

3. The Loving Father and the Sinful Heart

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[0 : 00] Before that, though, we're going to be, as always, reading and studying God's Word. And I'd invite you now, if you would, to turn with me in your Bibles to the letter of James.

And Andy Gemmill, as our preacher this evening, is continuing his study in this letter in the New Testament. You'll find it in our church Bibles on page 1011, 1011.

And we're going to pick up at verse 12 of chapter 1. So James chapter 1 at verse 12, and we'll read down to the end of the section at verse 21.

James 1 then at verse 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. Let no one say when he is tempted, I'm being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.

[1 : 14] Then desire, when it is conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.

Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Know this, my beloved brothers.

Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger. For the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.

Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

[2 : 24] Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. Amen. Well now, as we come to learn from God's word together, let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we've just sung, we pray again that you would cleanse our sins, and renew our souls, and make your word our guide to heaven.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Please turn to James chapter 1. According to common folklore, there are two sorts of people in the world.

There are glass half full people and glass half empty people. Now, you may not be familiar with that idiom. Let me illustrate. Here is a glass.

It has water in with it. And one person may come along and say, there's half a glass of good stuff there. Actually, you're not sure what's in there, are you? Another person will come along and say, half of it's gone already.

[3 : 35] What a rubbish glass that is. Same glass, different attitude. Are you a half full person or a half empty person when it comes to life?

Last week, in the first part of James' letter, we learned that there are many things that are very difficult in life. Now, we all know this. We don't need the Bible to tell us this.

But we do need the Bible to tell us that there is a very good reason for a Christian to be profoundly a glass half full person when it comes to life, rather than a glass half empty person, not because life is any easier for a Christian, and not because you have to get good at pretending that life is good when you're a Christian when it isn't good, but because God has promised to those who love him that if they keep persevering through the difficulties of life, he will give them a crown of life at the end.

Chapter 1, verse 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.

What's more, it's not a matter just of grin and bear it, it'll be better in the end. God has promised that even the hardships of this world will, in the end, be used.

[5 : 07] God has promised that God will be used, somehow woven into the perfection that God will bring about for his children in the end. The hardships may be very hard indeed, much harder than you can see any purpose in.

And yet God is big enough that in the end, he will bring good out of evil. And what's more, says James, chapter 1, God promises that he's not angry that we find life difficult, and is glad to help when we come to him for help with such things.

Now, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ is the best example of this. There is no more wicked thing to do in the whole of the universe than to murder God come in the flesh.

There is nothing more unjust anywhere than that the sinless one should be declared guilty by a human court. But, in the end, even that wickedness will be used in God's plan to renew the whole of the created order.

There isn't worse wickedness and injustice, and there isn't greater generosity than that. God is very good at subverting evil and bringing good out of it in the end.

[6 : 31] So, there are profound reasons for the Christian to be optimistic, despite the fact that life is hard now. But there's also a warning in chapter 1 that you can be a, how shall I put it, an obtusely half-empty person.

What James called double-minded or two-souled. Looking at the trials of life in a worldly way and wanting the answers to the trials of life here and now. Make it nice now, God, or I won't trust you.

Do what I want you to do, and then I'll trust you. Now, this week we're going to look at what happens when we find ourselves heading in that direction, when trials become temptations.

Why is it there, this conflict in life? Why is it that having been promised a crown of life to come, why is it that we still long for everything to be straightened out right now?

Well, when this happens, says James, two forces are at work, competing for our allegiance. And the first of them is the sinful heart. Verse 13. Let no one say when he's tempted, I'm being tempted by God.

[7 : 50] For God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he's lured and enticed by his own desire.

Then desire, when it's conceived, gives birth to sin. And sin, when fully grown, brings forth death. James moves from what might be called testing, verse 12, to temptation, verse 13.

Actually, in the original, the word is the same, but our Bible does it right in translating them differently, because he's not talking about the same thing. In verse 12, we're talking about the difficult thing that happens.

In verse 13, we're talking about the human response to the difficult thing that happens. And in particular, to our tendency to respond wrongly to the trials that come our way in life.

The sinful heart does not always deal with life's trials in a trusting God's promises kind of way. The sinful heart so easily says, this is a difficult situation.

[8 : 59] I'm not happy with this. This is not what I signed up for. Therefore, I'm going to stop trusting God now. I'm jolly well not going to look at this with godly wisdom. I don't want to ask for God's help.

I want to be angry, for example, or bitter. I know that's not right. In fact, I know it's sinful. But if God wanted me to avoid sinning, then why did he bring all these things along to make me angry?

Now, let me give you a trivial illustration of this. I used to work in hospital, in medicine, and I used to spend quite a lot of time up late at night dealing with sick people.

