

Taming the Heart

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Date: 06 August 2023

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[0 : 0 0] So James 1 verse 14. But each one is tempted when by his own evil desire he is dragged away and enticed.

Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin. And sin, when it has full grown, gives birth to death. Now as you read those two verses, I think maybe one of the first things you'll notice is there are different stages as you go through those verses.

Firstly, we see there's that temptation at the start, just as it says here, by our own evil desires we are dragged away and enticed. So we're drawn in to see what's this all about and what is it that's tickling our fancy.

And then after that, secondly, it says after we've been enticed, it gives birth to sin. And then finally it says this sin leads to death.

And what I want to try and do this morning is to look at an example of this from the Bible. And so what we're going to do is we're going to go all the way back into the Old Testament, all the way back and look at these two verses in light of an example from 1 Kings, from one of the kings of Israel, a man by the name of Ahab.

[1 : 2 8] So it would be handy if you do have a Bible because it's a whole chapter and I'm going to be dipping in and out. I won't read the whole thing. So it's 1 Kings chapter 21 if you can follow along.

And if you have a church Bible, I think it's page 363. And so the king of Israel at this time was a man named Ahab.

And this man, Ahab, we're told, he ruled over Israel for 22 years. And as you go through the kings of Israel, as one dies and as another king succeeds, we're usually introduced to them either as a king who followed after the Lord and after the Lord's heart, or else as one who turned away from the Lord and who followed after idols and Baals and other foreign gods.

And in 1 Kings, we're introduced to this king, Ahab, in chapter 16 as follows. At the end of chapter 16, it simply talks about Ahab and it says about him that Ahab, son of Omri, did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him.

He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, but he also married Jezebel, daughter of Ethbel, king of the Sidonites.

[2 : 5 4] And he began to serve Baal and to worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an Asherah pole and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.

So you get an idea of what, you know, this man was like. He was an evil and a wicked man. And as we look at what Ahab did through this chapter, you know, it becomes very clear what these two verses in James are talking about.

And, you know, it starts off in a very normal way as you look at it. In chapter 21, verse 1, you know, we're told about this man called Naboth.

And he has a vineyard. And we're told that the vineyard was in Jezreel and it was close to the palace of this king Ahab. And Ahab said to Naboth, he says, let me have your vineyard as a vegetable garden since it is close to my palace.

And in exchange, I'll give you a better vineyard. Or if you prefer, I will pay you what it's worth. And here, you know, you start off and you see the desire creeping in.

[4 : 1 3] And I don't think it necessarily starts off as an evil desire. I mean, Ahab, he's looking out his window. He sees this vineyard and he thinks to himself, you know, that would be a nice thing to have.

That would be a good thing to have. You know, I'll go talk to Naboth and see if he'd sell it to me. And so he goes down and he talks to Naboth and he asks him, you know, what would it cost me to get this vineyard off you?

And every day, similarly, we have these sorts of desires. You know, I can go from the very biggest things to, you know, wanting to, the desire to buy a house or to buy a new car.

Right down to when you're going into the car park outside Fields or Lidl or Aldi or wherever. And you see the car park space right up at the front and your desire is like, I want that one.

And, you know, we all have desires every day. And a lot of times, they're very good desires. You know, we want, you know, we want to have maybe good healthy food for our kids.

[5 : 11] We want to have this or we want to have that. And they can be good desires. And where it becomes a problem is what do we do with those desires when they don't get fulfilled?

Are we satisfied if we don't get what we want? Or are we going to allow jealousy or annoyance or anger into our hearts? And this is really the point that James is trying to make when he says, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin.

And in so many situations, multiple times during the day, you'll come to this crossroads of, you know, are you going to let this desire conceive in your heart and give birth to sin?

Or are you going to fight it off? You know, as we're going through the book of Genesis, you might remember those of you who are here. We went through chapter four, which talked about Cain and Abel, the two brothers.

And they both came with their sacrifices to God and they both offered them. And God accepted Abel's and not Cain's. And Cain was angry and he was jealous of his brother Abel.

