

Taking Sin Seriously at the Lord's Table

Scripture: James 1:13–17

Code: 81-18

If you're going to come to the Lord's Table you're going to have to take it seriously. You cannot deal with the Lord's Table superficially. You cannot deal with it heretically, as the Roman Catholic Church does in the Mass. You cannot deal with the Lord's Table perfunctorily as if it's just a routine. You have to come to the Lord's Table very thoughtfully and in a worthy way; and what that means essentially is you've got to take a look at your life.

What you're doing is really the highest act of worship in the life of the church, and you are celebrating Christ's death on your behalf; and it was your sin that put Him there, and you don't want to come to celebrate His death for your sin while holding onto that very sin for which He died. So what it's saying is, "Deal with the sin in your life." And that means to acknowledge it, and to confess it, and repent from it and turn away from it. And that all starts with an honest recognition of sin.

The society in which we live now is so completely engulfed in a reversal of all biblical morality that it would be hard to even impose on this culture a biblical definition of sin without starting a riot. And that seeps into the church, and the way the culture treats sin so lightly has become the way churches treat sin. But it cannot be so. It cannot be acceptable for us as believers to think lightly about sin. And I want us to think seriously about it, to think with some discernment about it, and not in some external category, but about the sin that is in us. So in order to help us to look honestly at sin, as we come to celebrate our Lord's death for that sin, I want you to turn to James chapter 1, James chapter 1 - and I want us to look at verses 13-17, verses 13-17. I'll read it to you, and then we'll consider it.

James 1:13, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I'm being tempted by God;' – or "tempted of God" – "for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. 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."

Now James is addressing something that's just part of being human, and that is the propensity to blame somebody else for your sin. Certainly that's what people do in our world today culturally; but it tends to be what we all do personally. To say, "Well, it's really not my fault. This is the world I'm living in. These are the circumstances I find myself in. This is the effect of the sin of Adam and the Fall. I'm a fallen person, living in a fallen world, facing fallen circumstances; and I don't know how I'm supposed to avoid sin. There is sin in me, and this is the world that God has placed me in."

The tendency is to blame God, not necessarily directly as if God were the tempter, but indirectly in the way that Adam did when God confronted Adam about his disobedience in eating of the forbidden fruit. Adam said to God, "The woman You gave me made me do it." Now, he wasn't blaming the woman, he was blaming God, as much as if he had said, "Look, I went to sleep single; I woke up

married. I didn't even know what a woman was, and there she was. And she led me into sin, and You made her." This is the general pattern of human blame-shifting, to make God responsible. And it happens even among the people of God. Isaiah 63:17, "Why, O Lord, do You cause us to stray from Your ways and harden our hearts? Why, God, are You causing us to sin?"

Shows up in the culture in many ways. The poetry of Robert Burns has an illustration. Robert Burns, the great Scottish poet, wrote this: "Thou knowest Thou hast formed me with passions wild and strong, and listening to their witching voices has often led me wrong. It's God who gave me these passions, who's at fault."

There were some ancient rabbis who believed that God must have created *yetzer hara*. What that is is evil impulse. Since God made man and made everything in man, God must have created his evil impulse. So God, if not directly, certainly indirectly, is culpable.

But even as believers, we can say, "If I had known it would have turned out this way I wouldn't have married him. Why did You let me?" "If I had known this situation had happened in this business in this office, You could have stopped me from working here." "Why are these things happening to me in my life? You have created my circumstances." There may be a greater tendency on the part of believers to say this than even nonbelievers, who don't have so much a sense of God ordering everything. But you cannot come to the Lord's Table if you're not taking full responsibility for your own sin. If you're passing it off to anybody else indirectly, to God you are not in true state of repentance.

Let's go back to James 13 and let's see the proposition that he gives to us in verse 13: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I'm being tempted by God.'" Stop there. "Don't say that. Don't say this is from God."

Literally, the original Greek needs some scrutiny, because the placement of the language here, *apo theou*, "of God" or "by God" or "from God," is in the emphatic position. So it actually reads this way: "From God I am being tempted." Or, "Of God I am being tempted."

