeat, and enjoy watching her deal with the fruits of your labor!”*

Satan finds those sins toward which we are already inclined, and suggests that maybe, just maybe, there's nothing wrong with taking a little step in that direction. Satan doesn't just exploit that weakness though. He works to convince us that the weakness doesn't exist in the first place. Or if it does, no worries, it's under control. We definitely don't need the support of other believers, and there's no sense in relying on God and on his word. That's just not really necessary.

God's Word says otherwise. James 1:5 says, *"If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking."* and in 1:21b adds, *"and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls."* It is not under our own power that we are able to resist the temptation that Satan sends our way, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' temptation in Luke 4 gives us a model for our response to temptation. When Satan tempts Jesus, Jesus is prepared with Scripture to refute the lies Satan tells him. Each time Satan suggests a new temptation to Jesus, Jesus responds with Scripture that he knows like the back of his hand. Have you ever taken a test for which you were completely unprepared? You probably didn't do as well as you might have, had you taken the time to study. Same thing when we face temptations. Are we likely to fare very well if we haven't taken the time to prepare for the inevitable temptations that Satan sends our way?

At the end of the story about Jesus' temptation in Luke 4:13, Luke tucks in one more important piece of information. *"When the devil had finished tempting Jesus, he left him until the next opportunity came."* Temptation is not a one-and-done situation. Satan isn't finished after one try. He's just waiting for his next opportunity. His goal is to steal and kill and destroy, and he's not going to give up easily!

But struggles don't just come in the form of temptation. I haven't really spent much time considering the difference between testing and temptation prior to this week, but the distinction is important. Both can result in blessing (James 1:12 *"God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation."*) but they do not have the same source. James 1:14 says, *"Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away."* Temptation is not from God. But God does allow testing of our faith *"For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."* James 1:3-4

Testing may come in many different forms. In the case of Job, God allowed the loss of his family, his possessions, and his health. Job's friends weren't much help, suggesting that Job's trials were his own fault. For us, testing may look like the loss of a loved one. It might look like financial instability. Or the end of a marriage. Or a virus that upends life as we know it. What temptation and testing do have in common is that it is our response to them that matters. Often we can't control the circumstances in which we find ourselves, but how we respond to our circumstances not only shows our character but gives an opportunity for that character to develop.

James 1:2-3 says, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow."* I can't necessarily say that I immediately appreciate all of the troubles that come my way. In general, I find troubles to be at best a nuisance. But given some time, and perhaps the benefit of hindsight, it is often possible to see that the trials I have faced have been essential in the development of my faith and character. As you head into this week, how will you allow the testing and temptations that will come your way to shape you?