[6 : 28] And God sees the anger and jealousy that's in Cain's heart. And he says to Cain, he says, sin is crouching at your door. It desires to have you, but you must master it.

So Cain was at that crossroads of he must make a choice. Was he going to let that desire of jealousy and anger towards his brother creep in and go further still with it?

Or was he going to fight it, to master it as God had called him to there? And this is the same situation that Abel is facing here as well.

You know, he's at this crossroads. Naboth has said, no, no, I don't. I don't want to sell you the vineyard. I want to keep it in the family. You know, is Nahab or is Ahab going to accept that and be at peace with it in his heart?

Or is he going to let those desires conceive and give birth to sin? And unfortunately, we see that he chooses the latter option.

[7 : 33] You know, we read in the next couple of verses that Ahab, he went home. It says sullen and angry. And he lay in his bed sulking and refusing to eat.

You know, he was like a spoiled child. And he was like, hmm, I didn't get my vineyard. And his wife, Jezebel, she sees him. And she says, what's the matter?

And he tells her all about it. You know, what's happened with Naboth and himself. And this is her response. She says, down in verse 7, is this how you act as a king over Israel?

Get up and eat. Cheer up. I'll get you that vineyard of Naboth, the Israelite. So she wrote letters in Ahab's name. And she placed a seal in them.

And she sent them to the elders and nobles who lived in Naboth city. And she wrote in the letter, proclaim a day of fasting. And seat Naboth in a prominent place among the people.

[8 : 30] But seat two scoundrels opposite him. And have them testify that he has cursed both God and the king. Then take him out and stone him to death.

So this was her whole plan. She was going to get Naboth killed. And going to send out these letters. Falsely accuse him of something that he had done wrong.

And then get him stoned and killed. And then Ahab could take over this vineyard. And so that's her plan. It's carried out. Naboth, he's accused of cursing God and the king.

And he's taken out. And he's killed. He's stoned to death. And over those couple of days or however long it took.

You can see how Ahab's desires have gone from simply, you know, looking out his window. And thinking, oh look, that's a nice little vineyard there.

[9 : 30] Wouldn't it be a great little place for my vegetable garden? To now, you know, he's feeling jealousy and anger. He's sulking. And then he gives in to Jezebel's evil plan to get rid of Naboth and to take over this vineyard.

And so you see those desires being conceived in Ahab's heart. As they turn then to feelings of anger. To listening to his wife.

To following them out. Executing the plan. And you see this sin being born. And in our lives, I think it's a very similar path.

If we allow those feelings of jealousy or anger or lust or pride or arrogance to get into our hearts.

Then very soon, you know, you'll hear that same voice of a Jezebel speaking in your heart.

Telling you and giving you ideas of, you know, how you can get even with that person. How you can get revenge. How you can get back at that person. Oh, you're so much better than that person. You shouldn't be treated like that.

[10:37] You know, I think we can all apply it to our own situation. Where those desires come in and we, you know, we feel hurt by someone. Or we feel jealous or anger or whatever it is.

And there's that point where we have to decide. Are we going to let it continue on and develop into something more serious? Or are we going to fight back against it?

And the Apostle Peter, you know, he tells us that the devil in 1 Peter, he talks about the devil, that he's a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

And so he talks about the devil being someone who's looking for your weak spots, your weak points. And he knows them. And he will try to exploit them at every opportunity.

Just as he, do you remember all the way back in Genesis with Eve in the garden? He tries to exploit Eve. And he says to Eve, did God really say you mustn't eat from any tree in the garden?

[11:42] And I think he does the same thing with us. He will try to ask those questions and try to exploit those opportunities for us to doubt God and to put ourselves first instead of putting God first.

And that's why, you know, Peter, he talks about the devil being a roaring lion. And he calls on us then to be self-controlled and alert, to be ready for this lion, to be on the lookout, to always be watching.

And then he says, resist him, standing firm in your faith. And so it's one thing to be on the lookout, but the devil will attack you at times.

And when he does, we're called to resist, to stand firm. And before that point of desire being conceived and giving birth to sin, we must resist him.