The use of *apo* is crucial to the meaning. There are two words that can mean "by" or "from" or "of." One is *apo*, with an equivalent to an "a." The other is *hupo*, the equivalent of a "u." *Hupo* has the idea of direct agency. That would be to say, "God actually tempted me."

But it's not *hupo*; it's *apo*. And *apo* has the distinct idea in Greek of a kind of remote, indirect cause; and that is the typical pattern that we fall into, saying that we're in the mess we're in, we're falling into the patterns of sin we're falling into, because the circumstances are really designed by God, and it's, in some sense, His fault.

Now I don't know that you would actually push it all off on Him. But James is telling us you can't push any of it off on Him. True confession starts with full, full responsibility for sin. It starts with, "O wretched man that I am. I don't do what I ought to do; I do what I ought not to do" (Romans 7).

And I will agree, we don't go so far as to say God is the tempter, because we know better than that. But we certainly do blame God indirectly, remotely for the circumstances that we are in. "I'm a victim; what do you expect? I have these anger issues because the people around me are impossible to

deal with, and they continually frustrate me. I have these anger issues and these rebellion issues because my parents are overbearing, and lack understanding and lack compassion, and don't want to listen to me; and this is the circumstance I'm in. What do you expect me to do? How do you expect me to respond?"

I don't think Christians really blame Satan for our sin. Obviously, we should blame Satan for orchestrating the world that lays out the objects of temptation. I mean, this is a world we live in where the sexual objects of temptation are everywhere. But this is also a world where the justification of violence, and the justification of hatred, and the justification of anger, and the justification of lying, and the justification of cheating, and the justification of stealing are demonstrated throughout this culture from top to bottom, side to side. So Satan has laid out all of that.

And we're living in a culture now where the bottom line is, whatever you can get away with is okay; you just don't want to have to face the consequences. So it's a difficult world to live in if you don't want to take responsibility for your sin. But on the other hand, it's the best culture yet, because everybody blames somebody else for everything.

This young man who shot all those students this week sent all of the pundits and the psychologists and psychiatrists back into their little huddles to analyze why he did what he did. What caused it? Who's really to blame? Was it the fact that he was an orphan? Was it the fact that his parents had died? Was it the fact that he had some physical features that were hard to cope with in the world that elevates beauty? What was the issue here?

We hear so very often that people are criminals because they're poor. People are criminals because they feel like others have more than they need and they don't have what they need. And so justification for their thievery, or their cheating, lying is the fact of their plight: "I'm a poor victim; I have no choice. This is kind of where I am. This is the best that I can expect from somebody in these circumstances." And again, this isn't Satan, this is God, saying, "Well, you put me here."

Proverbs 19:3 gets to this. It says, "The foolishness of man perverts his way, and his heart frets against God. The foolishness of man perverts his way," is one translation, "and his heart frets against God." "God, You did this. You put me in this condition, circumstance." This is typical, normal human behavior from Adam on. "The woman You gave me made me do this."

James will not allow that, and neither will the Lord allow that. There is no place for seeing yourself as a victim. You're not a victim; you're a perpetrator of sin, and so am I. You cannot blame the poor man's crimes on poverty. You cannot blame the drunk man's drunkenness on a bad marriage. You cannot blame a juvenile's crime on a bad home. Circumstances don't make us sinners; we arrive that way.

Robert Burns also said, "He was by passion driven, but yet the light that led astray was light from heaven." Again, blaming God for his illicit passions. This view, according to James, is intolerable. No one should ever speak of sin and God in the same sentence, as if God had anything to do with sin. And James is going to give us four proofs of that in this text. I want you just to look at them with me: the nature of evil, the nature of man, the nature of lust, and the nature of God. It's a powerful argument for why God can't be blamed for sin, and why we must take full responsibility.

Let's look first at the nature of evil, verse 13, middle of the verse. Here's reason number one why we don't blame God: God cannot be tempted by evil; He Himself does not tempt anyone.

