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February 18, 2018 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: **James 1:12-18**

<sup>12</sup> Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

<sup>13</sup> When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup> but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

<sup>16</sup> Don’t be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. <sup>17</sup> Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. <sup>18</sup> He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

It’s one of those things that seems to be ever-present in our society: diets. Someone’s always coming out with a big, new diet. Some years back there was the South Beach Diet, then the Atkins Diet. Now the Paleo Diet is out there drawing its own crowd and there are a dozen more out there, some for specialized dietary needs and some that are old favorites that just keep circulating.

It’s nice to have people, willing to work through the details of putting a diet together. Even if you don’t have any major problems, at some point in your life you’ll have to start watching the cholesterol and salt a bit, you’ll have to start controlling your portion sizes and all of that sort of thing if you want to stay in shape in your later years. There’s still the exercising, regular health check ups and other things you need to stay in top shape.

Pursuing a diet is a fine idea, especially as you get older. But there are some things that inevitably go along with the diet to make things more difficult. The first is the food itself. There’s a reason you have to work at the diet. If diets were full of fun foods you wouldn’t even have to have diets. Everyone would just eat good stuff. But it isn’t so easy. Instead you get small portions and what you have is dominated by stuff like steamed carrots and broccoli, kale salads and similar stuff that isn’t terribly exciting. Added to that, you have to plan it all out and prepare it. You can’t just buy whatever at the grocery store. You have a list of things you can eat and you have to stick to it.

That’s really not the worst part though. It’s when you’re driving somewhere by yourself, you pull up to a stop light and look out to the right and there it is: Graeter’s! You know you

shouldn't. You've been on the diet for a couple weeks now and have been doing great. It's been so long since you've had one you just need a taste. You'll go right back to the diet afterward but you just need a change of pace now, a little reward for doing so well. You get yourself a cone, but just a single scoop and it tastes so good. But then you start thinking. You were doing so well. Why did you have to give it up? Why could you hold out, power through the temptation and stick to the diet you worked so hard for?

“God, why did you let me go there? Why did you have to put that in my path? Why couldn't you give me the strength to stand up to it? Did you want me to fail? Was that the point all along?” God could certainly have rearranged any or all of these things to smooth out the rough points of your diet. He could have made it so you had to take a different path to get to where you were going. He could have made it so Graeter's was closed for some reason. He could have done all of this and more to make your life a little easier, but instead he allowed you to run right into something he knew was going to cause you problems. It seems God doesn't want you to succeed. You were all set to improve your life and do something worthwhile and he's brought it all crashing down. What was already going to be an uphill battle is going to be made even worse because God is going to make it all more difficult

It seems like it never fails. Whenever you try and do something good, something that's going to require a lot of hard work and dedication it never goes easily. Sometimes that's just trying to get through the day without problems. All of those things you know you should avoid and you do your best to stay on track but inevitably they are right there waiting for you every time you turn around.

The temptations, they're terrible. You know they're bad. You know you should avoid them. You even try to avoid them, but it doesn't matter. They're always there. A constant reminder of your failures. Constantly alerting you to how God seems to be making your life even harder than it has to be.

It's bad enough when it comes to diets. Taking care of your body is a good thing. Building those good habits that will help you stay healthy is something we should all strive for and few of us do very well at. But it is far from the only temptation out there. We all have those dark, little things that call to each of us.

You've been trying to be better about money. It's always something you've put more trust in and cared more for than you should. You made some investments and have been diligent

about saving so you shouldn't have to worry. You know there will always be things you want that you won't be able to have and you've started to make your piece with that. You're out clothes shopping, not anything special and there you see it under a clothing rack, a wallet. It has a driver's license in it. It also has \$100. It would be easy enough to turn it in at the front desk or with the police, but that would mean passing up on this little windfall you've been given. You've been doing so well, but now God seems to be throwing this little problem in your path just to trip you up. It shouldn't have to be this hard.

You've always had a problem with the ladies. You hit up the bars and nightclubs to have a little fun. Long term relationships have never been your thing. You just go with the casual hook ups that don't require you to hang around forever. You know what you're supposed to do. Commitment, marriage and all of that stuff, but you have a hard time giving up your freer lifestyle. You've decided for right now to just swear it all off altogether. The only problem with all of that is that there's this new brunette in the office. She's pretty and single, but what's worse is she seems to be really attracted to you. You're trying to do things right for once, or at least not more wrong. You don't need this temptation in your life and you don't understand why God had to put it there when he knows the kind of struggle you've been having. This is God's way of punishing you, of keeping you down in the dirt when you're trying so hard to get free.

