

SHAPED BY THE WORD – James 1:12-27

Pastor Tim Rech, Clearcreek Chapel

Please turn with me to James, chapter one and verse 12.

This morning we continue in James. If you recall, James was writing to the “early-early” church (since it was only 15 years or so after Christ’s resurrection) of Jewish Christians dispersed as well as those in Jerusalem. After spending little time on greetings (only one verse), he begins the letter treating the subject of trials; how to face them, the fruit of persevering through them, the godly wisdom available to face them, and how they have the effect of equalizing the poor and the rich.

Now for then, as it is for all times, all people in this world suffer trouble. However for the Christian, trouble takes on even greater meaning. For God is working in His people through trials to shape them into the image of His Son. He is working to:

- Test our faith
- Turn us from reliance on worldly things
- Set our eyes on eternal things
- Reveal the idols of our heart
- Value His blessings
- Develop us for greater usefulness in the kingdom
- Enable us to better help others in their trials
- So that we might know Christ and His sufferings better

In summary, trials are a gift of God that enable us to increasingly align our lives with Him and His will.

Blessing in Trial (1:12)

So let us pickup the text at chapter one, verse 12:

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

So right away we see that the man who remains steadfast or perseveres patiently in trials and temptations is blessed or “happy”. It brings to mind the beatitudes given by Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount. (Matt. 5);”Blessed are the poor in Spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...”, etc. This man is blessed for two reasons; one he is blessed in enjoying the life changing work of God in His life. Second, he is blessed because he sees the ultimate outcome of having endured a lifetime of trials which is to receive a “crown of life”. Now he does not receive this crown as a reward for persevering through trials – he has not earned it. Rather he sees the persevering work God has produced in Him as evidence of possessing saving faith leading to eternal life. We all need eternal assurance and demonstrating a pattern of patient endurance through the troubles of this life gives us such assurance. We can see evidence that we are

children of God – ones who love God regardless of what troubles come our way. And also we can see that trials will not last forever.

So we are to patiently endure our trials and in the process we can be a happy people. Now this was not how the church at that time was responding to the trials they were facing. And if we are honest, it is not often how we respond. Like Jesus disciples, as the wind blows and the waves crash, we often collapse in a heap, forgetting everything we have been taught and become crippled by fear – our faith nowhere to be found. Other times, we take matters into our own hands and assertively revert to our fleshy and worldly methods (often angry ones) to handle the situation. Parenting is an example – we resort to familiar sinful responses to the pressures of raising our children. There are also times we simply run from the trial. In any event, we miss the opportunity afforded by the trial to grow and the purposes of God in it altogether. The good news is our Lord is gracious and patient and will continue to carefully test us to achieve in us what He desires.

Now there is another “response” to our trials which is to look to blame something or someone else or worse yet, look to blame God. It seems this was what James was observing among the brethren. We read on in verses 13-15...

God’s Role in Trial (1:13-18)

Not to Tempt (1:13-15)

¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God,” for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

Now here is a good time to ask the question, “What is God’s role in these trials to which James is speaking?” In verse 13, James tells us what God is not doing. God is not tempting us to sin in trials because God, unlike us, cannot be tempted by evil. He is fully aware of evil but is in no way subject to it since God is located in an entirely different realm. At first glance, this seems to contradict other places in Scripture. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul recounts how the Israelites “tested” Christ by their unfaithful disobedience. This temptation involved being tested from outside. God can be tempted in this way and will respond accordingly as the Israelites could testify. A child can test or tempt his father by disobeying and the father responds with discipline. But what is in view here is that God is not subject to evil passions and uncontrolled appetites arising from within. Temptation cannot cause God to sin since He does not possess a sin nature like we do. And since He will never take part in sin, He cannot cause anyone to sin.

