

(*δελιάζω, deleazō*) carries the sense of “enticed” or “lured” into a trap.¹ Thus, the child of God must constantly be “putting to death” the deeds of the flesh and progressing in being sanctified more and more unto God. As Paul writes:

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 5:5–8)

15 – Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

Now James uses the metaphor of conception and birth to illustrate the method of the sinful flesh to bring about sinful behavior which ultimately results in death. Here he is giving the general description of how the sinful nature, dominated by “lust,” is the pattern of life for the unbeliever, a pattern which is ultimately characterized by death, that is, separation from God.

He pictures “lust” (*ἐπιθυμία, epithumia*) as a seductress who, having lured the person into her abode, conceives (*συλλαμβάνω, sullambanō*) an illegitimate child by him. It is impossible to “undo” the act and thus, apart from being “born again,” the consequences are irreversible, that is, the inevitable result is “death.”

The phrase “and when sin is accomplished” could just as well be translated “and sin, when it is fully grown,” for it may well picture that which is conceived as having been born and having grown up.² James’ point is that, apart from the influence of the “new person/man” and the power of the Spirit to “say no” to the sinful flesh, once lust is conceived it will inevitably bring about death. Ultimately, this is the characteristic of every unbeliever.

The picture of “lust” being “conceived” is simply that process by

1 *BDAG*, “*δελιάζω*,” p. 217. It is found in non-biblical texts of the fisherman luring the fish into his catch.

2 The Greek verb *ἀποτελέω, apoteleō*, carries the sense of “bringing to completion,” which, when describing a person, could well mean “to grow up.” Note ESV, “and sin, when it is fully grown....”

which the sinful nature begins to stimulate desires. As Manton notes:

Sin, or the corrupt nature, having inclined the soul to an ungodly object, works to set the soul in an evil frame of mind.¹

As noted in the previous verses, the unbeliever has no desire to repent for his sin but, like Adam, shifts the blame to God, claiming that God “tempted” him to sin (v. 13). Being that it is impossible for God to tempt anyone to sin since He is infinitely holy, James teaches us in this verse that the source of sin in a person’s life is when he or she gives in to the lusts of the fallen nature.

An entirely different scenario must characterize the true believer. For the believer, being strengthened and led by the indwelling Spirit, is enabled to say “no” to the lusts of the flesh and to have a life characterized by righteousness. Indeed, a spiritual battle exists within the believer, for the flesh wars against the Spirit and seeks to be in control, as James has stated, to return the believer to being a slave to sin. As Paul writes to the Galatians:

For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. (Gal 5:17)

The final clause in this verse from Galatians, “so that you may not do the things you please,” should be understood to describe the goal and desire of “the flesh,” the “sinful nature,” i.e., to entice the believer to act in a way contrary to the “new person” he or she has become in Yeshua. Yet the primary emphasis that Paul gives in this verse is that all who are “in Yeshua” must recognize that there remains a battle against the flesh, and that progressively saying “no” to the flesh and “yes” to the Spirit is the inevitable mark of being truly one of God’s children.

Surely this is a battle and the believer’s complete victory over the sinful nature will only be realized when “mortal puts on immortality,” as Paul writes:

For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have

1 Thomas Manton, *A Practical Commentary, or An Exposition, with Notes, on the Epistle of James*, vol. 4 in *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, (Marranatha Pub., [reprint]), p. 99.

put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY."¹ "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?"² (1Cor 15:53-55)

Yet all who belong to the Lord will make progress in putting to death the deeds of the flesh and living more and more unto the Lord. Such progress is what it means to persevere in the faith. This is what Yeshua taught in the parable of the sower.

But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance. (Lk 8:15)

The practical application of what James is teaching us here is obvious, and Paul's words are clearly applicable as well. If we are constantly to win the battle over the sinful flesh, we must remain ever faithful in the means of grace. These are: (1) Scripture: filling our minds with the word of God and living in accordance to its eternal truths; (2) Prayer: regularly engaging in prayer and communion with God; and (3) The Ekklesia: being in the fellowship of other believers as we are together and encouraging one another to be living testimonies of God's love and grace. Clearly, that which we feed upon, that is, what is regularly filling our minds and thoughts, will have a large effect on our ability to say "no" to the flesh and "yes" to God as we are led by His Holy Spirit.

Remaining faithful in our walk with the Lord is that which enables us to stand firm against the enticements of the world and, by the strength given to us by the abiding Ruach HaKodesh, we are strengthened to resist the snares of the evil one, to say "no" to the flesh, and to have lives which honor our Savior. Thus, to the all important utilization of the means of grace, which are the positive aspects of our sanctification, must be added a negative aspect: we must resolve not to partake of ungodly aspects of the world. It is true that people become like that upon which they constantly gaze. Let us then resolve to fill our lives with that which will build us up in the faith so that more and more we become living testimonies of our Lord and Savior, Yeshua.

1 Is 25:8.

2 Hosea 13:14.

16–17 Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

James' exhortation is that the believer in Yeshua not follow wrong teaching which would make God out to be something He is not, i.e., the source of temptation, but rather that those believers to whom he is writing would affirm the truth about God, namely, that He is the source of all that is good.

