**Know the Truth**

James 1:9-18

***Imagine you wake up in the hospital with amnesia.*** You don’t know WHO YOU ARE or where you are, and nobody knows you. Think how scary that would be, how disorienting! You don’t know your own name, where you’re from, what you do, whom to call… You are lost. You are alone. You are in trouble.

But then someone walks into your hospital room and when he sees you his eyes light up and he runs right up to you. **It’s your father**. He immediately clears everything up, let’s everyone know who you are, takes care of the medical bills and you feel totally comforted. In time your memory comes back and you remember who you are and what your place is in the family.

Think how absolutely **VITAL it is to know the truth**. If someone is confused about themselves and the world and God, they are truly lost. As some people say when looking at a map, “I don’t know which way is UP.” The only way to get un-lost is to figure out where you ARE and where you are GOING. What we’ll see in this part of James is the truth about US - where we are; and the truth about God (where we are going). First:

**The Truth about Us:**

* The poor and humble are **Better off**

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation.” James 1:9-10

Here James introduces a theme he will come back to over and over in his short letter - **poverty and wealth**. And immediately James, like his brother Jesus, turns things upside down. He takes the typical understanding - that rich people are better off - and flips it on its head.

“Let the lowly brother - the poor man - boast in his exaltation.” Remember Jesus is the one who said, “Blessed are the poor in Spirit” (that was in Matthew 5) and also “Blessed are you who are poor” (that was in Luke 6).

Now, let’s ask ourselves **if we REALLY believe Jesus** (and James) on this point. Look at the way Jesus said it in Luke 6.

* The poor and humble are **Better off**

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven… But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” Luke 6:20,24

There are actually four blessings and four woes here. Jesus says ***the blessed ones are the poor, hungry, sad rejects***, and the ones in danger are the rich, fat, happy and cool. That’s my translation. Today we don’t think fat is cool but we do like to be well fed, don’t we?

So let’s consider what we REALLY believe. We say we believe in Jesus, right? Do we really believe what He taught us?

**Luke 6:20-26**

| **Blessed are you…** | **Woe to you…** |
| --- | --- |
| * Who are poor
* Who are hungry now
* Who weep now
* Who are hated
 | * Who are rich
* Who are well fed now
* Who laugh now
* Who are celebrated
 |

* Are those who are poor - monetarily poor - better off?
* Are those who are hungry now, better off?
* Are those who are sad and struggling now, better off?
* Are those who are persecuted and rejected for Jesus’s name, better off?

Jesus says, straight up, that they are. ***Do we believe Him?***

The key word in this passage is **NOW**. Are we looking for all of our happiness and blessing NOW - in this life - or are we storing up treasure in heaven, for eternal life?

I bet we are all sitting here thinking the same thing in our middle class American suburban church. ***We are geniuses because we can have it both ways.*** Yes, we are rich by all standards - if you look at the whole world we are all filthy rich. Even if you just compare us with other Americans, most of us are very well off. But that’s ok - Jesus and James are warning OTHER rich people, not us. We are fine, because we are saved. So we are blessed in both ways - physically AND spiritually. Go us!

**The Truth about Us:**

* The poor and humble are **Better off**

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation.” James 1:9-10

James is thinking about two people in the same church family. One is poor, the other is rich. The poor one, James says, is the one who should boast - because HE is the one who is better off. “Ha ha! Sucka! It’s all me! I own you!” That is some really bad trash talk.

***The rich person should be all meek and humble***, deferring to the poor man, asking for grace and understanding, “Please be patient with me and my small, weak faith.” This is so backwards to our culture. We assume rich is better. Wealthy is blessed. Poor is sad and to be pitied.

But in God’s kingdom there is a blessing for the poor and a warning for the rich.