And when one's up late at night and tired, and everybody else is up late at night and tired, you tend to rub one another up the wrong way. And I used to find myself from time to time getting angry inside, and experienced every time this inward dialogue.

Look, what's up with you then? I'm angry. Well, what are you angry about? Everything. Why don't you ask God for help?

[10 : 03] You know he always helps when you ask. I don't want to. I want to be angry. I've every right to be angry. I did not sign up for this being up late at night with these ill people thing. Actually, you did.

Look at your contract. Now, ask God for help. Every time I did not want to. And every time God did help.

Every time without fail. Now, that is a trivial example, and would be comic, really, if it weren't so typical of my response in every area of life.

I didn't sign up for this. Well, you did, actually. Remember Jesus' words? If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

You signed up for the cross-carrying everyday thing. You signed up for waiting for glory till the future, not now. Remember what God has promised you? I didn't sign up for this.

[11 : 05] That's what the sinful heart is like. It makes a claim, verse 13. God is tempting me to sin. If God didn't want me to sin, why did he put me in this situation?

And that is what human beings have done since the very beginning. Adam in Eden. What does Adam do when he sins in Eden? Of course, God, if you hadn't given me this woman, things would have all turned out quite differently.

And what does she do? Well, if you will let snakes into your garden, what can you expect? Shifting the blame down the line. It's all God's fault, really. Now, human experience is full of examples of this.

If God had wanted me to be cheerful rather than a grumbler, why did he let that disaster happen to me? If God had wanted me to be content, why did he make my financial circumstances so difficult? If God had wanted me to be kind and generous and faithful, why did he give me such a difficult spouse? If God had wanted me to love my Christian brothers and sisters, why did he bring these ones to church?

[12 : 16] In other words, there's no way God could expect me to be different from the way I feel like being right now. If he had, he'd never have put me in this situation. If he wants me to be godly, let him change things and then I'll trust him.

That's what verse 13 is all about. James says to that person, get a grip, snap out of it. God cannot be tempted by evil and he doesn't tempt anyone else to evil either.

He can't be leaned on to sin himself. He never leans on anyone to sin. He doesn't want you to fall into sin in this difficult situation. In fact, the desire to sin comes from ourselves.

Verse 14. Each person is tempted when he's lured and enticed by his own desire. In other words, if I find myself not being godly, it's me that's not being godly, not God.

If I find myself all bitter inside, it is not my circumstances that have made me that way. Let me say this just as gently as I possibly can.

[13 : 30] For there are many very difficult circumstances in life and you may be facing them. It is not the circumstance that makes us react like that.

It is us that makes us react like that. The claim of the sinful heart is that it's God's fault. And says James, not only does the sinful heart make claims, it produces children.

Verse 15. He goes on to describe the effect of that sinfulness when it grows up. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin.

And sin when fully grown brings forth death. It's characteristic of James in his letter to look down the road and see where something leads in the end if left unchecked.

And here he talks about it in family language. One thing produces a child and that produces another child. Desire when it's conceived gives birth to sin.

[14 : 40] That's the child it has. And sin when it grows up produces death. You see he looks at the little beginning. It's God's fault really. And sees where it goes in the end.

He looks at the little seed and sees not just the tree that grows from it, but the forest that the tree develops into.

And that's why this is such a penetrating letter. Because it looks at small things and sees big consequences and big destinies. And what he means is this.

That little desire. That little, what else could God expect of me in these circumstances? Leads to the very opposite of the crown of life that God has promised.

If it's allowed to grow up. There is then inside us this deceptive heart. This heart that does not want to persevere all the way to the end.

[15 : 40] Through whatever difficulty might come trusting in God's promise. That's one force. But wonderfully, there's another force at work in the Christian believer.

And that is the loving father himself. Verse 16. Don't be deceived, my beloved brothers. 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. Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth.

That we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures. Look what he says about God. Two things are mentioned about the loving father here.

First, his unchanging goodness. He's talking here about how God is the father of the lights. What he means is that God is the creator of the planets, the moon, the stars, the sun.

[16:42] What point is he making? Well, go outside in a dark, clear light and look up at the stars. And doesn't it make you feel small and temporary?

And you think to yourself how far away they are. They've always been there. Always the same. And yet, of course, they haven't always been there. And they're not always the same.

They change day by day. Their position in the sky changes relative to us. The appearance of the moon changes. Sometimes you can see it all. Sometimes it's in shadow. The sun changes. Sometimes it's there.

More often in Glasgow, it's not there. Sometimes it's cloudy and obscured. Sometimes there's an eclipse and the moon gets in the way. Even those most permanent things in the created order have all sorts of changes going on about them all the time.