Rather our temptations leading to sin originate from our own desire within – the desires proceeding from the sin nature into which we were born. And because of our nature, even legitimate desires can become sinful. Opportunity arises through a trial or test which provokes a desire from within us. We are then lured and enticed by this desire that is welling up – it is like being in a boat on the lake with a dead motor that is given a tow by another boat – once we connect to the other boat, we can only go where the rescuing boat takes it. And look at the

progression in verse 15 of where this desire can lead us. After the desire or lust develops and is unchecked, we begin to rationalize it, regardless of the truth or the dangers associated – it is conceived. Then we begin to make plans to pursue and satisfy our sinful desire and this is where we cross over. We have surrendered in our mind to the lust and now all that is left is to commit the sin or give birth to it. Sin then leads ultimately to death – eternal death for those not in Christ - and possibly a premature physical death for those who persist in a particular sin.

Remember however that it is no sin to be tempted – even Christ was tempted. What matters is what we do with the temptation. Saying it another way, is that to us, trials can become temptations because they have the possibility of resulting in sin. However to Christ, as He was tempted in the wilderness, it was simply a test to be perfectly passed by applying the Word of God to it.

So let us be clear, God does not tempt us to sin – nor the devil – nor any person or thing. The cause stems from our own evil desires which, if unchecked, lead to sin. Rather God plays a different role in trials and it involves our ultimate good. Let us read on...

To Express His Goodness (1:16-18)

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.^[d] ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Again, we cannot be deceived or misled by ourselves or anyone else concerning God. He has no association with evil – that is our department. Rather God is only concerned with and governed by bringing good to His people. Our God is the author of all good gifts and His purposes are only for good toward us.

And He never changes in His intentions towards us. James contrasts God's character to that of the heavenly bodies God has created. From our vantage point on earth, it seems the sun, the moon, and the stars are always moving throughout the days and weeks. We also notice the shadows cast by the sun throughout the day and through the seasons of the year are ever changing as the earth rotates in its orbit and shifts on its axis. God is not like this – He never changes. Have you ever given thought to this truth? He is not like this world – a world that constantly shifts and changes in all of its aspects. He is not like us – tending to be fickle in our tastes or our commitments. His kind and good intentions are always expressed towards His people.

This expression of goodness towards man has never been greater than that of verse 18. It says He deliberately chose to bring us forth or said another way, He chose to save us. He chose to give us new birth. And how did He do this? Well, it was through “the word of truth” – the gospel of Christ. He caused new birth in us. Why was this necessary? Because we were dead in our trespasses and sins – people who by their sin nature were enemies of God. This gospel conveys the good news of Jesus Christ who was sent from heaven to earth where He bore the punishment and wrath from God for our sins, died on the cross, was raised because He was perfectly just, and

then ascended to heaven where He sits at the right hand of God interceding for those who believed and received Him – His chosen and adopted people.

Verse 18 also helps us to better understand why we need trials and why God tests us through them – In Christ, we are His “firstfruits” – His prized possession. Therefore we need to be transformed in order to live like children of God – transformed by His Word – the Word for which James tells us we need to prepare to receive in verses 19-21...

Hearing the Word (1:19-21)

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

So in teaching us how to receive God’s Word, James addresses our own words - words that are often not good in their content or in their expression. In fact, they get in the way of what God is trying to teach us in trials. James is describing a posture here – a biblical and godly posture needed so we can hear the Word of God. It has nothing to do with our bodily posture (unless you are sleeping!) but rather that of our hearts and minds. He said we ought to “be quick to hear and slow to speak” or rather “do not be slow to hear or quick to speak”.

Hearing must be our first reaction or reflex when exposed to the Word. It was obviously a problem for these dispersed churches.

And this does not come easy or natural for us – even at this moment - even in the stillness of a quiet room at home when we open our bibles. For our minds ramble, busy with self talk, and diverted by the slightest disturbance. It is even more difficult when we are anxious or perhaps carrying around unconfessed sin.

