WHEN PERCEPTIONS LIE TO US

There is an interesting phenomenon in couples, in which the same pattern of slight disagreements seems to arise. The wife will be telling a story and mention that they left a restaurant at 5:00 P.M. No, the husband will argue, it was at least 5:15; she disagrees, certain that it was 5:00. To the listeners, this detail is unimportant, but it becomes vital to those telling the story because they’re both certain that their perception of the situation was correct. When the stakes are higher—for example, when two people disagree on what the other said out of anger—the tension intensifies. If someone can’t trust their own perception of what happened, whose can they trust?

Humanity defaults to trusting self from an early age. Born with a natural inclination to selfishness and self-reliance, we can stop this trend only by Divine intervention and dependence. Despite our noble intentions for honesty, integrity, and clear vision, it’s easy for us to be confused by the false narratives shared by media, peers, and our selfish nature. It’s hard to distrust our own (learned or natural) perception of reality and trust God’s instead. The irony is that humanity’s natural perception of reality is wrong, in more ways than one. While we are learning self-distrust, it is essential to learn God-trust. Only then can we see clearly.
Write out James 1:9–18 from the translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out James 1:12–16. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE POOR, THE RICH, AND THE TEMPTED

James opens his perception readjustment by focusing on two economic extremes. He juxtaposes the lowly poor with the rich in a manner inconsistent with both his era and the modern-day, because he seems to mix up their commands. The “lowly brother” is told to “glory in his exaltation,” while the rich should glory “in his humiliation” (James 1:9, 10). Here James brings out the correct perception: the lowly can glorify and praise God even without earthly wealth, because that is not where true exaltation or joy originate. Furthermore, the rich man can be thankful in affliction and trial and have a humble heart before God, because his riches cannot last long enough to produce true exaltation. Wealth, in whoever’s hands, can rise as easily as a flower after rain but then disappear with the heat of the noonday sun (v. 11). The lowly should not wait for wealth in order to glory in his exaltation, nor should the rich become haughty by accruing wealth.

James follows up this comparison with one of the most systematic explanations in the Bible of how individuals fall into sin. He somewhat startlingly calls the tempted individual “blessed”; this blessedness comes from enduring the temptation out of love for God (v. 12). The phrasing is intensely pragmatic: temptation is endured, not bartered with or coaxed away. Furthermore, in increasing one’s endurance of temptation, the focus should be in increasing one’s love for God.

The idea of being tempted by God is impossible, James affirms. Instead, “each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (v. 14). There is a distraction, and one’s attention is captured based on desires.

It’s important to note that it only says “desires,” labeled neither good nor bad. One can assume that only bad desires lead to sin, but healthy desires can, too. When following the healthy desire for food, one can be enticed into eating things harmful for the body. When following a healthy desire to relax, one can be enticed into a relaxation brought on by illegal substances. When following a healthy desire for intimacy or even sex, one can be enticed into damaging sexual experiences. Still, desires are truly bad: desires for revenge, to harm someone, to lie, to take from someone else. Both the desires and the carrying out of them can be harmful.

When the desire is given into, this is sin (notice that being tempted is not sin) (v. 15). Left unchecked and unrepented of and unforgiven, sin leads to death. James closes this practical walkthrough with pathos: “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren” (v. 16). Sin requires deception, faulty perceptions of realities, in order to thrive; the individual has to believe a lie, to walk in that lie, and leave space for that lie in their life. Blessing comes from not walking down that path at all, but instead enduring the idea through a love for God, strengthened by His power, love, and a right perception of reality.
TESTING VS. TEMPTING

Certain Christian clichés are more harmful than helpful. One example, for some, is, “God doesn’t tempt us, but He tests us.” Though technically true, this has led some believers to rephrase it practically as, “If the devil causes something bad to happen, it’s temptation; if God causes it, it’s a test.” This oversimplification and blending of two non-identical concepts skews perception of both God and reality. There is a biblical difference between the two that deserves attention.

James says that God can neither be tempted “nor does He Himself tempt anyone” (James 1:13). As explored in yesterday’s lesson, temptation utilizes deception surrounding either a harmful fulfillment of a legitimate desire or the fulfillment of a harmful desire. Put another way, the goal of temptation is harm: to harm the individual, at least for the here and now, and preferably permanently. Drawn away by her desire for “something more,” Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, and the devil gained access to our world and our hearts. Under the dizzying effect of power, lack of accountability, and sexual desire, David took Bathsheba and slayed her husband, leading to untold woe throughout his kingdom and family, cutting at the very heart of God’s chosen people. Fearing for his life and possibly his reputation, Peter denied even knowing Jesus, fulfilling a pitiful prophecy uttered only a few hours prior, leading to his own guilt and shame. In all of these examples, the purpose of the temptation is revealed when conceived: destruction of relationships, harm to body and mind, and an estrangement from God.