Now listen, the deities of the pagans and the false gods of the nations throughout history are by virtue of their creators, who are men and demons, innately evil. They are innately tempters. They are loveless. They are wicked. They are guilty of not just something like whimsy in what they do, but evil intent. They are full of malice. They are threatening. These are the gods of the nations. False gods are all that way because they are creations of fallen men and fallen demons, and they reflect the character of their creator. The stream doesn't rise higher than its source; so when men and demons create deities, they create deities like themselves, who are evil - only they're evil in a supernatural, and therefore, much more vast sense.

But the nature of evil is unholiness, the absence of goodness, the presence of wickedness; the nature of evil makes it mutually exclusive from God because God is holy. Leviticus, throughout the whole book God repeats, "Be holy, for I am holy. Be holy, for I am holy. I am holy. I am the Lord your Holy One." Isaiah 6, the angels cry, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts."

But notice the words that James uses: "God cannot be tempted by evil." It's an interesting verb here that's translated "cannot be tempted." It's the verb *peirazō*, and it is used only here in the entire New Testament. And it actually means "to experience, to experience," "to literally have a personal, integrated experience." And James is saying, "God cannot experience evil; He *cannot*. He has no capacity for it; He has no vulnerability to it."

Evil, by the way, is a neuter-plural adjective in this form, without an article. In the Greek language we say it's anarthros, it doesn't have an article. If it had an article it would be "the evil," the definite article. But it's without an article; it's just evil in its total sense. God has no experience with the entire realm of evil. God has no experience with evil as a reality in any form. Evil and God are not compatible; they don't come together. All evil repulses God. All evil is alien to God's nature; it can find no place with Him.

Evil is apart from God. And there are a lot of ways that you can see that illustrated in Scripture, but I would love to show you one that I think will be an encouragement – and I doubt whether you've ever thought about this before. God can be tempted without succumbing. So when it says, "God cannot be tempted," James means in the sense that the temptation has any real connection to Him with any potential to respond. God cannot be successfully tempted. Better the translation – and that's why I told you what the word means – "God cannot experience the evil." And I'll give you an illustration of that.

Satan goes after God, and I'll show you two places. Job chapter 1 – you don't have to turn to it. Satan shows up in heaven and he says to God, "You are receiving worship and love and obedience from Job because he's blessed. I'm telling You, if You stop blessing him - he only is faithful to You, he only trusts in You because of all that You've done for him. Take it away and he'll curse you." This was an attempt on Satan's part in the earliest part of redemptive history to see if he could get God to do something in the life of Job that would destroy his faith. He's tempting God to do something that would destroy Job's faith.

God says to Satan, "Go ahead. I'll prove to you that the faith that comes from Me and the relationship

I have with Job is absolutely unbreakable no matter what he suffers.” So Satan comes into the life of Job, devastates his life, kills all his children, takes away his health, takes away all his possessions, all his animals. He is literally sitting in a heap of dirt, scraping the filthy boils on his skin with a broken piece of pottery. And Job says this: “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.”

Satan was tempting God to cause something to happen in the life of Job that would destroy his faith. But no matter what happened in the life of Job, nothing could destroy that faith, because that faith was designed by God to endure. God would have had to have broken His hold on Job. And the point of the book of Job is that when God has someone that belongs to Him, nothing can change that, nothing. Satan can tempt God to act against Job or anybody else; God has no capacity to succumb to that temptation.

Now I'll give you a more dramatic illustration. In the book of Revelation, chapter 12 and verse 10, it says that Satan is before the throne of God day and night accusing the brethren. He's doing exactly what he did against Job, only he's doing it *constantly*, and he's doing it now as I'm speaking. He will do it until the events of Revelation 12 take place in the future, the end of the age, and he's accusing the brethren.

Do you think he has some accusations that are legitimate? Of course. He is basically trying to get God to turn on us. He's tempting God to forsake a people who are less than perfect. He's saying things to God like, “They're not faithful. They don't love you like they should. They don't serve you like they should. They don't love each other like they should. They don't worship You like they should. They don't give like they should. They sin like they shouldn't.” Satan constantly is in the very place of God, His throne room, accusing believers, tempting God with the diatribe against us, to break His hold on us.