**The Truth about Us:**

* The rich and powerful are in **Grave Danger**

“And the rich in his humiliation because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.” James 1:10

The wealthy person is instructed here to BOAST in his humiliation - his low status. To see ***how insignificiant money is*** when it comes to importance in the kingdom and true spiritual power. This is why it’s hard for a rich person to get saved in the first place. Easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than to get a rich person into heaven. In other words: it can’t be done. Yes, God does miracles, but usually wealthy, affluence people are not the recipients of these miracles because they don’t think they need them.

And it’s not just about getting saved, it’s about ***your place in the church***. Again, this is so backwards. Usually successful, more wealthy people are the ones who get nominated for leadership roles and who tend to speak the loudest. Because in the world, everyone listens to them. But in the church - James says - the rich should be especially quiet, deferring to the poor people who have stronger faith and, usually, a deeper connection with God.

Look ahead to James 5 for a **scathing warning to the rich**. James gives a preview of that warning here in chapter one, and he will come back to money over and over in this letter. The point for now as we define reality and know the truth about ourselves is that we need to see clearly that poor people are better off and rich people are in grave danger. Grave. You see what I did there? Serious, deadly, soul-threatening danger. Why? Because they are about to pass away. Blink and they will be gone. And that’s the third truth about us.

**The Truth about Us:**

* All of us will enter eternity very **Soon**

“For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower falls and its beauty perishes…” James 1:11

Now this is still primarily directed at the rich, but it does apply to everyone with the basic truism that life is short. ***This life is a morning mist.*** We are like grass that withers in a day - not even like a plant that could make it a few weeks - just like a flower that will shrivel up and die the next day.

Moses prays in Psalm 90, ***“Teach us to number our days that we might gain a heart of wisdom.”*** Wisdom is found in recognizing how short this life is and how very, very long ETERNITY is. If we get this perspective wrong our values and priorities, our purposes and plans will all be upside down. We will run the risk of trying to gain the whole world while neglecting or even forfeiting our eternal souls. One more truth about us.

**The Truth about Us:**

* Our problem is not God or suffering but **Ourselves**

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life…” James 1:12

From Psalm 90 James takes us back to **Psalm 1**. Who is the blessed one? Who will flourish like a tree by streams of water? And who will wither and shrivel up and be blown away like chaff in the wind? The wicked are those who hang out with fools and scoffers who mock spiritual things and chase after sex, money and power. The wise person God blesses stays away from fools like that and instead meditates on God’s Law, digging the roots of his heart and mind deep into a relationship with God.

That is how to be strong through trials - to **be rooted in God, not in this world**. That is how to receive the crown of life now and forever. Remain steadfast under trial. Trust in the promises of God.

* Our problem is not God or suffering but **Ourselves**

“When he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life God has promised to those who love him.” James 1:12

The promise of eternal reward is for those who LOVE GOD - not the world.

***What does your heart really love?*** I’m sure we would all be quick to say we love God. But we do appreciate having money in the bank don’t we? We do enjoy our air conditioned homes and our nicely running cars. We do like having healthy, well educated, obedient children. We do seek after successful careers, promotions and a higher standard of living. In other words, we are Americans. And that means the water we swim in is the culture of the American Dream. We are, just by being 21st C. Americans - rich, fat, happy and cool.

And that means all of these warnings are aimed directly at us and we ignore them at our own peril. ***But God is gracious to let us go through trials and tribulations to loosen our grip on this world and tighten our hold on Him.***

In the midst of deep personal suffering we will struggle to define the heart of the problem because at first we will think the problem is the suffering itself and we will do everything we can to get out of it. ***I, for one, do not tolerate pain at all if I can avoid it.*** First sign of a headache I’m taking tylenol and laying down. Immediately. When I ruptured my achilles - both of them, two years apart - I was a complete baby. I took all the painkillers until they were gone. Why did the doctor give them to me if not to take them? Did I pretty much sleep for a week? Yes. Was that better than being in pain, definitely. The second time had we just moved 800 miles to a new city and a new job and was my wife six months pregnant. Unfortunately for her, yes. But I still took those pain meds.

