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Rick Myatt

HOW TO NOT RUN A RED LIGHT

James 1:13-18

I want to begin today by sharing several ideas or incidents that have something in common. I would like you to think about what that common thread. The first is a principle from physics. It is that light objects and heavy objects fall at the same rate. If you drop a 50 pound weight and a pencil from a height of 10 feet at the same time, they will hit the ground at the same time. That doesn't, at first glance, seem reasonable, yet it is true.

We all have heard that people have different learning styles. Some are auditory learners, some are visual learners, some are hands on learners. Researchers have discovered something that some people just will refuse to believe, but experiments consistently show it to be true. People learn less effectively when taught information by their preferred learning style, not more effectively.

In World War 2 the British Royal Air Force, seeing many of their bombers being shot down during missions, decided to add some armor to them. Of course adding armor meant adding weight, thus reducing both range and payload. Therefore they needed to figure out where they could put a limited amount of armor that would enhance the aircraft's survivability but not restrict its range too greatly. They asked statistician Abraham Wald to study the problem. After extensive study of planes that successfully returned from missions he recommended they put armor on the areas where there was little or no battle damage. This made no sense to some people but his reasoning was quite brilliant.

A couple's dog had puppies. They wanted to give the puppies away, but when they advertised "free puppies" they got no takers. They changed their ad to say, "Free puppies, 5 cute, 1 ugly." In one weekend all the puppies were adopted, taken by people who showed up to take that one poor ugly puppy.

What is the link between those 4 snippets? Each of them has an element that is counterintuitive. At first glance it doesn't seem right, and yet it is true. Saying one of your puppies is ugly would seem to hurt your chances of someone taking them, and yet just the opposite was true. Putting armor on places planes hadn't been hit made sense because the places they were hit clearly were not critical, since the planes survived that damage. Today I want to talk about something that is counterintuitive for us humans. It has to do with how we live our lives, a subject of

great concern to us all. What we are going to see is hard for us human beings to accept. Yet it is crucial to living a successful life. We will see these counterintuitive truths in James 1:13-18.

TEMPTATION ARISES FROM WITHIN

We saw last week that a concept central to this section of Scripture is “testing.” The Greek language was often more specific than English. For instance, Greek had 4 different words for the different kinds of love, all of which in English are translated by one word, “love.” But when it comes to “testing” in the spiritual sense English is more specific than Greek. We have two different words that can translate the same Greek word, which is helpful because there are clearly two different kinds of tests of faith all of us will deal with.

In the opening section of James the author addressed the issue of how our faith can face tests that we would call trials. These are the hard things that happen to all of us that can shake our faith and cause us to question whether we can really depend upon God. James told us that God allows and uses those kinds of tests to mature us and make us stronger. But there is another kind of test. We would call it a temptation. That is something that would lure us to act in ways that are contrary to God’s will. Thus it is a temptation to sin. Both trials and temptations are tests. Both test whether we will trust God. With temptations the issue is will we trust that God tells us the truth when he commands us to behave in certain ways.

Humans have a tendency to blame any failure or compromise on circumstances that obviously make their choice understandable and defensible. We rationalize and justify. “It’s not my fault.” In the old comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*, one frame shows little Calvin saying, “If anything bad happens, it’s not my fault. It’s fate.” James envisions a believer saying, “If I disobey, it’s not my fault. God caused it.” You might recall the first man, Adam, explaining to God, “Well, the woman you gave me...” It’s not my fault, it’s her fault, which really means it’s your fault, Lord, because you made her and gave her to me.

I recently read an article in *Psychology Today* that I found amazing. The author was attempting to set us free from disliking ourselves because of our own poor behavior or choices. She wrote about how we must deal with it when we have experiences of fear, aggression, greed and craving. In other words, she was dealing with those times when we behave badly and we know we’ve messed up. She said, “We must first understand that what is happening inside of us is a natural part of our survival conditioning. It is part of being human, and it is not really our fault.” Oh, so being aggressive and greedy is just natural so I can’t help it? She explains,

“The things that we most hate about ourselves are shaped by innumerable forces. They are conditioned by the primitive brain’s habits of aggression and craving, and amplified by genetic tendencies from past generations and the prevailing stories and mindset of our surrounding culture.” So it's not my fault because I’m a victim of my primitive brain, genetic tendencies foisted on me by my ancestors and the impact of my greedy, aggressive culture. Wow.