And how does God respond to that? In Job's case, the faith was unbreakable because God held it firm. But listen to God's word through Paul in Romans 8: “If God is for us, who is against us? Who will bring a charge against God's elect?” Well, Satan.

Will it succeed? “God is the one who justified; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” No.

“In all these things we overwhelmingly conquer. I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Who is bringing a charge against God's elect? Satan is. Who is he that condemns? Satan is. Who is the one who would want to separate us from the love of Christ? Satan is, and he's before the throne of God relentlessly telling God to let us go because of our unfaithfulness, tempting God to throw away His children because of their failure.

Would God ever do that? Let me tell you something: if you could lose your salvation, then God is a sinner and has fallen to a temptation from Satan. That is a profound thought. If a person can lose

their salvation, then Satan has triumphed over God, Satan has broken God's holiness, God is not holy.

But God is holy and has no experience of evil. Satan can do this day and night until he's finally thrown into the lake of fire; and all that he throws at God is simply dandelions in a hurricane, blown into oblivion. God will never let His people go. Your security as a believer is bound up in the holiness of God. The character of God is impregnable to the onslaught of evil.

You see the other illustration that I would point to you in the New Testament, of course, is Christ's temptation by Satan upon the mountain. And in every case, Christ was impervious to the temptation. The Latin for talking about the nature of Christ with regard to sin was kind of interesting. Some of the early church Fathers said Christ was *non posse peccare*, "not possible to sin." Others said He was *posse non peccare*, "possible not to sin."

Now you say, "That's splitting hairs." But think about it. The first one says, "It was not possible for Him to sin." The second says, "It was possible for Him not to sin." The correct one is the first one: "It was not possible for Him to sin." Jesus Himself said, "Satan has nothing in Me. There's nothing there to connect to."

So God has no experience with evil, and back to verse 13, "and He Himself does not tempt anyone." He is not capable of bringing evil into His own experience, so He is not ever the source of it. So the nature of evil precludes you blaming God. God has nothing to do with evil, absolutely nothing to do with evil. Well, you say, "Well, why does Matthew 6:13 say, 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil'?" Because God is the only One who can guard our paths to deliver us from evil.

So, look, don't blame God; the nature of evil precludes that. "God will never," 1 Corinthians 10:13, "allow you to be tempted above that you are able, but always with the temptation make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it." He is the one who delivers you from the temptation; He is not the source of the temptation. So the nature of evil precludes God being its author, directly or indirectly.

Secondly, the nature of man, the nature of man. Verse 14, so important: "But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust." Where's the problem? Not outside of you – What? – inside. "But" – here's the fact that's so essential – "every person" – *hekastos*, "each one, no exception, individually" – "falls under this temptation when he is" – two verbs here – "carried away and enticed." "Carried away" is actually – they're participles. So they describe in the present tense. So they describe a continuing kind of action.

The first one is literally "dragged away, dragged away." It is to be drawn away, lured away; compelled, impelled, drawn by some kind of inner power. It's a hunting term, and it describes a trap. There is something in the nature of the animal that desires the food that is in the trap, and the desire drags the animal into that trap. There's nothing wrong, nothing evil about the trap in one sense, nothing evil about the food; it's what's evil in the heart that activates the entrapment. So temptation basically works on the inside of the human soul. "Entice" is more a fishing word, "to catch," actually "to catch a fish." Catching fish and setting traps for animals both are beguiling, alluring deception.

Here's how sin works: it targets something inside us that longs for what is forbidden, what is evil,

what is wrong. It sets the hook, it baits the trap. It looks good, it's so inviting. All you see is the bait, all you see is the morsel, and instead of the anticipated pleasure, you end up maybe dead. Temptation always promises a tasty indulgence, and it delivers death. So the reason people do wicked things is because their hearts are wicked. "O wretched man that I am," Paul says.