The point that James is making here is that the one who made them doesn't change at all. He is unchangeably the giver of good gifts.

[17:44] Every good and perfect gift comes from the loving father. Why is he saying this here? Well, I don't think it's as an explanation for verse 13.

He's not saying, don't say God doesn't tempt because God always gives good. He's already implied that. Why does he emphasize God's unchanging goodness here? I think because God's unchanging goodness is the only antidote to the sinful heart that's described in verses 14 and 15. You may have felt, as we looked at verse 12, about the necessity of keeping going under trial. You may have thought, well, will I keep going?

And you may have thought, as we went through that last bit, verses 13 to 15, well, I do have that inward tendency to blame God for my sinfulness. How can I possibly respond rightly to the test of life?

And you may have thought, well, I'm finding it very hard at the moment to keep trusting God because of the things that are happening in life. How on earth am I going to keep going? I'm sure I must fall. Well, the only hope that you have, and the only hope that I have, is a God who unchangingly has the character of being a generous giver of good gifts.

[19:08] And one gift in particular, verse 18, his life-giving word. Of his own will, the Father has brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

The word of truth, the gospel message about Jesus, has given new life. Now, we've already come across the language of children and bearing children in this little passage in verse 15.

Here we come across it again, a different sort of birth. God the Father has brought his children forth by the word of life. He's brought them to birth.

It's God's gift, his generous gift, that he gives new life to his children. And that is tremendously good news. Because if I were left to myself, I would have the heart of verse 14 and be absolutely powerless to do anything about it.

God has chosen us, said James, with the purpose of making us specially his in the world. That's what this word first fruits is about. The people of Israel, when they had their harvests, had to bring the first bit of the harvest and dedicate that to God.

[20:33] It was the first fruits, the promise of something to come. And it's like that with God's children. Christians in this world are to be recognizable as specially God's possession.

Though in the end, of course, everything will be seen to be God's possession. God is such a generous giver of good gifts that despite the natural state of our hearts, he has injected life through the gospel message.

He is not a God who gives people things in order to make them sin. Quite the opposite. He is a God who steadily and generously gives people what they need to lead them to life.

Well then, what response does James want from those who are finding that the trials of life are leading to the temptation to say, well, it's God's fault.

If he hadn't done it, then I wouldn't be feeling like this. Well, the response is seen in verse 19 to 21. Know this, my beloved brothers.

[21 : 51] Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.

Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. What then should the response be in the difficulties of life?

Well, if God has given me new birth through the word of truth, do I need to worry about this dangerous, deceptive heart that I still find I have? Surely if God has given me new birth, then I've just got new birth, and it doesn't matter what I do or what will happen.

Well, that's sometimes the answer Christians have given, but it isn't the answer this part of the Bible gives. James has looked at the evil inside, and he's looked at the good gifts that God provides, and you find them both together in verse 21.

He says, put one away and receive the other. Therefore, verse 21, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

[23 : 12] The language is so strong here, filthiness, rampant wickedness, because if you remember, this is a letter written to Christians behaving badly. There is real wickedness going on here among James' readers.

The thing that needs to be received is the implanted word. And I take it he means you need to keep on receiving the gospel message that has already been implanted in you.

As a Christian, you don't just receive the good news of Jesus once at the beginning of the Christian life. That which God has planted in you and which has given you life, you need to keep on receiving. Keep on submitting to. Keep on taking to heart. Keep on trusting. Jesus is the Lord. The Lord Jesus is rightfully in charge of my life.

The work of the Lord Jesus is the only source of my forgiveness and cleansing. The presence of the Lord Jesus by his spirit is the only hope in my personal conflict with evil.

[24 : 23] The gospel message all the time turns me back to the Lord Jesus Christ as the only place where my sinfulness can be conquered. And the humble acceptance of the word which has already been implanted is vital if I'm to persevere and keep going to the end.

God has brought his people to new birth by the gospel and his gospel has the power to take us all the way to the end. He is a generous giver of what we need.

But you'll notice verse 21 is not just receive with meekness the implanted word. It's put all that other stuff away and receive with meekness the implanted word.

There's something that James wants his readers to know. Verse 19. Know this, my beloved brothers. Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness that God requires.

Now verse 19, the first bit, the know this, probably sits in the middle of what's gone before and what's coming after. Know this, God is a generous giver.

[25 : 43] Take note of that. But also note that we should be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. And this is interesting and important. So if it's been a long day for you and it's a hot evening and you're just beginning to nod off, now is the time to wake up and take notice.

What is odd about verses 19 to 21? Well, what's odd is this. James wants his readers, verse 21, to hear and receive God's gospel word.

But before he gets to that verse 19, he tells them that they need to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger with one another.