James knew that this tendency to rationalize and justify ourselves is the human bent. He says what actually happens involves a very different process indeed. James tells us that the reality is that each person is tempted, “when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.” The translators have not helped us by the wording of that verse. When we read “evil desires” we tend to think of terrible, violent, greedy, or lusty desires. We might think we have had a few evil desires in our lives, but that's rare. Most of the time they’re not too bad, and even very good.

James isn’t talking about something that happens on a few rare occasions when we are tempted to do something really awful or that is clearly out of bounds. He is talking about what happens *every time we are tempted to disobey God*, whether it be big or small. In the original text of James 1:14 the word “evil” doesn’t appear. It just says that we are enticed by our own desires. Yes, they are evil if it means that we desire something other than God’s will for us, but those desires may themselves be for something that is neutral in and of itself, or even something that is good. James says it is our desires that lead us to do something contrary to what God would have us do. In the terms of the Bible, it is our desire that causes us to commit sin.

So the problem begins with us desiring something. That desire becomes so strong that we decide we must fulfill it. In fact, we must fulfill it even if the only way we can see of doing that is to blow right through a stop sign that has been put up by God or even by our own conscience.

About a month ago I drove to Rubio's to pick up some fish tacos for Laurie and me. I came to the intersection of Xana Way and Alga Road just outside our neighborhood where there is a traffic light. I was on Xana, and wanted to turn left onto Alga. The light was red so I stopped and waited. The light turned green so I started across. Alga has two lanes each way, so I was going to swing into the right lane because I was going to make a right turn not far down the road. But as I was turning and about to pull into that lane I sensed almost more than saw something coming. A young woman was driving up on Alga coming from my right. She was

going way above the speed limit, flying along the street. The light for her had been red for some time but she blasted right through it. I violently veered left to avoid her and had I not done so she would have slammed into my car at a high rate of speed. Apparently she was in a hurry and couldn't be bothered with stopping.

Our desires can exert such a pull on us that when God puts up a red light we either don't even notice it because we are so obsessed with this thing we must have we blatantly choose to ignore it. Eve desired what she thought the fruit from the No-No Tree would give her. She wanted it so badly that even though God had put up a blazing neon red light there, she blew right through the intersection. That's how failing to obey God happens. James says *that's what happens every single time we disobey God.*

Let's imagine a person who is experiencing some serious financial pressure. It is income tax time. After doing work on his taxes he figures out if he does them honestly he is going to owe a significant sum of money, money he doesn't have. He desires deeply not to experience even greater financial stress. He sees that there is a way he can lie on his tax forms and is almost certain he will not get caught. He tells himself the government wastes money at a prodigious rate and will never miss his piddling contribution. He knows God says to obey governing authorities, to give to Caesar that which is Caesar's, to always speak the truth, but if he does, life is going to get even more difficult for him. The light turns red, but he blows right through the intersection. His desire to not have a financial disaster conceives and gives birth to sin. There's nothing wrong with that desire, but somehow it still gives birth to sin.

The people James wrote to desired to be treated fairly, to have enough food to eat and enough money to live on, to not be rejected and ridiculed. Those are certainly legitimate and quite reasonable desires. But James wrote his letter in part because they desired those things so much and felt they had a right to desire them that they might compromise in ways that would allow them to fulfill the desires. Maybe just back off this Jesus stuff a little, sort of fit in a little better with the people around them. The desires were reasonable, but they tempted them to blow right through God's red light.

Every time we go through a red light we are focused on some desire just like that girl driving on Alga was focused on getting somewhere fast. When your spouse says something or uses a tone of voice that pushes your button, you feel that desire to shoot back because you desire to be loved and affirmed, not hurt.

