



ANTI-ADDICTION DAY LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, July 31, 2011

Emerson B. Powery, Guest Lectionary Commentator
Professor of Biblical Studies, Messiah College, Grantham, PA

Lection – James 1:13-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 13) No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. (v. 14) But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; (v. 15) then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death. (v. 16) Do not be deceived, my beloved.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

If you run across anybody that used to know me,
tell them I'm doing fine.
The last time that you saw me,
I was lifting up holy hands,
I'll tell them I've been redeemed.

I've Been Redeemed. By Jessy Dixon

In 1987, the United Nations General Assembly formally recognized an International Anti-Drug Day. It is an annual reminder for the nations of the world to struggle for a world without drug addiction. It is a time to strive for resolutions toward a global society free of drug abuse. As the annual day highlights, drug addiction can destroy a thriving, healthy society. Throughout the years there have been numerous symbolic responses, during which time countries throughout the world, for example, have offered mass burnings of heroin and other narcotics.

Addiction is a global phenomenon but it is also a local one. We are aware of its affect on our cities, local communities, churches, and, perhaps, even in our own families and individual lives. And, furthermore, habit-forming addiction is about more than the use and abuse of illegal drugs. Addiction is any dependence on something—whether it is a substance (e.g., drugs, alcohol) or a behavioral practice (e.g., pornography, over-eating)—that affects one's psychological, emotional, or physical well-being and negatively hampers relationships with family members, friends, and co-workers. Oftentimes, there are significant underlying issues that the addictions signify. We should heed these signs, like the tips of icebergs, and secure the necessary professional help we need. We must reclaim a respect for our bodies and the bodies of others.

Freedom from addiction needs a supportive community. Prayers and practices can contribute to new habits. Through the aid of friendships, professional guidance, and life-long diligence, people can begin to recognize their God-given potential to realize their full humanity before God and their neighbors.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: James 1:13-16

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

It is often not the “substance” or the “practice” itself that causes the problem. We know that prescribed drugs, if taken as prescribed, frequently curtail ailments. Medical advances have brought tremendous relief to those of us with diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, etc. But a “good” can be distorted into an “evil.” Prescription drugs help us manage certain health irregularities. However, when taken in the wrong dosages for the wrong reasons, prescribed drugs can be addictive and even fatal. Sexual activity is a normal God-given activity for the beneficial health and enjoyment of our human bodies. However, even sexual activity can be perverted and lead to grievous sins and crimes. Abuse of prescribed drugs or turning sex into fantasies for selfish pleasures (including the objectification of another person) are signs that deeper troubles exist that can lead to death-dealing addictions.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Humans can quickly blame someone else for their troubles. Frequently, when there's no one else to blame, we blame God. James wishes to challenge that decision. Temptations toward "evil" (in this case "addictions") do not come from God (1:13). "Tests, trials, and temptations" are the themes of James 1. In English, a "test" or a "trial" (which has a positive connotation) appears to be different from a "temptation" (which has a negative connotation). These words derive from the same Greek word: *perismos*. (James does not use the term, either the verb or the noun, beyond chapter 1.)

So, James advocates that "tests" and "temptations" are a natural part of life, of simply being in the world. And, such tests (or temptations) will make us stronger: "blessed is the person who endures the test" (1:12). But James wants to challenge the theological notions behind such tests. They do not derive from God (1:13). And, unlike some of his contemporaries like Paul, James does not explicitly assume that these temptations come from Satan either (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Thessalonians 3:5). Rather, such tests or temptations come from human "desires" (NRSV), a word that the KJV translates as "lusts" (1:14). James does not advocate, as some suggest, that "tests" are spiritual challenges from God and "temptations" are not (i.e., they are spiritual challenges from the devil). That's not the theological position of James. None of it comes from God!

So, from where do our addictions emanate? This does raise a particular contemporary problem. James seems to imply that all desires are bad. Is James an advocate of stoicism? Stoicism was a vibrant philosophical movement in his day; it posited that the way to live a good life was to remain unaffected by pleasure or pain, that is, indifference to any emotion. In some ways, we can see some of the ancient fruits of stoicism in the black holiness dimension in some of our churches. As Cheryl Sanders recognizes, even casual observers notice "the emphasis on personal morality and ascetic lifestyles" with its "prohibitions against alcohol, tobacco, addictive drugs, extramarital sex, gambling, secular dancing, and the like."¹ This is a message not just about "addictions" but "desires," and the distinction is an important one for many of our churches. Churches need to discuss the differences so as not to be led away from enjoying some of God's bounty even here on earth.