We need help from God with this – pray for the ability to hear quickly and with duration. Ask Him to show you what He needs you to hear and how it might apply to your life. Have your personal antenna always raised to hear a Word from the Lord through a sermon, ABE, flock, a bible study, or when a brother or sister shares a verse or passage with you. Prepare yourself to hear the Word before you come to church. Take charge of your mind and settle it down. Worship before hearing the Word helps, does it not? In it, we are reminded of and express back to God His greatness and glory, our terrible sin condition, the gospel of Christ, our struggles in this Christian life, and last but not least, His precious promises.

And we not only need to be quick to hear but slow to speak. In fact, one of the obstacles in hearing God is that our inner lawyer rises up within us to defend ourselves. If we are not careful, the words, “Yeah, but” are silently or audibly spoken and we find ourselves arguing with God. This is not a good place to be for we are judging God – blind to our own need. And we are lying because if God says we need to hear it, then we need to hear it. Or another response is to prematurely declare our understanding of the Word and tune out before hearing it completely.

James also tells us to be slow to anger which is curious because why would the Word of God cause anger in a believer? Could it be that we do not like its penetrating gaze upon a particular area of our heart or life? Well, we know from many places in the bible that anger rarely accomplishes anything. Yes, it can certainly get a reaction from whom it is targeted; a spouse, a child, or an employee but it does not last. And as taught in this text, it certainly does not produce the righteousness of God in us. But you may argue that godly anger is good and right, and that is true. But how often do we really express godly anger? No, we are typically angry for our own selfish reasons and again, this does not produce the righteousness of God.

James tells us also to put away all the filth and evil in our lives. Yes, how we live in light of the Word of God, affects our ability to receive it. Is there sin in your life that needs confession and repentance? Take it to the throne of grace – agree with God concerning it, and repent from it. If needed, go to your brother, ask for forgiveness, and be restored.

Now James gives one more thing to prepare us for receiving the Word and that is to receive it with meekness or with humility. With this attitude, we simply acknowledge He is an all knowing God who knows us perfectly and we do not. We acknowledge He is God and frankly, we are not. And even if we do not understand completely or immediately how that is to work out in our lives, we simply trust He is right.

And then look at the last half of verse 21 on what we are humbly receiving; it is the implanted Word which has the sense of God's Word rooting like a seed in the heart. And God's Word does what only it can do – save our souls. Now we know it saves us but this is referring to our sanctification - the Spirit led process that progressively changes us over time into Christlikeness – in fact it involves the process of trials God has ordained and James has been explaining to us thus far in the letter. God shapes us through His Word – this is the point of this passage this morning. God divinely appoints trials for our lives and then gives us His Word to enable us to respond to our trials just like Christ did. It really is that simple – it is the process into which we have been placed down here. It is for our good and God gets the glory – it really is simple and the sooner we grasp it, this life becomes less and less of a mystery. We can then stop asking questions like, “what did I do to deserve this?” or “why does this continue to happen to me?” or “where is God in all this?”

So if He has brought us forth and saved by His Word, shall we not also look to His Word to shape us in trials and in daily life? Is His Word not completely sufficient to approve us in trial?

Now if we stop here though we will preempt this process. James continues in verses 22-25..

Doing the Word (1:22-25)

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

We must be doers of the Word as well otherwise we fool ourselves. “Doers of the Word” – this is the language of the Christian resume and obituary, “Doer of the Word”. In fact, a Christian who consistently makes a practice of not obeying God’s Word has every reason to question his or her salvation. The sovereign God does not say, “Let there be light” when he saves a person from darkness and then not produce in that person the godly fruit of faith and obedience.

This seems straight forward and we always apply God’s Word upon hearing it, right? OR is it possible that we might become callous to His penetrating Word and therefore be totally unaffected by it? Might we sit here each week and hear it but simply be unwilling to apply what we hear. “Yes, yes”, you might say, “I know, I will do that later”. Can the Word become so familiar to us that not applying it becomes routine? This is a real danger and James likens it to a man who after looking into a mirror and studying himself, walks away and promptly forgets what he learned about himself. “What did he look like? ... I don’t know”.

