

DAY ONE

James 1:1-4

Whatever the trial or difficulty, consider it joy?

Imagine your brother walking up to your prison bars and saying from freedom's side, "consider it all joy". Imagine him texting this trite little phrase to you while you're still in the funeral procession, or whispering it from the other bed in the hospital room after the doctor just used the word "terminal", or saying it with one arm around your shoulder as you both watch your house burn to the ground, or writing it on the same envelope your spouse served your divorce papers in. Count it all joy.

The question isn't whether or not you would punch him.

The question is on which part of his face, and how many times.

The only way you could feel remotely positive about this annoying bit of Dear Abby-ing is if your brother had the experiential authority to say it.

James is Jesus' brother. Yet, instead of saying "James, the brother of Jesus Christ", he refers to himself as a bondservant or slave of God and the Lord. And he chooses the Greek word "doulos" for slave- the lowest form of servant hood that carried with it the most derogatory connotation. James is more than in full association with Jesus; he's in full submission. He knows who his half-brother turned out to be, and how the story of our difficulties turns out if endured with Him at the helm. James is completely sold out. He's seen extreme familial and social tension work all the way out. He's seen sickness completely reversed. He's seen terribly difficult, evil people, become heroes. He's seen persecution and pain further good and beauty. He's even seen bloody crucifixions end in love and life for all.

On this experiential authority, our brother James, our mutual brother and bondservant of Jesus, says, "whatever you're facing, no matter where you are- trust me: consider it joy." Not because he believes that being spiritual means adopting a Pollyanna view of real difficulty, but because he knows firsthand that in Christ, difficulties equal our growth and betterment, and that not even death itself has the last word. Our job is to endure and see it through.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 NIV

How much do external circumstances determine your personality? How does trusting and enduring in the ability of James' big Brother change things today?

Allow God to draw your attention to all the ways you run from difficulty, and how you unconsciously view a lack of ease with a lack of closeness with God. As those things come to mind, allow James' words, and Christ's life, to remind you that difficulty is the path to growth. That often times the only way out is through. And that not even death has the last word anymore.

from Jim

DAY TWO

James 1:5-8

So which is it? Does God give wisdom generously, without reproach and fault-finding, or does he give it with restriction: only to those who don't suffer from a case of instability and double-mindedness?

"Double-minded" is translated into English from the Greek word "di-psycho". It doesn't take a Greek scholar to get the sense of it: The person James is referencing has two minds.

Know anyone like that? The person she is at home and the person she is at church are different people. The man he is tonight is different than the man he was last night. These people act one way at work, and yet another way everywhere else. They aren't just adjusting to their environment with different facets of the same personality. Unfortunately, it's hypocrisy. It is, essentially, acting. And you never know who they are going to be when it matters most, because they are whomever they need to be to maintain the illusion of control in their own fear-filled life.

And as a result, they are two.

But God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Not two. Not three. Not improving at being God today compared to who he was yesterday. And not in a bad mood tonight because his team lost. And not short-tempered because of lack of sleep and not feeling forced to compromise out of social fear.

He is one. He is whole. He is. And this oneness is great news, because we have this oneness to trust with our whole lives.

When we ask God for wisdom-for-living, especially when it's wisdom for living in the middle of various difficulties such as discussed yesterday in verses 1-4, the idea is that we would actually expect God to provide. To actually teach us how to, despite the circumstances, really thrive. Jesus-style thriving. Unfortunately, we often resort to a lack of oneness or integrity (by the way, integrity comes from the word integer; a complete, whole number) that's rooted in our fears and instabilities. We fragment in hopes to be or do whatever it takes to save ourselves. So, even as we pray, we're already concocting our "real" plan, with our self as lord. The prayer of the double-minded man or woman is in this case obligatory, because in reality it has already been determined that the path to be taken is entirely up to human ingenuity. This is the sort of doubting James speaks of. Not doubting in general, but a doubt that has already rendered God a powerless but necessary check-box in a life resolved to live on its own terms.

But God wants us to have oneness, not only with each other, but within ourselves. And so praying to God while simultaneously resolving to do things our own way renders our prayer just frustratingly empty words. That's why we shouldn't expect to receive anything, because we're not really asking. Praying because we feel like we're supposed to is different than praying because we are seeking to make God the Lord (master!) of the whole of our life.

Maybe you feel like you're in the middle of a crisis. Maybe you just recognize you want God's guidance for life. Will you ask God for His wisdom today and for as many days as it takes? Will you admit your hang-ups with His total leadership over you, yet submit to it, disallowing yourself to continue quietly leading your own life, your way? And if you feel the "other mind" rolling its eyes and trying to make plans based on a suspicion that you'll never be safe in a world where you have to give up control, tell it to pray too.

from Jim

DAY THREE

James 1:9-11

Years before this, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began his message by flipping a lot of socially accepted norms on their heads:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth...” Matthew 5:3-5

Jesus wasn't saying that the way to blessing is to become poor, sad and meek. He's saying that the Kingdom of God doesn't rate things the way that the kingdoms of humanity do. It's what some call, as a result, an upside-down Kingdom.

The first will be last.

The least will be greatest.

The humble are exalted while the proud are, well...humbled.