As we're told in the book of Ephesians, we're told to resist with the shield of faith, with the belt of truth, the shoes of the gospel, the breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the spirit, the word of God, and coating everything in prayer, praying at all times, he says, in the spirit.

[12:57] And so I suppose the question is, really, are you going to give in as Ahab did here? Are you going to allow those feelings of anger or bitterness or resentment or pride or lust or whatever it is, slip in and rule your heart like it does to Ahab here?

Are you going to listen to a Jezebel in your heart telling you how you should get revenge or do this sort of evil or that sort of thing?

Or are you going to resist, as Peter calls us to, so that, as it says in Philippians, So that we may be pure and blameless children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which you shine like stars in the universe.

Wouldn't that be so much better to think for this? In those situations, are we going to give in or do we want to resist so that we can shine like stars in the universe, so that we can shine the light of Christ to others around us?

But finally, then, we see here in these verses in James the result of sin. He says, when sin, when it is fully grown, it gives birth to death.

[14:20] And sin, it ultimately, it leads to death. You know, we can see this generally in the world around us. You know, it could be whether you see it with drugs or with alcohol or smoking or gambling or food or the lack of it.

Eventually, sooner or later, it leads to death. And I think this is kind of what James is trying to get across, that sinning eventually leads us to death.

Not necessarily a physical, although that too, but more so a spiritual death. And this is, you know, it's probably one of the reasons why we've gone through the book of Genesis, is to give this foundation and a basis of we see where evil comes from.

We see the sinful desires of the human heart. And when they're let do what they want, the destruction and the evil that it causes in the world.

You know, as we went through those first 11 chapters, you know, whether it was with Adam and Eve or Noah or Cain and Abel or the Nephilim or, you know, the people who are building the Tower of Babel.

[15:32] You know, we saw their desires. We saw what happened when they acted on their own evil desires. And so here with Ahab, what you see is Naboth is murdered.

And so Ahab, he goes down and he takes over Naboth's vineyard and he starts to make it his own into his own vegetable patch. But the prophet Elijah comes to Ahab with a message.

And he says to Ahab down in verse 20, he gives him this warning. He says, Elijah says to Ahab, I have found you because you sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord.

I am going to bring disaster on you. I will consume your descendants and cut off from Ahab every last male in Israel, slave or free. And I will make your house like that of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, and that of Basha, son of Ahijah, because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin.

And also concerning Jezebel, the Lord said, dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel. Dogs will eat those belonging to Ahab who die in the city. And the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country.

[16:52] You know, and we see Elijah pronounces disaster on Ahab. He tells him of how every one of his descendants is going to be wiped out. Dogs are going to eat your relatives.

Dogs are going to lick up your wife's blood after she dies. And we see this, you know, if you read through the rest of the kings, second kings in particular, you'll see this all come true.

But basically, Elijah's saying to Ahab, because of your sin, Ahab, you will die. You and all your descendants. But what is Ahab's response?

Now, bear in mind, down in verse 25 and 26, we're reminded what Ahab is like. It talks about him. There was never a man like Ahab who saw himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel, his wife.

He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols, like the Amorites the Lord drove out before Israel. So that's the man that Ahab was like. He was evil.

[17:56] He was vile. And yet, look down in verse 27 at Ahab's response. It says, When Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes, he put on sackcloth, and he fasted.

He lay in sackcloth, and he went around meekly. So Ahab, he hears what God says, and he humbles himself. He tears his clothes, he fasts, he acts meekly, and he at this point acknowledges God.

He's not thinking of himself. He realizes that God is the one who is sovereign, and that he humbles himself before God.

But what stands out to me is God's response then to Ahab after this. After all that Ahab has done, after all the evil that he has committed, God says, Have you noticed, so God says to Elijah, he says, Have you noticed how Ahab has humbled himself before me?

Because he has humbled himself, I will not bring this disaster in his day, but I will bring it on his house in the days of his son.

[19:14] And so what you see is God shows mercy to Ahab here.

