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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL
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**The Struggle to Overcome Temptation Depends
on Who You Can Trust for Good Things**

James 1:12-18

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Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

James 1:12–18

¹² Blessed *is* the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. ¹⁸ Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let us pray, O Lord, bring us Your good and gracious gifts from above and lead us to receive and acknowledge these by fearing, loving, and trusting You above all things.
Amen.

It all depends on who you can trust. But just who can I trust? It all depends on who you can trust. The need to trust has been identified as the most fundamental disposition of the human creature. It is the focus of human life. An inability to trust or a tendency to mistrust leads to what anthropologists call an “identity crisis.”

That phrase, “identity crisis,” was coined by an anthropologist named Erik Erikson. Erikson was a German-born American immigrant who studied people; and specifically children. As an anthropologist, his most famous contribution was a theory he called “the Eight Stages of Psychological Development.” In the first stage of development,

Erikson addresses the concept of trust vs. mistrust. In it Erikson argues that our most fundamental development as human beings is built upon a need to trust.

For example, when you sit down to eat breakfast, and you open the box of Cheerios, you are trusting that no one has poisoned your cereal. When you drive across the Fox River on your way home, you are trusting that the engineers have built a sturdy safe bridge and that no one has planted a bomb underneath it. And backing up to that first stage of life, when you are a baby, you cry because you need mom to come to pick you up, comfort you, and give you what you need. Trust is fundamental to how we function as human beings.

1. Trust is fundamental to how we behave as God's creatures

Now I don't know whether Erikson is a Christian or not. Nevertheless, his work strikes a cord with us as Christians; and especially as Lutherans. It is built into our theology. The centrality of trust is really nothing new to us. It was proposed over 500 years ago by another professor named Martin Luther. If you read Luther's commentary on the first commandment in his Large Catechism, you'll see just this. Luther develops this idea of human identity and anchors it in a fundamental understanding of trust. But this is more than trusting one's parents; the first commandment shows how trust is fundamental to how we behave as God's creatures.

Luther writes:

"A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. As I have often said, the trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol."

It all depends on who you can trust for good things; which is ultimately a 1st commandment question. And we should see the 1st commandment not just as one out of ten commandments; the first commandment is all the commandments and it is the only commandment. We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. All other commands from God are built upon disposition; this attitude; this identity; and our behavior in every other realm of living will depend on whether or not we can trust God for good things. Trust is fundamental to how we behave as God's creatures.

2. Trust is fundamental to the struggle in temptation

This is where the struggle is born. This is where the desire to live according to God's will becomes a struggle. It is a question of who you can trust. It is a question of where you will look for good things and where you will identify what is evil. As Luther put it, who is your god? In particular, it is question of whether I can trust God.

¹² Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. ¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

Temptation is a bait and switch. It is a trap. A deception. The word used in the Greek describes a pulling motion; a dragging away against your own will. Hook, line, and sinker, temptation drags us away into something evil. It offers one thing to us, yet gives us something totally different. It is a bait and switch. False advertising. But we somehow, again and again, become convinced that God really isn't serious about what he says; we become convinced that something good can come out of this sin.

Take King David for example. Where was he looking for good things? In 2 Samuel 11 we find him standing atop the roof of his palace in the evening. And he looks. And he looks and he sees something; something attractive; something desirable. It was Bathsheba; a woman who is not his wife; a woman who is the wife of another man. And that man is gone, away at war, serving his king. Who can David trust for good things?

In a sweeping course of events, David orders for this woman to be brought to him, they conceive and she is with child, he orders her husband, Uriah, to the front lines where his fellow soldiers are instructed to abandon him and Uriah the Hittite is abandoned and dies. And King David takes Bathsheba to be his wife. Who can David trust?

But he thinks, it the honorable thing to do after all; she is with child; alone, a widow; and here the King has compassion, he will do what is right and good and take care of the pregnant widow. David has become so lost in his own sins that he cannot even identify what is evil and what is good. And it is clear, there is no struggle; which means there is no trust; King David no longer trusts God to provide what is good and has sought it out in himself. To rationalize why this would be ok is to say, "I am tempted by God." As if to say, God has not given me enough. It is clear, and he doesn't even realize it: he cannot trust himself.

¹⁴ But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.

While listening to another pastor preaching on this same text, I gathered a helpful quote from C.S. Lewis. In a series of Radio broadcast during WWII, the author C.S. Lewis gave an accurate description of the human condition. Lewis said, "When a man getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less. A moderately bad man knows he is not very good; a thoroughly bad man thinks he is alright." And in a later broadcast he said, "No man knows how bad he is, until he has tried very hard to be good."