James says God tempts no one, but you run into plenty of evidence that suggests God enjoys seeing you constantly struggle to do the very thing he wants you to do. It's like he wants you to be constantly indebted to him. Forgiveness is all well and good, but if he's just forgiving you for things he put in your way to begin with then it all kind of cancels out in the end. If that's the case, why even bother fighting it? You'll never win because God constantly thwarts everything you do.

St. Paul's seen plenty of his own sins though. He certainly had his own temptations. His old life as a Pharisee directed him toward all kinds of evil things, all to feed his own pride. He was even a party to murder, and not just one, but numerous. There was always one more Christian to hunt down and bring to his brand of justice. But maybe that means he is very familiar with temptations and how they affect people. Maybe he knows where those temptations come from and why it's so hard to stay away from them. Maybe he knows what brings sin and death because he's seen it all right in front of his eyes.

As Paul previously had been going around following his sinful desires and bringing

Christians to his twisted justice, he realized just what it meant for Jesus to show up to him on the road to Damascus. God had not put all of those Christians in Paul's path for him to slaughter. Paul's pride is what looked for them and sought them out. Paul is the one who went after what he wanted, despite what God wanted for him. He would have kept on doing it too, unless God intervened. When Christ came, it could have been in wrath and anger at all of the abuses Paul's pride brought to God's people. Instead he came in mercy, calling Paul to a new life and to recognize his pride for what it was, a path that leads only to death. His desire led to sin and his sin led to death. It was a supreme act of grace that brought Jesus before him in forgiveness. Now St. Paul understands the nature of sin.

It is our sin that goes looking for what it should not have. We look for sinful things because we are sinners. It is not God who tempts us, it is our own sinful hearts that go seeking what we should not have. Without our sin we would never be tempted. We would never look at Graeter's as an escape from our diet, though we would never be in a position to need one in the first place. We would never seek pleasure in money or in affairs or anything else because we'd see with eyes unclouded by sin that we already have all we need and much, much more.

We look away from God and the evil thoughts come into our minds and we let them fester there and grow and direct us to carry them out, no matter that we end up worse for it. We get mad at God for putting the temptations in our path because we don't like the more uncomfortable truth, it was our doing all along. For God to remove all temptation from our lives he would have to remove everything, because anything can be a potential temptation for us, even our own bodies and minds.

St. Paul says, "Do not be deceived. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above." God constantly involves himself in our lives to protect us even from ourselves. Christ appears to us, as he did to St. Paul to shower his grace upon us even as we seek out other sources of comfort that lead to our own destruction.

It's a testimony to the love and mercy of our God how every moment of every day does not lead to a new temptation and mire us further in any number of sins. Instead of looking all around us, at anything that might possibly feed our desires even a little bit, Christ appears to us and shows us his grace. Every good and perfect gift comes from our Father above and he gives us the gift of his Son to defend us, protect us, and lead us. Christ appears to us here on the altar and shows us he has everything we need and more. His body and blood cover us with his grace

and work in us to draw our desires away from the world and direct them to him. With Christ we have all we need. With Christ we find we also have all we could possibly want.

Christ shows us what life without sin is like. It is a life where every moment is joy. Every moment is peace. Every moment is pure trust and contentment. Every moment is life because we never seek out the things that lead to death.

Though we have joined Christ at the altar, we still fight the daily battle with temptation and sin. Our sinful desires still lurk within us and seek to drag us off the path. The difference now is that they do not lead to death, because Christ is with us, constantly calling us back away from the dangers of sinful desires.

Christ, in his glory, shows us what comes of sin, but also what comes of his grace. We fall victim to our temptations and we will continue to do so throughout this life. But his forgiveness is there for us too. We recognize our failures and ask for strength to fend off the temptations next time. When we fail again, as we inevitably will, his forgiveness is still there for us. The battle against temptation is not for us to win, because we will always lose in the long run. But it is a battle we must continue to fight. It is a battle we can lose if we choose to give up. The victory, however, is won by Christ. Those who cling to him and his grace in the midst of sin will find a crown of glory, of victory, waiting for them at the end. Christ's crown of glory means more than just eternal life. It is eternal life free every sinful thought or desire. It is a life of true freedom.

The fight against sin and temptation can be wearying and depressing, but do not give in to it. Christ fights on your behalf and he will forgive you and strengthen you. Keep resisting those destructive impulses because what Christ offers is the most good and perfect gift we could ever hope for.