Are all "desires" bad for James? Perhaps the older English language of the King James Version offers us an important distinction here; instead of "desires," the KJV translates the Greek word, *epithumia*, as "lusts." "Lust" has a more negative connotation than "desire" (e.g., "lust for sex" or "lust for power"), which may be what James has in mind. Even in these few short verses, James does not say that desire itself is bad; rather, it is natural and derives from within. The problem is when humans attempt to carry out their desires to selfish ends without any divine guidance, what James would call "wisdom from above" (3:17). Such desires, like "jealousy" and "selfish ambition," which James mentions specifically in chapter 3, do not derive from God but are "earthly, unspiritual, devilish" (3:15). These kinds of desires, and the addictions associated with them, come from internal cravings: "you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts" (4:2). When human desire is not matched by the family's or the community's desire and uplift, it can lead to "sin."

So, "sin," as James puts it forward, is a justice issue and one that involves the entire human family. In other words, "sin" is not only an offense against God, it is also "wrongdoing" against

one's divinely created body, one's family, *and* one's community. In the remainder of the short treatise, James speaks specifically of "sins" as "showing partiality" (2:9) and failure to do what is right (4:17). So, likewise, addictions hinder our ability to do what is right and to treat others in a way that is fair. If you're no good to yourself, then how will you help anybody else? If you're no good to anybody else, how are you living up to your God-given potential to be an agent of change in the world?

James, too, recognizes that our addictions, which lead to wrongs against our brothers, sisters, neighbors, children, spouses, partners, and friends, can be countered through "confession," "prayer," and the community: "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective" (5:15-16).

Celebration

Let's celebrate our bodies. For James, celebration is clearly the objective of this section as well: "Blessed is anyone who endures . . ." (1:12). When God created bodies, God called them "good." God loves our bodies. Our black bodies have often been unloved in U.S. culture. As Toni Morrison profoundly reflects, more than twenty years after writing The Bluest Eye, "Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*."² That starting point can impact all of our discussions, prayers, songs, and care for one another. We can love *everybody* the way we love our own bodies. And, when we love, respect, and care for our bodies, we show our appreciation to God who has given them to us for good pleasure and worthwhile living. As James writes, "Every good and perfect gift comes from God" (1:17). Addictions will be broken when we learn to love our bodies!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The joys and pains of "birth"; the silence (and loss) of "death";

Sights: The "evil" associated with addictions are usually visible: the strain on one's body from addiction, blood-shot eyes, diseased skin, obese bodies, gaunt bodies; and

Smells: The odors of "birth" and "death"; the smell of cigarette smoke and the presence of blood (with its distinctive aroma).

The preacher should reflect on what our "desires" (1:15) sound like, look like, smell like, and taste like, and the "texture" of our desires. Not all "desires" are bad, are they? Many of our desires are triggered by our senses—the smell of a cigarette, the sight of an attractive woman or man, or the taste of a favorite food.

III. Other Material for Preachers and Others

- An ongoing discussion in the United States is on the medicinal value of marijuana use. Recently, in California, its citizens voted against a ballot measure to legalize its possession and use. Currently fifteen states allow its use for pain relief associated with

AIDS and cancer. These states oppose the federal government's criminalization of the drug. [For a series of related stories, search for "marijuana and medical marijuana" in the NYTimes.com online edition.]

- Toni Morrison's projects and artistic gifts have often tackled the theme of loving the (black) body. In 1993, more than twenty years after her earliest novel, The Bluest Eye, she provided an extremely insightful reflection on the "gaze that condemns" blackness and her literary challenge to the power of that external gaze to create "the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority."³

Notes

1. Sanders, Cheryl J. Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996. p. 132.

2. Morrison, Toni. "Afterword," The Bluest Eye. New York, NY; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970; 1993.

3. Ibid.