James had heard this upside-down beauty for the better part of his life, and watched as Jesus gave himself to those with no voice, those who had lost their dignity, those who lived under the feet of the strong in society. Jesus put children on his knee, sinners at his table and lepers in his arms. So James says nothing new here at all. He reminds his brothers and sisters not to fall back into an old evaluation of people and achievement and hierarchy, but to remember that God flipped it all over with the condescension of His son. Let those who are low in this world's eyes, who have it tough no matter how hard they try, who are easiest to ignore and abandon and dismiss by those that assume heaven shines only on those at the top of the food-chain- let them enjoy the fact that they are brothers of the Messiah who stooped and washed feet. And for those that think this Kingdom of God runs off the same power grid as the kingdoms of men, may they celebrate the day that they realize the flowers blooming on their achievements are nothing more than tomorrow's compost, and that God loved them before they achieved a thing.

Consider today that there is nothing wrong with strength, resources...even power. Solomon was made powerful, rich and influential by God himself. Ask yourself though if these things, or the pursuit of them, defines you. If so, what would it look like to turn from that pursuit, in humility, and become someone who is defined by the character of Christ, regardless of the position in society that elevates or relegates you to. What would it mean to see others, in far better or worse circumstances than yourself, as equal? Or, perhaps even greater than yourself? God doesn't define us by our possessions, achievements or lack thereof. Therefore, we are invited to see ourselves and others through the eyes of Love which shows no favoritism, and remains unmoved by the things we try to impress each other with.

Believers in humble circumstances should not take pride in their high position. But the rich should take pride in their humiliation - since they will pass away like a wild flower. For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant, its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.

from Jim

DAY FOUR

James 1:12-18

"Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created."

Temptation is not a sin.

The very sinless Jesus was tempted, and that's all the proof we need that there's no sin in temptation. We do not sin when we're feeling drawn into engaging in thoughts, behaviors or attitudes that are misaligned with God's Kingdom. Sin occurs, when we surrender to it.

Being "dragged away" by sin is an interesting picture. You might be thinking of it as being tied up with a rope and dragged. But, that would make the tempted one an involuntary victim of a kidnapping- essentially an innocent abductee of temptation, having no escape from the negative results. Being an involuntary victim can't be a sin. Instead, think of the dragging as happening by way of holding hands. At any moment, releasing your grip on temptation's hand, means the dragging and enticing comes to a halt. But the dragging starts over the very moment you interlock your fingers with it again. And the thing about temptation, as it says in James 1:15 is that it is always willing and eager to walk hand-in-hand with us back to its hotel room and consummate the relationship. So what starts off as merely an idea, a mere desire, has now conceived. And it gives birth to full-blown reality.

Now it's sin.

A kingdom bruising, others-injuring, self-ruining sin. And the child of that union, grows up to become some measure of death; something leveled against the life God wants us to have (John 10:10). "Do not be deceived" is the very next sentence James writes. That's the issue. When we're tempted, we fail to hear God's voice or even the guide of our own conscious. Nothing matters but impulse. It's total deceit. Perhaps for you it's sexual. Perhaps it's revenge. Perhaps it's gossip. Theft. Lies. Abuse. Addiction. Corner cutting. Back-stabbing. Cowardice. Whatever it is, it feels like the easy road. Its hand is warm and inviting and it's promising a better moment just a block away. Just don't let go. Go with your gut and enjoy yourself. You've earned it. No one will know. Our brother warns us that this seemingly innocuous temptation will conceive and give birth to death. The guilt we will have, the destruction of trust, the ruining of a relationship, a career, our name. Death wants to be born. In order to avert that, you must let go of its hand, and grab the hand of Christ. Over and over, perhaps a thousand times a day, we must let go of one hand and grab Another's.

Will you let go of the hand that drags you and hold the one that seeks to lead you into life today?

Will you admit to someone else today the handholding you have been doing and ask for help?

Will you trust, as James says, that our unchanging God, who cannot be tempted to become something other than what He is, wants to give you every good and perfect gift. He wants to lead you away from death and into life. But you can't hold his hand, if you're being dragged by another.

from Jim

DAY FIVE

James 1:19-27

"My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it - not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it - they will be blessed in what they do. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Consider reading this passage twice. What's the theme that most stands out as you read it? Maybe you have a top three: put them in order. You can learn a lot about how you see yourself and even what God wants to work on in you by noticing what seems to yell loudest in such a full passage as James 1:19-27.

Are you quick to speak?

How's your anger?

Is your "religion" the kind God is after?

Do you wish you did more with your faith than talk about it, but aren't sure what to do? Is your mouth out of control? What comes to mind as you read verse 21 (Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you)?

Any sense of disgust or condemnation you feel doesn't come from God (Romans 8:1).

You may very well feel uncomfortable. Yep- that could be God. Change can be excruciating. But it doesn't come with the wrinkled nose of disgust and condemnation on God's face. His disappointment for the junk we settle for is the heart of a caring father, not the vindictiveness of a tyrant's enforced holiness-code. So, any sense of rejecting condemnation may be your perception of God, your parents, a pastor- but not actually God. So, without the sense that God's love for you is hanging, conditionally, in the balance, listen for God's voice in this passage and see what he brings to the front of your mind. Then, with all your trust, courage and sincerity, do what you sense Him telling you to do (or to stop doing). "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like."

Today, if even for the first time, listen, trust and do. Don't forget the face of reality and leave this moment stuck exclusively in your "study/prayer time".

In every moment: Hear, and do

from Jim