And you know, I think if there was one person in the world that time who deserved what judgment he got, it most definitely would have been Ahab. You know, he stands out as being, as definitely in Israel's history, one of the most vile, cruel, and evil kings that there was.

And yet God at this point shows mercy to Ahab. And you might ask, how can that be in light of all that he has done and all who he is?

You know, it doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem just. But I think one of the reasons that God decided to put these verses here is to show us that if such a vile and an evil man as Ahab can receive mercy from the Lord, then I think that gives us hope to each one of us here.

That there is no one who is outside of God's mercy. And that is such a great hope, whether you are a Christian or not.

[20:28] Because it shows us that God can be merciful no matter who you are, no matter what you have done. You are never too far from God's mercy.

You know, listen to what God says to the Israelites in 2 Chronicles 14. He says, If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and I will forgive their sin and heal their land.

And so you see here Ahab receiving mercy from God as he humbles himself before God. And the same can be true for each one of us.

And if you have not already received and asked for mercy from God, then he says here, If you will simply acknowledge your sin, if you will humble yourself before God, He, it says, will be faithful and he will be merciful.

And you know, we often sing that song here at Amazing Grace, His mercy is more. And one of the reasons we sing it so often is, well, for me anyway, those words that are in the chorus, Our sins, they are many, but his mercy is more.

[21 : 55] And it reminds me, and I hope it reminds each one of us of that amazing truth. I know myself how evil I am. I know the desires that are in my heart, the temptations that are there.

I know all the struggles I have and I know how sinful I am. And yet, at the same time, I know that God is a merciful God. I know that when I call out to him, when I ask him and humble myself before him, he is faithful and he is merciful.

And it gives us confidence to go on because we are called as well to fight against, not simply just to stand there and do nothing, but we are called to fight, to fight against those sinful desires that are coming into our hearts.

And even when we fail, God's mercy will still stand. He will still be faithful to us, but yet we are called to resist him.

There's, let's see if I can remember, there's the last verse of that song, God Sent His Son. You know, one day I will cross the river.

[23 : 14] I will fight life's final war with pain. And then as death gives way to victory, I'll see his glory and I'll know he lives.

And I think we are, you know, as we fight off these desires day after day, we're fighting for something greater because we're looking forward to that day when we'll cross the river, when we will be with Jesus again.

And we are looking forward to being with him. And that gives us great hope and great reason why we need to fight these desires.

We're not simply doing it for ourselves, we're doing it for eternity. We are looking forward to eternity. And I can't wait for that. And that gives me a great reason to fight and to stand and to be as faithful as I can.

And I hope it gives you too that you will be faithful and that you will fight against those desires. But at the same time, when you fail, that you will realize that we have a faithful and we have a merciful God.

[24 : 27] Amen. Let's pray. Father, we just come to you this morning and we just give you praise.

We know that, God, we are evil. We have sinned. We know in our hearts, God, we have let you down so often. And yet, God, as we see in the story of Ahab and we see how evil that he was and yet you were merciful to him when he called out to you, when he humbled himself before you.

And Father, I pray if there's anyone here who has not come before you and humbled themselves before you, I pray that you would work in their hearts, that you would bring them to a place where they see that you are Lord and that they would bow before you, that they would acknowledge their sin.

And, God, I pray for each one of us that does know you in those times where we fail and we let you down, oh God, I pray that we would bow before you, that we would acknowledge our sin as well.

And, God, that we would know as well that you are merciful and you are faithful to your people. You will not, you say in your word, God, in 1 Corinthians, you will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear.

[25 : 58] And so, God, you give us the strength each day. By the power of your Holy Spirit, I pray that you would help us to be a people who would take hold and trust in you and struggle through those desires that pop into our hearts and our minds every day, that we would fight against them, that we would fight against these sinful desires and that we would look to you to be our help and our strength.

So, God, would you help us as we go into this new week? Would you give us grace and would you show us mercy? And would you continue to give us power to be able to fight off these desires?

We just give you praise this morning, God, and we thank you for your word which teaches us and pierces our hearts. Amen. Amen. Thank you.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 37] Amen.