***We are FIXERS. We want solutions.*** Our knee-jerk reaction when we face a problem is to fix the problem. So what do you do when there is no fix to your problem? When someone has died. Or has a terminal illness. Or has a chronic, untreatable condition. Or can’t work anymore. Or is battling deep depression.

We know verses like this, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial.” And earlier in this chapter, “Count it all joy when you face trials of various kinds.” Or Romans 8:28, “God works all things together for good.” We know all that. But in the moment ***we usually diagnose the problem first as the suffering itself***. And when that doesn’t work we shift the target to God.

* Our problem is not God or suffering but **Ourselves**

“Let no one say when he is temped, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.” James 1:13

This is a really important verse. ***God is not the author of evil and suffering.*** The reason we have evil and suffering in this world is first Adam and second the devil. Not God. God is the one working to redeem all evil and suffering and who has promised to restore all things in the end. He is the One working in us even as things happen to us.

It is so important that we get the diagnosis right so we apply the proper treatment. God is not your problem, though when you’re in pain you will become convinced that He is.

I’ll pick on **Mike Atherton** for a minute here. He’s been a part of the church family here for most of my seven years. Mike and his family were in a terrible boat explosion out in the Bay in 2009. All six adults on the boat were seriously injured and a couple of them came very close to death, including Mike. The children, thankfully, were farther from the blast and were not hurt.

After a long surgery that saved his life - and really 100 other miracles that saved those six adults - Mike had to adjust to life without either leg and without his dominant left arm. Since he had spent 10 years as a pole climber for the electric company and was also a competitive water skier, nothing in his life was the same. He sums up the story that he spiraled into five years of depression and a lot of anger directed at God.

Put yourself in Mike’s place. ***Who do you blame?*** They never did figure out what caused the boat to explode. The engine wasn’t running. There was no manufacturer to go after; no person to prosecute. So the only One left to accuse - was God. Why would you let this happen? Why us? Why me? Ask Mike about it sometime.

In the end, it was that boat explosion that ended up leading Mike back to the Lord he had known in his childhood. It wasn’t that God was tempting him or punishing him, ***God was calling him home.***

“God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts NO ONE.” God is not tempting you now. He is not punishing you now. Whatever you are going through, the problem is not the suffering or God. ***The problem is inside of you.***

* Our problem is not God or suffering but **Ourselves**

“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” James 1:14

This is where temptation comes from - **our own hearts; our own desires**. Jeremiah tells us that “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9). Now look at the progression, rooted in evil, selfish desires.

* Our problem is not God or suffering but **Ourselves**

“Desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is full grown brings forth death.” Jame 1:15

This is a gruesome picture of the conception and life cycle of sin, like some disgusting harry monster or ***demi-gorgon that starts small*** but keeps growing until it starts trying to kill you.

The aim of sin is always the same: **its goal is to destroy you** and everyone around you. Our desires may seem small and innocent, but they grow into something much bigger and more deadly.

So here is:

**The Truth about Us:**

* The poor and humble are **Better off**
* The rich and powerful are in **Grave danger**
* All of us will enter eternity very **Soon**
* Our problem is not God or suffering but **Ourselves**

These foundational truths run exactly ***opposite to what we would all conclude on our own***. Our default assumption is that being rich and assertive is way better than being poor and humble. Our base understanding is that this life will last a long time and there is always more time to be had. And our usual diagnosis is that the problem is the suffering itself or God Himself. No one wants to admit that the real problem is you.

Now let’s turn our attention from ourselves to God.

**The Truth about God:**

* God exalts the humble and **Humbles** the proud

“Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation.” James 1:9-10

If the poor person is supposed to boast in his exalted status and the rich person is supposed to boast in his humble status, ***who is doing the exalting and the humbling*** in this equation? Obviously it is God who is responsible to take care of it. And we read that explicitly elsewhere in this letter.

**The Truth about God:**

* God exalts the humble and **Humbles** the proud

“‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ …Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.” James 4:6,10

James quotes Proverbs 3:34 and Jesus. On three occasions Jesus said, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12; Lk. 14:11, 18:14). Obviously it is **God who will do this humbling and exalting**.