So we are to continue to look into the Word (verse 25) – James calls it the perfect law, the law of liberty. This was an important distinction especially to the young Jewish believer who had previously been brought up in O.T law – the law that although good, gave no enabling power for its hearer to obey. And rather than free them, it enslaved them. No, James is speaking here of a liberating law, one that comes with the gospel of Christ and the heart changing power of the Spirit. Remember from Romans 7:6, “we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”

James exhorts us to look into the law of liberty (the Word of God) and to persevere in acting upon it – we will be blessed or happy in doing. So let’s not be like the guy looking into the mirror and forgetting what he looked like after he walks away.

Can you see how this ties back to trials and testing and how we are to patiently endure them when they arise? God allows trials into our lives and we then, as Spirit filled believers shaped by the Word, hear and do the Word of God in a persevering way. We are blessed and most importantly, God gets the glory – all the glory. And if I might add, the spiritual world watches on in amazement. This should give us a new perspective when we lose a job, get a bad report from the doctor, or experience conflict in a relationship.

Now this passage is not done with us yet, let’s read on in verses 26-27:

True Religion (1:26-27)

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Even in being doers of the Word, we can also deceive ourselves. And these two verses set the stage for much of the remainder of the letter.

James addresses true religion here or rather what true religious activity involves. And to paraphrase these two verses, it would simply be, “less ungodly talk, more godly action, and less looking like the world”. Deceptive or counterfeit religion contrasted with pure religion is in view here.

First of all, James introduces the problem of the tongue – for later on he will have much to say about it and it will not be pretty. A Christian’s tongue out of control flavors his or her entire walk and causes such a walk to be worthless in God’s eyes and even in the eyes of other people since it obscures any godliness demonstrated in other areas of that person’s life. This was a problem among the believers to whom James was addressing. In the conflicts between one another, the tongue was being used as a weapon against one another – a weapon used to quarrel, to curse, to speak evil, to boast, to grumble, and to make self-condemning oaths. In the trials of personal conflict, they were failing the tests God brought their way and were devouring one another. An unbridled tongue caused their religion to be worthless.

On the contrary, James tells us a worthy religion (a pure and undefiled one) is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. This is not to say these specific activities are the particulars or end-all of true religious activity. But rather James is making the point that biblical religion is godly action towards one another – of selfless giving, serving, and helping others in affliction. We are to be willing to sacrifice and die to ourselves for the sake of one another. Here again we are to be shaped by the Word of Christ – seeking to live like Him.

You see if we are not careful, we can fall into the pattern of too much tongue and too little selfless action toward one another. If unchecked among its members, it can destroy relationships and even a church.

And there is one more thing... James tells us that a pure and undefiled religion is to keep oneself unstained from the world. There is much to say here but I think we understand this. But how are you doing with the world? Do its bright lights still appeal much to you in or are you alertly resisting it? Are you increasingly comfortable with the world and perhaps even made a happy compromise with it? Do you continually find yourself asking, “If only I had...” – fill in the blank...

Let us not deceive ourselves; a worldly Christian and / or one with an out-of-control tongue is worthless in God’s eyes.

So let us bring this passage together:

- Trials are God’s work to change us – we must patiently endure them
- From God proceeds every good thing and He is working to shape us His children through His Word which saves and changes us.
- Are you slow to speak and quick to hear the Word of God so that you might be shaped by it?
- And are you a doer of the Word? – a non-doing and disobedient Christian is a contradiction

- In living the Christian life, do you have your tongue under control and is the world's influence on you getting less and less?

James is a simple but profound book – one we need to return to again and again since it speaks so clearly into our day-to-day lives and shows us what God is doing there through trials and testing. I hope you are not looking for something different. Trials where we apply His Word in faithful obedience are His chosen instrument to change us. And we can trust Him – the one who sent His only Son to die for our sins and who called us forth by His Word. So by God's grace, let us persevere in obedience and be steadfast in trials. For blessed and happy we will be and when it is all over (and it will be soon – this life is so short), we will receive the promised crown of life from God our Savior. What a day that will be...let's pray.