But not everybody is a serial killer, not everybody is a school shooter. Why? Because God has built into human life some restraint. The first restraint is conscience, and conscience is a very active restraint; but it has to be informed by a true moral code. And where you have someone bereft of an accurate moral code, conscience goes amuck because it can only react to that sense of morality. God put that restraint in every human being, and the conscience is there to excuse or accuse. But conscience depends on a sense of right and wrong. You have a society where all of that is thrown out, and what is right is now wrong, and what is wrong is now right, and everything is reversed. Conscience can't function.

The second restraint God has placed in human life is family, and a rod to discipline children, to break their unfettered desires, and to tell them that, "You can't behave in a full expression of your lusts without pain." That's why you can't parent without inflicting pain, so that they associate pain with acts that are unacceptable. Where you have a breakdown of the family, this restraint is removed.

The next restraint is government; and government has a sword, not a stick, but a sword – threat of death. But all of those are necessary to restrain the otherwise deadly human heart.

Now for us as believers we've been subdued by the Holy Spirit, haven't we; we've been subdued by the Holy Spirit. But we have to understand that we can't as believers violate this intent of this text, and that is we have to take full responsibility for our own sin. It's your own lusts. It's your own heart. It's the desire of your soul, *epithumia*, *epithumia*.

That word is used a lot in the New Testament, "desire." It's the inclination of the soul to fulfill its lusts: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, pride of life. *Thumos* is the soul, the human spirit, the principle of life: feeling, thought, mind, will, purpose. It's the strong, driving passion of the soul, and it is why we are temptable, because as of yet it hasn't been redeemed, and it's still sinful and desires what is wrong and what is dishonoring to God, and what is even deadly.

The problem is not outside of you, it is in you. That's why in the Middle Ages when there were monks going to monasteries, thinking that they could get in a monastery and overcome temptation, they found that it was utterly impossible, because they took the corruption in there with them. It was foolish to cut off parts of the body, as some of the ancient monks did: cut off their – in some cases their ears; in other cases, plucked out their eyes; in other cases, bodily organs. Sometimes they would take thorn bushes and flagellate themselves, and try to seclude themselves in some painful environment bereft of any kind of social graces. And all they found was that they were isolated with their own wretchedness.

The preposition here is *hupo* with the "u," meaning the near and direct agent is in us. Like Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and the enemy is us." "The heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked," Jeremiah 17 says. Romans 3 says that men are killers, blood-thirsty killers at heart. That's why we sin, because of the corruption inside of us. You can't blame God because of the nature of evil, which is alien to God. You can't blame God, because you're the problem, I'm the

problem. God's not the problem.

Let's think a little more deeply about the third evidence that James gives. The reason you can't blame God, thirdly, is because of the nature of lust. You've got to come to grips with the fact that this lust that operates in us is a powerful force; you need to know how it works.

Verses 15-16: "Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren." He's talking to believers, "beloved brethren." He changes the metaphor. He shifts from hunting and fishing, baited hooks and traps, to childbirth, to conception – gestation, birth, and death.

Now most people think of sin as a single act. Sin is not a single act. Sin is not a single act. And I'm talking about even an instantaneous, momentary, flashpoint sin, where you say things you shouldn't say, where you get violent and you get angry, you overreact; or whether on a short impulse you lie because you're caught and you don't want to tell the truth and you're trying to cover, so you tell a lie. And it isn't something you premeditated and planned for days and days. Or maybe you have an opportunity to steal some money, and it's an impulse kind of thing, and you grab the money and go. Or maybe you have an impulse to gossip about somebody and say something about them that is critical of them and demeaning to them, and you haven't plotted and it just came up. Or maybe you're even agreeing with somebody who's feeding you that kind of thing.

You might not think of it as something that is a process, but that sin, even that momentary, violent sin that seems like it all happened in one flashpoint, is a process. That baby isn't born unless that baby has been conceived and been gestating. In other words, you've already been harboring attitudes, simple attitudes, with regard to your own self and what you deserve, and toward other people. And the flashpoint is just the birth; the conception came along a lot earlier.