***This is generally true as in the Proverbs*** - arrogant jerks will get what is coming to them. Jesus basically explained it that way with reference to seating arrangements at a banquet. It’s better to take a bad seat and have the host move you up than to take a good seat and have the host come over to move you down. Try to promote yourself and you’ll be seen as a self-promoter and that will backfire on you.

But this is also **true spiritually in the deepest sense**. The only way to be saved in the first place is to humble yourself and admit that you don’t deserve to be saved. As Indiana Jones learned in the nick of time - “only the penitent man shall pass.” On your knees. Or get your head chopped off. In order to call on Jesus to save you, you have to recognize that you need saving, that you need to be forgiven. Humility is required to confess your sins and turn from them in repentance.

But that is just the beginning. ***The principle applies throughout our Christian lives.*** We only grow and mature to the extent that we humble ourselves.

* In order **to pray** you have to be humble enough to recognize that you need help and strength and guidance from the Lord.
* In order **to read the Bible** you have to be humble enough to listen to the Lord and submit yourself to His Word.
* In order **to connect with other believers** you have to be humble enough to realize that you need encouragement and prayer from others.
* In order **to store up treasure in heaven** you have to be humble enough to give away your time, money, effort and energy in service to others.

***Humility is the cornerstone virtue for all other Christian virtues.*** With humility, love, joy, peace, patience and everything else will grow because God will supply them. Without humility, none of the other virtues will grow because humility is the soil required.

Along with this truth about God comes the next one.

**The Truth about God:**

* God **Rewards** those who love Him

“Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial… he will receive the crown of life.” James 1:12

God has promised eternal treasure, spiritual reward for all who love and trust in Him. God has promised BLESSING to those who follow His way. Remember ***how Moses ended Deuteronomy in his final speech to Israel***. “I set before you today life and blessing, death and curses. Now choose life!”

From the very beginning ***God pronounced BLESSING on Adam and Eve*** and everything else in His good creation. But God also spoke a warning to the man and woman about the one tree that was off limits to them. They had the same reality before them that the Jews had under Moses. Choose life and blessing by following God’s rules, or choose death and curses if you break God’s rules.

***Do you believe that God exalts the humble and rewards those who love Him?*** Or do you really NOT believe in these promises of God which leads you to exalt YOURSELF and seek rewards HERE AND NOW in this life? That is certainly what we see in the world - people protecting their own interests and fighting for their own advancement. The way of Jesus runs exactly opposite to the normal human desires and tendencies. Third truth about God:

**The Truth about God:**

* God is completely and constantly **Good**

“God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one.” James 1:13

When we try to determine the source of temptation and sin there is one place we can immediately rule out. **GOD is never the source of evil or temptation.** As the source of all goodness and life and holiness, God is not capable of being tempted by evil any more than light can be tarnished by darkness. By extension, God himself does not tempt anyone. In other words, God never entices you to sin. He is not the one luring you into unfaithfulness or untruthfulness or compromise of any kind.

We saw earlier, those desires come from WITHIN YOU and are used and targeted and manipulated by the devil and his demons. But God is not involved in that temptation process. Whatever you are going through right now, if you are feeling desires to do something unkind or impure or in any way not right ***you can be sure those feelings are not from God.*** You can’t be 100% sure they’re from the devil because they might well just be from your own selfish, sinful heart. But they are 100% not from God.

***God is completely, unchangingly, perfectly GOOD.*** He is the definition of goodness, holiness, righteousness and light. We’ll get to verse 17 in a minute but James states it beautifully - God is the Father of LIGHTS and in Him there is no variation or shadow due to change. Or in the old NIV, ***“He does not change like shifting shadows.”***

In theological terms, **God is IMMUTABLE**. He does not change and He cannot change because He is PERFECT. If perfection changed it would immediately become less than perfect. But God is absolutely perfect and part of that perfection is that He is eternally unchangeABLE. And that should make our hearts sing with praise. Everything in this world is constantly changing - totally unpredictable. Every person we know does change like shifting shadows. There is no human being we can completely trust.