James 1:15 tells us a truth that we should repeat to ourselves constantly. Our desires give birth to sin, and when sin is full grown, it "gives birth to death." **Our desires give birth to sin and sin gives birth to death.** That is one of the most important truths you will ever know. It is counterintuitive, because we are absolutely certain that what we desire will make life so much better and fuller. That's why we desire it. But if that desire causes us to run God's red light the result will always be death.

We need to know and believe in the deepest part of our being that sin always produces death. Always. There are no exceptions. Blowing through God's red lights does not give life, it gives death. Always. That's where the lie comes in. Our desires tell us that they are the key to life. We desire approval, love, to be treated with dignity and respect, to be treated like we matter, to have some power and control in our lives, to have possessions, to be safe, to feel secure, to have comfort, to have success, and many more things. And those desires tell us that if we can fulfill them, if we can get all of those things, then our lives will be full. We will really be alive then, and until then we will surely be unhappy.

Laurie and I have gone through an interesting stretch this year. Our refrigerator, stove, garbage disposal, microwave and car all had to be replaced in the space of 3 months. For much of our lives had just one or two of these things conspired together to happen at the same time it would have been a melt down. Houseageddon. The end of our finances as we have known them. But it so happened that we actually have the money to pay for these things. We aren't a threat to pass Bill Gates on the billionaire list, but we have been able to pay for them all without a single coronary event for Rick. At one point Laurie turned to me and said, "Life is a lot better when you have some money, isn't it?"

It certainly is easier. And in some ways more enjoyable. Most of the things we desire are good things and do make life better. But they are not the key to life. We know that because all of us have had times in our lives when we did not have things we all typically desire, and yet were still full of life. I remember times in our lives when having to buy new tires for our car was cause for weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. We had no resources. And yet I know that during those times we were still joyful and at peace. Life was still full.

We all know that life is more than existing. A person in a coma is existing, but that is not life. So what is life? It is living with meaning, with purpose, it is having value, it is being at peace, it is having hope, it is a life full of love, both loving and being loved, it is experiencing joy.

Death is the absence of those things. It is being alive, but having no meaning, feeling worthless, being stressed and fearful with no peace at all, being hopeless, being so wrapped up in self you can't love or serve another, being joyless, being filled with anger, bitterness, resentment, jealousy and envy, or even just being dead inside, not really feeling anything. Every time we choose to run a red light and disobey God, every time we sin, we get a little dose of death. We drain meaning, love, joy, hope, peace from our own souls.

Many of those desires are not wrong. It is not wrong to desire approval, love, that life be a little easier because money is not so tight, to have success in some endeavor, to have a truly unified marriage. To desire those things is natural and usually a very good thing. The problem is when we let our desire control us, when we say "I must have this, even if it means running a red light from God," that is when our desires deceive us and give birth to death.

THE REMEDY IS THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Notice that James turns to talking about the character of God in this section. He has not changed the subject. He is telling us that knowing the character of God plays a crucial role in seeing through the deception of our own desires and stopping ourselves from blowing through God's red lights. But how do we know what God's character is? Recently watching television I noticed an actor who always seems to play a really nice guy. I have formed a vague opinion that in real life this actor probably is a really good guy. But the truth is, I don't know anything about him. He could be a terrific actor who is actually a mean jerk. The only way I could have some idea of the truth about him is if I were to meet him and have him actually tell me about himself.

It is logical to determine from the order we see in the universe that there is a Creator. Unfortunately from looking at nature we can't know very much about what he is like. So we are either left in the dark, or we will have to learn about this Creator through some other means than merely using our senses to look at creation. The best way, of course is if the Creator reveals himself to us. James is inspired by God to tell us what he is like. He informs us of two characteristics of God that we would not know if God did not reveal them this way.

God Is Good

The first characteristic is that God is good. James says in verse 13 that God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone. He is pure good and has nothing

whatsoever to do with evil. Furthermore, he is so good that he would never do anything that would encourage another being to do evil.