Sometimes sin is planned out and plotted out over days or weeks or months; sometimes it's just a flash. But it always starts; let's start where it starts. It conceives in the category of lust. That's the deep desire defined as the lust of the flesh, the lust of eyes, and the pride of life. This is your imagination we could say. Down deep in your imagination – your feelings, your emotions.

You don't start the pathway of sin in a calculating, intellectual way. It comes from deep dissatisfaction, deep anger, deep hostility, deep resentment, a deep sense of being mistreated, a deep sense of needing to defend yourself, deep sense of being trapped in a relationship or a place you don't want to be. You've given birth to those emotions, and those emotions are working toward your mind, and your mind is now chewing on those emotions. You are rolling it over in your mind. And when something happens that brings the flashpoint, all of that gestation bursts, and a sin is born.

Lust – back to verse 14 – is where it all begins. We are carried away and enticed by lust. It's not intellectual; it's not rational; it's just the hook has been baited to seduce us on the level of our feelings; and then that sin is conceived in the imagination. It can be long; it can be fast. The sin is conceived; it's gestating. It may be latent there. And then all of a sudden, in a flashpoint or in a moment of opportunity, it gives birth; and then comes death.

Again, most people think of sin as a single act. It is a process. It is a process. First, there is the

enticement. You could say that's the conception. And once it's conceived, and it sits there in a gestating form, eventually at the point of the flash it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.

The language here is interesting. "When lust has conceived," the verb there is the active, aorist active verb "to become pregnant." Children are not born until there's a conception, and a long period of time, and then a birth; that's how sin works. You actually may give birth to a sin and plan that sin, or you may just have growing in you violence, animosity, pride, self-will, anger, hostility; and at a flashpoint the sin is born. But that's the process.

You want to first deal with sin then deep inside, right? And that's why you want to have a clear conscience. Paul said, "You accuse me of all of these things," to the Corinthians. "My conscience is clear" (2 Corinthians 1:12). "My conscience is clear. You're throwing all kinds of accusations at me, accusing me of so much. I'm just telling you, none of it sticks. My conscience is clear, and my conscience is fully formed by the truth of God." You want to win the sin battle on the inside. If you lose it there, it'll show up on the outside.

And then the next step for the sin is to go from the feeling. If it can break through the barrier of conscience it gets to the mind, and then you begin to calculate, and then you begin to work that sin. I even know people who were so angry they plan what they're going to say to people if they ever meet them. Right? "If I ever see that person here's what I'm going to say." Really? You're gestating sin.

So you want to deal with the sin at the deepest point of your conscience and keep a clear conscience - don't let sin find a place there. And then immediately you want to deal with sin in the mind, and the way you do that is by keeping your mind for the things of God. "Think on these things" – Right? – "what is holy, righteous, just, good." If your mind is full of sinful realities, then it's no barrier to your feelings, and you will give birth to sin. Verb means "to give birth."

So sin, any kind of sin, is simply the child that you've been growing in your heart. It's the evil child. And when that child comes out it brings forth death. When it is matured, it brings forth – literally "to cease to be pregnant," *apokuei*, "to cease to be pregnant" - out comes death. What an amazing picture.

Think of sin that way. A baby conceived in your emotions, and then gone to your mind, and then given a place in your will, and at the right place, at the right time it is born a killer. The expectation of a mother for her child is that it would be full of life and love and joy. This baby is a killer. All kinds of deadly things come from sin. It always wreaks death, because every sin will cause death – your death, and even the death of Christ. So verse 16, "Stop being deceived." "Stop, my beloved brethren. Stop at the start."

One final thought. The nature of evil, the nature of man, the nature of lust precludes God having any part of it. Finally, the nature of God Himself, verse 17, just a comment: "Every good thing given, every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights," – the Creator of all the heavenly bodies – "with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow."

What comes from God? Only what? Good. Only good. This is the heart of the text. Don't blame God; sin doesn't come from Him; only good comes from Him. Every good thing given, every perfect gift is

from above, coming down from the Father of lights; and this cannot change – no variation, no shifting shadow.

So when you face temptation, run to God. And listen, here's the simple reality: whatever that sin offers you, God has something – What? – far better: a heavenly, perfect gift.

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