In contrast, God has explicitly said that He tests His people. When He gave manna to the Israelites on a Sabbath schedule, He did so to test them (Exod. 16:4). In fact, the entire wilderness experience was used as a test (Deut. 8:2). The goal has always been clear: “To know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” Instead of harm, the goal of testing is to provide a correct perception of oneself, to deepen dependence and trust in God, and to show how trustworthy God really is. Each test, threaded throughout Scripture, can be rephrased as a question from the heart of God. To Abraham He asked, Will you trust Me with your beloved son Isaac? To Israel He asked, Will you trust Me to guide and provide in the wilderness? To Martha and Mary, grieving the death of their brother, He asked, Will you trust Me when My timing is not yours? In all tests, God is desiring to show the believer their heart and their need, and that He is a trustworthy resting place for their hearts.

It’s true that “God doesn’t tempt us, but He tests us.” The purpose of temptation is for the devil to destroy; but the purpose of testing is for God’s hands to preserve and build.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/jam02-4
What relationship do the following verses have with the themes of Hebrews?

Hebrews 13:5, 6
Luke 12:33
1 Timothy 6:6–10
1 Corinthians 10:13
1 Peter 4:12–19
John 3:16

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with James 1:9–18?

Review your memorized verse from James 1:9–18.
THE BEST GIFT

After dwelling on the bad extreme of sin, James switches to effusively describing the good: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). Notice that he chooses the word gift over the alternatives of thing or experience. All good things come from God, and all good and perfect things are gifts. Though a seemingly trivial substitution of words, understanding something as a gift changes one’s attitude toward it. When something is earned or owed, there is less reason for gratitude to the giver; some would even say a “thank you” would be superfluous in such situations. But when something is gifted, especially to someone who has no other way of gaining it, humility and joy rush to the surface.

All of these good gifts come from one Source. Parents, friends, or even strangers may be conduits of these blessings and gifts, but their origin never wavers. The joy of a new baby’s life, the gentle breeze on a summer evening, the opening of a young flower, laughter shared throughout decades of friendship, and the joy of a fulfilling purpose all are gifts from God, given through the merits of another Gift.

The best and perfect gift ever given was and is Jesus Christ Himself. He was not owed to the earth, asked for, or even conceived of in humanity’s imagination. He was a gift from the Father’s hand out of a love-driven desire for the redemption of earth (John 3:16). Just as it was impossible to merit a Savior before He came, so it is impossible to merit His grace, mercy, or forgiveness today. All the blessings in His train are as much gifts as He is.

Some have framed the salvation story as Jesus somehow convincing the Father to let Him go and save the earth. But this is not the narrative of Scripture. The Father has consistently been lavishing humanity with gifts since the dawn of time, and He has no variation in this (James 1:17). Furthermore, it was “of His own will” that humanity was redeemed from destruction through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. He was not strong-armed into it; there was no begrudging compliance. Thus, beyond being loved, the creatures made in His image are wanted. They are wanted not only once but twice over: through creation and redemption. Being wanted and enveloped in such a Divine love is the gift that encompasses all the others.
NEITHER FLATTERY NOR FURY

To hate and reprove sin, and at the same time to show pity and tenderness for the sinner, is a difficult attainment. The more earnest our own efforts to attain to holiness of heart and life, the more acute will be our perception of sin and the more decided our disapproval of any deviation from the right. We must guard against undue severity toward the wrongdoer, but we must also be careful not to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. There is need of showing Christlike patience and love for the erring one, but there is also danger of showing so great toleration for his error that he will look upon himself as undeserving of reproof, and will reject it as uncalled for and unjust.

Ministers of the gospel sometimes do great harm by allowing their forbearance toward the erring to degenerate into toleration of sins and even participation in them. Thus they are led to excuse and palliate that which God condemns, and after a time they become so blinded as to commend the very ones whom God commands them to reprove. He who has blunted his spiritual perceptions by sinful leniency toward those whom God condemns, will erelong commit a greater sin by severity and harshness toward those whom God approves.

By the pride of human wisdom, by contempt for the influence of the Holy Spirit, and by disrelish for the truths of God’s word, many who profess to be Christians, and who feel competent to teach others, will be led to turn away from the requirements of God. Paul declared to Timothy, “The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”

The apostle does not here refer to the openly irreligious, but to the professing Christians who make inclination their guide, and thus become enslaved by self. Such are willing to listen to those doctrines only that do not rebuke their sins or condemn their pleasure-loving course. They are offended by the plain words of the faithful servants of Christ and choose teachers who praise and flatter them. And among professing ministers there are those who preach the opinions of men instead of the word of God. Unfaithful to their trust, they lead astray those who look to them for spiritual guidance. (Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 503–505.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How can we learn to distrust our own perceptions and trust the way God presents situations?

Why is deception required in order for us to fall into sin?

Share a situation where you were tested. What happened? How did you respond?

How is God currently teaching you to trust Him more? In what areas?

Focusing on the inSight section, how are we to respond to others as our perceptions grow in clarity?

Is it possible to be content, but still strive for more? Why or why not?

How does seeing all good things as a gift alter our everyday life?