James goes on in verse 17 to tell us that every good thing we have comes from God. Not only is he good, but he is the source of all good. He is so good that he is always compelled to share good with others. His goodness continually spills over onto everyone and everything. Every good thing that we experience and enjoy ultimately stems from him. Recently Laurie and I happened on a review of a doughnut shop that's a few miles from our house. It was a very positive review so we decided we would have to try it some time. However, it's far enough away that we didn't act on that idea, plus it's in a direction that we rarely travel. A month ago we had some business in that direction and on the way back we drove right by the shop. We both thought the same thing. "Let's try it." So we did. We bought a couple of doughnuts each. They were very good. But one of Laurie's choices was a custard filled, sugar coated pastry. It was terrific. As I tried it I realized that it is really good, which means it ultimately comes from God. He could have made this world so that everything tastes like oatmeal. Or chicken. Instead we have a creation full of wonderful flavors. Yes, Satan is alive and at work in this world, so cilantro exists, but God has given us the bounty of an amazing variety of lovely tastes. Not only that, but he gave me the ability to taste things. In fact, he gave me more of that ability than the average bear. Sometimes that can be a bit of a problem. Still, the ability to taste is a good gift from God that we tend to take for granted. Every single good thing in this world ultimately comes from the good God who is the source of all goodness. In his book, *The Existence And Attributes Of God*, the great Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock wrote of God's goodness, "All created goodness is a rivulet from this fountain."

Psalm 119:68 says to God, "You are good and what you do is good." Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Deuteronomy 32:4 says God does no wrong. Habakkuk 1:13 says to God, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil." God is completely pure and good. I noticed a bottle of cranberry juice at our house that had a label proclaiming, "100% juice." Out of curiosity I looked at the list of ingredients. To my surprise included in the ingredients was grape juice. So it is 100% juice, just not 100% cranberry juice. The Bible claims God is 100% good, and it means it. It means there is nothing but good in God. There is not even one millionth of one percent that is not good, which is another way of saying "evil."

In his classic book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A. W. Tower wrote, "The goodness of God is that which disposes him to be kind, cordial, benevolent, and

full of good will toward men... by his nature he is inclined to bestow blessedness and he takes total pleasure in the happiness of his people."

Do you think of God that way? Do you realize that he takes pleasure when his people are happy? This makes sense. Imagine a parent who only had pleasure when his or her children were unhappy. Would you think of them as good? Of course not. Because he is pure good all the way through God delights when people are happy. It is what he wants for us.

This is a truth that we know because God has revealed it to us. When we see all of the calamity and suffering in this world we could easily question God's goodness. That is most certainly true of our personal lives. For most of us they don't always go the way we want. If God is good, why have these painful things happened to me? We see a lot of God's goodness in the good things of this world. But there is a lot of stuff that's not good too. We must view those things through the lens of faith. At one point during the crisis of faith that followed the death of our first son, Joel, it became crystal clear to me that faith means trusting God even when there seems no reason to do so. It means believing that God is good when you cannot see his goodness in your circumstances. So we put our faith in God, we trusted that he was good, even when it did not feel like it. A year later we had another son. We named him Toby. We derived his name from two Hebrew words, Yah, short for Yahweh, the name of the Lord, and tobh, which means good. His name really is Tobhyah, the Lord is good.

God Is Always The Same

The second aspect of the character of God that we see in this passage is that God doesn't change. In verse 17 James says God does not change like shifting shadows. Laurie and I were on vacation at a beautiful beachside hotel. It was a lovely, warm tropical day, just the way we like it. We wanted to sit by the pool, relax and read. However, we are far enough along in life that we can't bake out in the sun like we once did in our foolish youth. We need to hang in the shade. So we found a couple of lounges in the shade of some trees. It was just what we needed. But as we stayed there that afternoon we encountered a problem. After a while we were no longer in the shade. The shadows don't stay in place. They keep shifting, so the only way you can stay in the shade is to keep moving, chasing the shade.

God is not like that. If God were the shadow of a tree, that shadow would stay right in place. Malachi 3:6 says, "I, the Lord, do not change." Psalm 102:25-27 says, "Of old you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. Even they will perish, but your endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment. Like

clothing you will change them and they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will not end."

