

“IT’S TEMPTING”

(Narnia 4)

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James 1:12-15 (p. 1172)

The four children were playing hide and seek. Edmund had gotten into the wardrobe after Lucy so he could go on teasing her about what he assumed was her “imaginary” country. But now to his utter surprise, he found himself in a snow-covered forest. Narnia was turning out to be more real (and more dangerous) than either of them imagined. Lucy was nowhere to be seen, but Edmund had a more pressing matter to deal with. A great lady on a sledge, her skin as white as snow, was looking down on him.

“The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” – Chapter 4

I have in hand a box of Turkish Delight given to me by a friend. It weighs a mere 11.5 ounces – much smaller than the several-pound box given to Edmund by the witch – but enough, perhaps, to get me hooked. Okay, I may not have a problem with Turkish Delight. But I assure you there are those things I know I must leave alone because, once tasted, I might do most anything to taste again.

Much as I would like to deny it, I’m not unlike Edmund. None of us is. In our lesson today James writes, *“When tempted...”* Notice he doesn’t say, *“If tempted...”* Temptations are not optional. They come with life as part of the package. The question is not whether you will have to face temptations, but how are you going to deal with those temptations that will inevitably come.

The first order of business had better be to understand what you’re up against. James begins by saying, *“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’”* God will send us trials to make us strong. But God is not in the temptation business. Ah, but that hardly stop us from blaming him. The primary example of that error is Adam in the Garden after the apple-eating incident. He said to God, in effect, *“Things were fine until that woman showed up.”* But he wasn’t pointing the finger at Eve – not really. He was blaming God. His words betray his intent. *“It was that woman **you** put here with me,”* he said. James warns us not to fall into the “blame game” trap.

Then with characteristic bluntness he goes on to describe just how temptation works. James writes: *“Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed.”* Notice that “evil desire” comes before getting “dragged away.” There’s no room for arguing, *“I was dragged away*

against my will.” That line about “dragged away and enticed” is simply a description of what inevitably happens when you let your “own evil desire” kick in.

Incidentally, there’s nothing wrong with desire. God designed us with the capacity to desire. When I was courting the young woman who later became my wife, I carried her picture with Psalm 37:4 on the back: “*Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*” As far as God is concerned, desiring is just fine. The problems come, however, when we’re tempted to satisfy what James calls “evil desire.” The tenth commandment addresses the same issue. It doesn’t say, “*You shall not desire.*” It says, “*You shall not desire those things you have no business desiring – like your neighbor’s wife.*” The Old Testament word for it is “covet,” and it’s deadly serious business.

I find it fascinating that temptation continues to work the way it always has. Now, you might wonder why people don’t catch on to what the Tempter is up to. Well, some people do. But it’s like advertising. If it still works on a sufficient segment of the population, why change it? There is an inherent fascination with things that entice us. We’re drawn to them, even when we see through them. We’ll open that refrigerator door or click on that screen when we know exactly what we’re doing and why we’re doing it. But we’ll go ahead and do it anyway. We may be “dragged away,” but we go willingly – at least at first. And if there is no intervention, it can be devastating. James put it this way. He said that when misdirected desire mates with temptation, “it conceives and gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full grown, gives birth to death.”

There’s an old story about how to catch a monkey in the jungle. Take a hollowed-out gourd and bore a hole in it barely big enough for a monkey to squeeze its paw through. Put some choice nuts and berries inside, tie the gourd to a tree limb, and wait. Soon a monkey will notice the gourd with the tempting goodies, reach inside and grab a fistful of food. And with a clenched fist, and the hole so small, the monkey won’t be able to remove its paw. But rather than drop the food, the monkey will hold tightly to the captured goods. It will jump around and go into a screeching rage, but will not let go of the food. And with the gourd tied to the tree limb, the hunter can walk up behind the monkey and capture it, and the monkey may never know how it happened.

Humans are often captured by temptation in much the same way. They get hold of a little Turkish Delight – or whatever the bait might be, and before they know it they’re trapped and don’t even realize it. They let their evil desire get the better of them, and yet they may be oblivious to the way they’re destroying themselves. Now, when it comes to those who have fallen prey to temptation, there are two quite different but I think equally dangerous traps into which we can fall.

On one hand, we can look at those who have given in to misplaced desire and write them off as weak-willed, rotten scumbags. Now, we might be willing to attribute their weakness to genetic factors. Perhaps they inherited an insatiable desire for Turkish Delight or alcohol or aberrant sexual behavior. Or maybe they gave in to temptation because of the way they had been raised. Perhaps it was due to the violence or x-rated crud they watched on television. Or it could have been due to the warped values they saw lived out by those who influenced them in their formative years. It's the old nature-nurture debate. Either they were genetically predisposed to weak-willed, self-destructive behavior or they were programmed to live that way because of their environment. But the bottom line is that they are seen as either defective or broken merchandise, and can therefore be dismissed as a lost cause. Sometimes we're inclined to treat them that way, and we dare not fall into that trap.

The other trap is to assume that those who fall prey to temptation are the essentially passive product of forces beyond themselves, whether genetic or cultural, and can therefore be excused as somehow victims. *"It wasn't my fault,"* they might say. *"It's just the way I am. That's the way I was made."* Or they'll say, *"I'm basically a weak person. I couldn't help myself."* And there are those who are all too eager to agree, *"Of course it wasn't your fault. And shame on those who've treated you so dreadfully."* The bottom line is that, rather than writing them off as a lost cause, their sinful behavior is written off as not only excusable; in some cases it is regarded as commendable.

Now, when it comes to our story, it is already tempting to view Peter and Susan and Lucy as the good children and Edmund as the rotten apple – the villain in the story. I suspect we already have an unspoken predisposition to write him off as a lost cause. And I'll warn you now that, as the story progresses, Edmund will appear all the worse.

But bear this in mind, and remember it well. There is something of Edmund in all of us. We all have our own equivalent of Turkish Delight. We are all inclined to get our fists stuck in one gourd or another. The Bible calls it sin, and we're all infected – every last one of us. If we condemn Edmund or make excuses for his behavior, we are condemning or making excuses for ourselves as well. God help us to neither write others off prematurely, nor dismiss their sin by excusing it. And God help us to deal honestly with our own culpability so that, by His grace, we'll be willing to accept the healing that God alone can provide.

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