They need to be willing to listen to people. They need to be willing not only, or not always, to be the person who others are listening to.

This is typical James. There's a progression here, just as there was in verse 15. People who are poor listeners are often quick to speak and soon become angry.

[26 : 52] Isn't that observably the case in life? And people who are good listeners tend to be slow to speak and slow to become angry. One thing leads to another. And James looks at these people's behavior and sees in this disordered group of Christians people who are not good at listening to one another and very quick to speak.

And there's plenty of anger in this letter. And the question he's raising is this. Guys, if you won't listen to people, how will you suddenly turn into a person who listens to God?

Why focus on human speech here? Well, it's just one of James' very practical and penetrating ways of showing where we need to change. I don't think there's a Christian anywhere who doesn't think that listening to God's gospel isn't important.

But what James is showing here is that I may think that listening to God's gospel is important and yet not really do it. And the way I relate to people and what they have to say will say a great deal to me about my attitude to God and what he has to say.

And it's very characteristic of James that he sees human relationships as the testing ground for relationship with God. Look at whether I'm listening to my brothers and sisters and that'll tell you pretty well whether I'm listening to God.

[28 : 29] It just does. And the way we speak to one another and listen to one another is a very good sign of how things are between us and God.

I am very unlikely to be a good listener to the gospel if I'm a poor listener to my brothers and sisters. If I'm always talking to them and quickly getting angry with them, chances are I'm not listening to God at all even though I might think I am.

And more than that, if I've got bad attitudes to other people, they may stop me hearing the word of God. If I'm angry with my brothers and sisters, angry people by definition are unlikely to be listening. Nothing like anger between Christians to stop them listening to the word of God. Now my guess is that that's what the first part of verse 21 is about.

put away all that kind of stuff in relation to one another and receive with meekness the implanted word. If you do one, you'll be able to do the other.

[29 : 45] There's stuff that must be got rid of if God's gospel is going to be continually received by the Christian. Well, our time is gone.

Some closing reflections. I wonder if you're a person who, for whom trials may have become temptations.

It's common enough in life. Something has happened. A difficult event. Maybe something somebody has said or done to you. And you find yourself longing to respond badly.

Longing to hit back. not wanting to be anymore the person you know you ought to be before God. If you find yourself in a situation where, for you, trials have become temptations, there is, there is a way forward. And the way forward is simple, really, if it were only simple to do.

[30 : 51] Keep trusting God's goodness and keep receiving his gospel. Now, this is not a straightforward thing to do. If it were, we wouldn't need this letter in the Bible because it would be easy for everybody to do.

It's not a straightforward thing to do, to keep trusting God's goodness and keep receiving his gospel. But it is the necessary thing to do. Let me assure you, there is no other antidote anywhere in the universe to human sinfulness than the goodness of God and the forgiveness his gospel holds out.

There is no other antidote to the human problem. Sometimes, of course, the trials in life are made doubly difficult by the fact that the difficulties have come to you through God's people.

Again, that's what this letter assumes. that Christians are behaving badly towards one another.

Hurts at the hands of God's people are very painful indeed and very difficult to get over.

If they were easy, this letter would not have needed to be written. You may want to hit back. You may feel malice towards them.

[32 : 12] You may feel that God's character has forever been tarnished in your eyes because of the Christian's behavior. Well, if that's you, consider for a moment the Lord Jesus Christ, God, come in the flesh and murdered by his creatures.

The sinless one, falsely accused and falsely found guilty and executed, consider him for a moment. God knows from the inside the trials and traumas of being human. God has given himself the father, the generous gift of his son, the son willing to go to death on a cross to earn forgiveness for people just like us.

there is an antidote to the pains of the world, the goodness of God and the forgiveness that's held out in the gospel.

In the end, that'll transform everything, everywhere, for everyone, a crown of life for those who keep trusting him. Let me assure you, there is nowhere else to go in the universe for an antidote to your heart.

[33 : 42] let's pray together. Don't be deceived, my beloved brothers.

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.

Of his own will, he brought us forth by the word of truth. Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

Gracious God, we acknowledge that so often we find ourselves in life perplexed, troubled, traumatized by things that have happened to us, circumstances that we find ourselves in. And so often we find ourselves eager to lay the blame for our own reactions somewhere else and especially at your feet. God, we thank you for the reminder from this passage that you are unchangeably the giver of good things and especially the giver of a generous gospel to us, the giver of your son.

[35 : 18] And we pray that you would help us knowing this. instead of blaming you for our difficulties, receive with meekness the good news of Jesus, which is able to save us.

Help us to keep trusting you even when it's difficult. Help us to keep trusting your promises even though they're not yet fully unfolded.

Keep us in this hope, we pray, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.