***But God is completely good and constantly good and unchangably GOOD.*** So we can trust Him 100%, without reservation. He has promised to love us and be with us and forgive us and accept us FOREVER.

Along with His goodness, we see His generosity:

**The Truth about God:**

* God is abundantly **Generous**

“Every good gift and every perfect gift are from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” James 1:17

God is never the source of temptation but ***He is ALWAYS the source of blessing***. Every good thing in your life is from the Lord. Every good person, every encouraging event, every positive experience, every special ability, every timely provision, every helpful resource - EVERYTHING good in your life is a gift from the Father’s hand.

God is not just generous, He is abundantly, infinitely overflowing with generosity.

People who argue that there cannot be a God because there is so much evil and suffering in the world never look at it the other way. ***Why do so many GOOD THINGS happen to such BAD PEOPLE?***

The reality is that the sun shines on the righteous and the wicked. The rain falls on good people and bad people. Yes, earthquakes and tsunamis and tornadoes and hurricanes cause damage and harm. But just look around to see the abundance of life in the oceans and forests, the jungles and savannas. Look at the 73,000 species of TREES in the world and over 300,000 species of FLOWER. 34,000 species of fish and 10,000 species of birds. ***Everywhere you look you can see the generosity and creativity of God.*** Especially in Florida. It’s much grayer and more bland up north. But even those cold pagans can see the generous hand of God if only through the provision of things like space heaters and warm mittens.

One more truth about God.

**The Truth about God:**

* God is **Graciously** working in us

“Of his own will be brought us forth by the word of truth that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” James 1:18

**God created you uniquely and intentionally**, fashioning you in your mother’s womb. And if you belong to Jesus by faith God re-created you when you were born again, changing your heart and filling you with His Spirit at the moment of your salvation. He brought us forth by His own WORD of sovereign decree. Simply according to the pleasure of His will.

***Why did God choose us and not others?*** That is the mystery of His grace. I can tell you that it wasn’t that we are the best looking or smartest or most deserving. If anything it’s the other way around.

Why did God choose us and save us? ***“As a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”*** That’s an agricultural metaphor mixed with a biological one. Firstfruits were the product of the start of harvest season. You would take some of your first ingathering and offer it to the Lord as a sacrifice of thanksgiving.

***Your life is meant to be a sacrifice of praise to the Lord***. God gave you everything, so you present yourself back to Him as a living sacrifice - an offering of firstfruits to be freely presented to the Lord, before the final harvest of the whole world.

So here is our summary for today:

| **The Truth about us:** | **The Truth about God:** |
| --- | --- |
| * The poor and humble are **Better off**
* The rich and powerful are in **Grave danger**
* All of us will enter eternity very **Soon**
* Our problem is not God or suffering but **Ourselves**
 | * God exalts the humble and **Humbles** the proud
* God **Rewards** those who love Him
* God is completely and constantly **Good**
* God is abundantly **Generous**
* God is **Graciously** working in us
 |

***In order to understand your life and this world***, you have to know the truth about yourself and about God. These are upside down kingdom revelations. It appears to us that the rich, well fed, happy and cool are blessed - but the Bible gives warning after warning to those with material things, success and popularity. And the Bible says that those who suffer and struggle now - for Jesus - are actually the blessed ones.

The fact is that eternity is coming very soon for all of us. This life is an eye blink. Eternity is a long time. So our problem is not pain or suffering - and it is certainly not God. Our main problems come from inside our own hearts. When we recognize that truth about ourselves, it prepares us to humble ourselves before the Lord and trust Him to reward us. God is perfectly GOOD and absolutely unchanging. He is overflowing with generosity. The question is not “why do bad things happen to good people?” but “why do good things happen to bad people?”

The answer is that ***God is GOOD and generous and loving*** and graciously working in all of us through His Word and for His glory, according to His sovereign purposes.

So brothers and sisters - know the truth: about yourself and about God!

Let’s pray.