Trust is fundamental to the struggle. The struggle matters. And that struggle is about a question of whom to trust. Who is god and what is good? Sin is ultimately a result of us trusting in ourselves to find what is good, or mistrusting God for what is good. It is as if we think, you know, God really doesn't have good things to give me; and more and more, like Eve and King David, we lose a sense of what good really is; and where evil really comes from. Who can you trust?

The way Jesus described it was this: "It is not what goes into a man that makes him unclean, it is what comes out. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." You see, evil is not something out there, for someone else to take responsibility for, it is in here. And that is the struggle: are we willing to admit, that we cannot trust ourselves. For that is where the struggle lies.

And if there is no struggle, then there is only death. It's an identity crisis; we've forgotten who we are and become something different. But we cannot give up; we cannot give in; we cannot think that this is something someone else is doing to us or someone else will fix this or somehow this will bring about good. And that is why the Apostle writes: "do not be deceived." Don't be fooled; don't think that there is any good in this or that it is someone else's fault or somehow God is making this happen. Because if you don't sense the struggle or the evil that is within, then it is likely that you have been deceived. and that deception if not dealt with will grow and grow until it brings forth death. Trust is fundamental to the struggle in temptation.

3. Trust is fundamental to enduring temptation

It all depends on trust. Who can you trust? When you learn you can't trust yourself; or any earthly security or solution; that there is no way you can endure temptation by what is within; you will realize that good things can only come from above. Trust is fundamental to enduring temptation.

Anthropologist Erik Erikson points out that the very first stage in a child's development is developing the ability to trust. It is this stage where the child learns to look up. He is hungry and he looks up. He is tired of sitting on the floor or he needs his diaper changed and he looks up. He has a gas bubble and needs to burp, so he looks up. And there is mom; there is dad. Tested at times, worn out perhaps, wondering when the child will start becoming more self-sufficient, but ultimately knowing that baby is dependent on you. Depending on you for everything. And it is your goal and desire to give him what he needs; to give him good things.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. ¹⁸ Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

God, our heavenly Father is unchanging. He gives only good things. And this ongoing, unchanging reminder is meant to create trust. To solve our identity crisis so that we would learn to know with confidence that despite all our sins and weaknesses, we are His first-fruits; the very first and best of His crop; His creation and His creatures. And this was not a result of us being particularly lovable or good; this was not our will, but His alone. For as we look up, we see: He has sent down us nothing but good and perfect gifts.

As we look up, we see the heavens opened and the Spirit descending and a voice speaking: "This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In a sweeping course of events, Mark records how Jesus was baptized, tempted, and began proclaiming the kingdom's arrival.

From above, God gave a good and perfect gift.
From above, God sent His own Son to face the devil;
From above, God sent His own Son to preach the gospel of the kingdom;
From above, God sent His own Son to fulfill our salvation;
From above, God gave up His own Son to suffering, to death, to hell;
From above, God raised His Son to life and anointed Him Lord of all creation;
From above, God sent His word of truth and called you into His kingdom;
From above, God sent the Spirit and created this fellowship we now share in Christ;

From above God, gave a good and perfect gift and it was the gift of His own beloved Son.

So hear Him: “the time is fulfilled, repent and believe in the gospel.” That is to say, turn to Him who turns not. Turn to that light which never grows dim and find what is good. Turn and believe His word, for all else is from the evil one. Believe that it is His will to save you from your sins. That it is His will to keep you by His word of truth.

This promise is your endurance against temptation. Knowing that God has laid up for you a crown; a crown that is promised to you and that no one can take from you; you look up. There is your Father. Perhaps you think He’s worn out from how needy you are; perhaps you think he is wondering when you will become more self-sufficient; when He can leave you on your own and leave you to do these things by yourself. But the truth is, you are dependent on Him for everything. And His dependability never changes. The light of His presence never varies and He will never let you down. Just look up and there in the hands of His Son Jesus Christ is the crown which is promised to all who love Him.

It all depends on who you can trust.

Maybe you’ve had some bad experiences and you are wondering who you can trust. You sit down to breakfast and notice someone has poisoned your cereal. You cross that bridge and it gives way. You look to people in your life for help and they let you down. You tried to overcome a certain weakness, but you just keep failing. Just remember, you are being tempted. And it is not coming from God. Do not use these experiences as a reason to give up the struggle; as a reason to stop trusting; as an excuse to ignore the evil that is within you. The real evil is not out there or in them, it is not someone else’s fault, and it is not God’s fault. The evil is within us; in our desires – and as soon as we realize that we will discover what is truly good. We will look up and we will look around. From above God has give us this fellowship of His Word and Spirit so that we would see our heavenly Father in the honesty and forgiveness we share with one another; in the trust and love we have for one another. Amen.