Here we have the second command or imperative in our section: the first being in v. 13, "Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God...." Now James states "Do not be deceived" (μὴ πλανᾶσθε), a present tense imperative, which in the Greek may emphasize a constant or ongoing vigilance to affirm what is right and not be carried into error through teachers who are teaching falsehoods. The imperative itself could be understood as "do not be deceived" or "do not be mistaken."¹ "Deception" is generally thought of as having an outside source, while "mistaken" is usually viewed as flowing from one's own will or choices. Here, the primary point is that those who profess to be believers in Yeshua must affirm what the Scriptures teach, for to do otherwise is to deny the very foundation of genuine saving faith. God has revealed Himself in creation (Ps 19; Rom 1:18–20), in the Scriptures (Ex 31:18, etc.), and in the Messiah, Yeshua (Jn 14:9; Heb 1:1–3). We therefore have the Scriptures as the benchmark against which all truth-claims must be tested.

The very fact that James addresses this command to "my beloved brethren" makes it clear that even those who profess genuine faith in Yeshua may be deceived and led down a path of falsehood. Obviously, the primary issue that James is confronting is that of God's very nature: that He is holy, holy, holy (Is 6:3; Rev 4:8), meaning that holiness is the very essence of His eternal nature. To claim that God is the source of temptation to draw a person into sinning is the same as claiming that God is Himself evil, which is blasphemy. Therefore James warns his readers and us not to be drawn into such a deception.

But being deceived rarely happens all at once. "A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough" (1Cor 5:6; Gal 5:9). All too often the path to deception and denying the truth of the Scriptures and thus of God, begins with one step away from the truth which then leads down a

1 Chris A. Vlachos, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: James* (B&H Pub., 2013), p. 46.

path which ends in unfaithfulness and destruction. Unfortunately, we see this happening more and more in our modern world. So the admonition of James is very relevant for us, especially in the so-called “Messianic Movement.” We must heed the words of John:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1Jn 4:1)

It seems clear that by “spirits,” John is referring to the “spirit of a teacher” or that which a teacher teaches, i.e., “teaching” in general. And how are the words of a teacher to be tested? By making sure that what is being taught aligns with the Scriptures. Unfortunately, the rise of biblical illiteracy in our times has caused the “yard stick” of the Scriptures to be set aside and considered no longer valuable to be used. *Sola Scriptura*, “by Scripture alone,” was the cry of the Reformation in the 16th Century and it needs to be our standard today if we are to “test the spirits” and discern what is true and what is not.

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above... – The fact that the word “every” is repeated both with “thing given” and “perfect gift” emphasizes James’ primary point: all that God does is good, even if fallen mankind views His actions differently. James emphasized this in v. 5 of our chapter when he affirms that God is the giver of wisdom, and He does so generously, meaning giving more than one might expect. Further, since God is infinitely holy, this means that whatever He gives is good. It is upon this truth that James has admonished us even to “consider it all joy... when you encounter various trials” (v. 2). Even those things which come into our lives which may bring hardship and sorrow, if from the hand of God, are ultimately for our good.

The two designations, “good thing” (δόσις ἀγαθῆ, *dosis agathē*) and “perfect gift” (δώρημα τέλειον, *dōrēma teleion*) could suggest various nuances, but it is probably best to understand the repetition as metonymy, i.e., saying the same thing using different terms, and thus indicating emphasis, for surely everything that God gives is both “good” and “perfect.” The qualities of “good” and “perfect” suggest that everything God brings into our lives is for our good, that is, to make us more and more dependent upon Him and to sanctify us unto Himself. The word translated “perfect” is *telos* in the Greek which, beside carrying the sense of “perfect” can also mean “complete” or “goal.” This would suggest that all that God gives us is that which will enable us to persevere to the end, to “finish the race,” and to be complete in Him.

...coming down from the Father of lights – The plural of the word “lights” (φῶς, *phōs*) is only found one other time in the Apostolic Scriptures (Acts 16:29) and only rarely in the Lxx. It is found in the Lxx of Ps 135:7 where it translates the Hebrew אֲוֵרִים גְּדֹלִים (*ōrim gedōlim*), “great lights,” which clearly refers to the stars and planets, and it is clear that James is using the same expression to refer to God as the creator of the “lights” as we read in Gen 1:14. Throughout the creation narrative, God proclaims that what He has created is “good” and even “very good.” This likewise emphasizes the truth that God is the source of all that is good. Moreover, since He is the creator, He is able to do all of His holy will, and there is nothing, therefore, that His children need of which he is incapable of giving them.

...with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. – The concept of “variation or shifting shadow,” while evoking a great deal of speculation on the part of commentators,¹ is obviously referring to the astronomical phenomenon of the manner in which the sky changes throughout the seasons, a phenomenon which was well recognized and even studied in ancient times. Since in the pagan world the sun, moon, stars, and planets were often believed to represent gods and goddesses, their changing appearance indicated their mutability, that is, their being given to changes by forces outside of their control.

James uses the changing phenomenon of the “lights” to contrast the immutability of the one true God Who never changes and no created thing can induce a change in Him.

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Ex 3:14)

For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Mal 3:6)

Yeshua Messiah is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Heb 13:8)

Why the eternal immutability of God is emphasized by James in our text is obvious: since all good things come from God, one might ask if that might change in the future. The obvious answer is “no!” because

1 For the manuscript variants in this verse, see McCartney, *James*, p. 112, notes on 1:17.

God does not change. In a world that is constantly changing, God is the sure and eternal One to whom we may cling and know that what He has promised, He will accomplish, and what He intends for good and His glory, He will bring to pass. He is the unchanging constant upon Whom His children can always depend. Therefore, we may know and affirm for certain that He will always be with us and for us, giving us all that is needed, for He is the giver of all good things and every perfect gift.

This passage teaches us, that we ought to be so affected by God's innumerable blessings, which we daily receive from His hand, as to think of nothing but of His glory; and that we should abhor whatever comes to our mind, or is suggested by others, which is not compatible with His praise.¹

1 Calvin, *James*, p. 291.