Everything in this world changes. Our family has always enjoyed Seaport Village. Yes, it is kind of a campy tourist trap, but we loved it. I just sort of assumed it would always be there. But it is about to be torn down and replaced with something completely different. As you know I've been a Charger fan most of my adult life. I just assumed the San Diego Chargers would always be the San Diego Chargers. Surprise, surprise. The last time Laurie and I went to Disneyland, which we have always loved, it took us forever to park our car. I remember fondly how amazingly efficient the parking system was back in the good old days. Even riding on the parking shuttles was part of the fun experience of the Tragic Kingdom. But all that has changed. It has changed much for the worse. Now the parking system is awful. But these things remind us, life changes, and everything in it changes. Friends we love move away. My children are in their 30's! How did that happen? I see pictures of myself and think, "Who is that ancient guy?"

Nothing, absolutely nothing, in this world stays the same. Every bit of it is constantly changing. But God is the same. Hebrews 13:8 says he is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Laurie and I have had a frustrating experience on several occasions. There was a restaurant that we really enjoyed. It wasn't expensive, but it was very nice and had some menu items that we both really loved. And then they changed. They changed their menu because they want to be more current. But what they dropped was one of our favorite items. Then when we ate there anyway the food just wasn't quite as good. The last straw was when we went and Laurie got a lovely case of food poisoning from them. We don't go there anymore. We've found it doesn't take many occasions where a restaurant is not good for us to cross it off our list.

What if we couldn't count on God to be what he has always been? It wouldn't be long before we'd cross him off our list too. We would never be able to trust him because we wouldn't know if he would still be good, just, merciful. Fortunately, we know God is unchanging therefore reliable and worthy of our trust because of what he has revealed through inspired writers of the Bible.

CONCLUSION

This is all well and good, but this seems like two different subjects. James wrote about temptation, then he wrote about the character of God. But he seemed to think these things were connected. It turns out they are.

Think of our desires on one hand and the character of God on the other as two poles around which our lives can be organized. We will orbit around one of these two poles, and they will determine how we live. Let's suppose we decide that our own desires will be our North Star, the thing that will guide us in life. We will live then with the controlling purpose at all times to have our desires fulfilled. As we have seen the result will be that we run a lot of God's red lights. Our desires give birth to sin, and sadly the result of that will be death. We do not gain life as our desires promise us, we lose it. We lose peace, joy, hope and love.

On the other hand, suppose that our North Star is the character of God. I let that be the controlling purpose and truth of my life. What I know is that God is good, and that he never changes, meaning he is always good. He is good even when I cannot see how that is possible given my circumstances. And so I choose to obey his red lights and his commands, knowing that they are always intended for my good.

Our granddaughter, Ella, who is brilliant of course, and has a big personality, has discovered television. One of her first words was "mote," her best attempt at "remote," which she learned controls the TV. She loves to watch Mickey's Roadster Racers and Sophia The First on the Disney Channel. When they come on she gets so excited she starts to dance with joy. During the period of Anna's pregnancy when Anna was on bed rest Ella got to watch a lot of television, because Anna had few ways of occupying her attention. Now that Anna is back on her feet she and Toby have wisely decided they need to cut back Ella's television time. Ella doesn't understand this. To her it seems unkind. Why would her parents keep from her this obviously very good thing that she greatly desires? Maybe her parents are unfair and they don't really love her, they just want to control her and inflict pain on her. But you and I know what she cannot yet know. Her parents are good, wise and loving, and doing what they know is for her long term good. Ella can't see or understand that end and how this action is necessary for it. What she must do is trust in the one thing she knows, that her parents love her. So she throws a fit, but then she gets over it.

When we make the character of God our North Star, not our own desires, we will have those times when we don't see the rationale behind what God orders, but we will know his character. We put our trust in his goodness, that is the same yesterday, today and forever, and that is what saves us from the tyranny of our own desires. How important it is to be able to identify our desires, acknowledge that some are legitimate, but then determine whether we pursue them and how we pursue them by what the character of God says about them.

Making the character of God the ruling principle that guides everything in our lives, even over our own desires, is counterintuitive. It is not the way of human nature and it does not come naturally to us. But it is the way to life.

This is a matter of life and death. For when we orient our lives around our desires they motivate us to run right through God's red lights, and every time we run a red light the result is death. When we let God's character be our guide, the result is always life, no matter what our circumstances may be.