

Faith in the Marketplace: Pursued by Happiness

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] What we're looking at today is a passage from the first epistle of, well it's not the first, it's the only epistle of James. And it's the first four verses.

And they read like this. James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greeting.

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness, and let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Perhaps I could just ask you to bow your heads with me, and I'd just like to pray as we begin. God, we thank you for this place, we thank you for this city, and we ask that as we try to hear your word in the midst of the city, and in the midst of the circumstances of our life, you by your Holy Spirit will work in us, and give to us ears to hear and hearts to obey the things that you have to tell us.

Through your word, we ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Now, we've just completed a fairly, well, a series of six talks on Matthew chapter 5, and all of them were the six formula sayings where Christ said, you have heard that it was said unto you, but I say unto you.

[1 : 44] And he used the contrast of the one with the other. And he went through the six things, and he identified as basic human issues that have to be dealt with by law, these things, and I'll just give them to you in series.

He said, thou shalt not kill, but anger was the issue he was getting at. Thou shalt not commit adultery, and lust was the problem he was getting at.

He went after divorce, too. And the more I think about it, the more I think this ties in with what I want to say today. I think that there is a kind of basic spiritual principle that healing takes place when you divide.

And I think Christ is saying here that healing doesn't take place that way. But we'll go on to that in what comes on a little later. Then he dealt with the problem of swearing, and really dealt with the problem of lying.

And then he dealt with the problem of violence, and how it comes up in our society. And then he dealt with the problem of relationships, and how we relate to our friends and enemies.

[3 : 04] So that he gave us this agenda. Now, what he said about this agenda was that when you have this process, you have a fairly consistent picture of what goes on in our world.

That most of what we occupy our time with each day, the things that become problems for us, come from the area of anger, lust, divorce, lying, violence, and relationships.

So he says, this is the agenda that you're to work on. Now, what happens is that when the world works on it, it says, well, it's too bad these things happen, but we have to rationalize them over here.

And so we make excuses, and we rationalize the law in order that we can live comfortably with it. But then Christ comes along and says, no, it's not a matter of rationalizing it.

It's a matter of fulfilling it. Discovering in the circumstances of your life how you can fulfill the purposes for which the law was given.

[4 : 15] That we don't give in to anger. We don't accommodate lust. We don't accept the principle of divorce. We speak the truth.

We avoid violence. And we major on relationships. And so those six things become, in a sense, the agenda of our lives, in that they recur so often in our lives that most of what happens to us comes under one or other headings of this.

And Jesus says, I want you to work on that. Well, now, in order to tell you this, this is the thing that he says about us.

He says that we are people like this and that the pressures on us are always what you call tearing us apart.

That is, the effect of the world on us is always to tear us apart, to pull us in various directions.

[5 : 21] So that when he writes this letter, he says, James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in dispersion. The impact of the gospel on Jerusalem was so profound that within a very short time, persecution started and the Christians were scattered all over the Mediterranean world as they fled the persecution, which began with the stoning of James in Jerusalem.

So he said the Christians are in dispersion. They are nevertheless, and he uses this Old Testament picture to give you the reality that even in dispersion, the Christians are together because he calls them the twelve tribes in the dispersion.

In other words, they still have an identity, one with another, even though they are shot all over the map by this process of persecution. Well, then he takes the same picture of dispersion and says, and that's what happens in our lives, too.

So he says in verse 2, count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials. Now, what a trial does to you is to try and tear you apart, to, in a sense, explode you, so that you have these trials pulling on you and you're going in so many directions at once that you just don't know how to cope with your life.

You don't know how to get it together. And you soon arrive at the place where you resign yourself to the fact that you can't get it together.

[6 : 59] And a memorable nursery rhyme reminds you of this problem when it talks about Humpty Dumpty sitting on the wall and Humpty Dumpty having a great fall and all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

That this is what happens to us, that we're pulled in so many directions by such powerful forces in our world that we are smashed like Humpty Dumpty falling off the wall.

And there are no human resources that we can summon that will put us back together again. We can try and get put together again, and we can patch up and mend and do various things.

But the effect of living in our kind of world is that we are smashed by the forces that are pulling us apart all the time. These are the various trials that he talks about.

He says, count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, when you meet these forces that are pulling you apart. Now, if you go back in this direction here, these are the kind of forces he's talking about.

[8 : 14] The kind of forces. But while you may be able to regard with some objectivity, you need to interpret these forces in terms of the events of your personal life.

That is, how these things work out in the circumstances of your personal biography. Because all of us are aware of them, and all of us are aware of them being at work.

And that's why I said that I think divorce is a great kind of New Testament principle, and that is that tearing apart is not what God is about, but putting back together is what God is about.

So that in a sense, divorce is a kind of secular sacrament in the midst of our society, demonstrating what's happening. Not demonstrating what's happening just to the people who may be involved in it, but demonstrating what's happening in all of us.

And that is, we're being torn apart. We're being torn from one another. Relationships are breaking down, and this kind of thing is happening to us. We are being torn apart.

[9 : 18] Now, when James starts his letter, he says, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, when you meet various trials, because the same forces that are pulling us apart are the things that, if you can in some way reverse the process of them, you can put things back together again.

So the same, it's not a matter of escaping these forces. It's not a matter of living outside the range of these forces, outside the gravitational pull of these forces.

We're all caught in them. But a totally different process can go on within these various trials, trials, and that's why James writes and says, count it all joy when you meet various trials, because, he says, something else can happen.

Now, of course, what he's doing in saying, count it all joy when you meet various trials, what he's doing is saying to us that this is, of course, the path that Jesus Christ, our Lord, walked.

He became subject to these various trials. He was torn apart by them, by the arguments with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, by the concerns of the high priest and the Sanhedrin, by the Roman law, by all the people were constantly tearing at him and pulling him apart, so that when Paul writes about him, he writes in the most dramatic terms and says, he who was in the form of God thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but became of no reputation, subjected himself to these forces, and became, as a man, became obedient unto death, the thing that finally tears us to pieces, you know, tears us right down the middle, the fact of death, and he became subject to these, and so that when we're feeling this same force, we're feeling what it was like in a supreme way for Jesus Christ to be in our world and subject to these forces.

[11 : 42] That's how James describes it when he says, count it all joy. The joy is not, as you can see, a frivolous kind of joy.

It's not the American Declaration of Independence pursuit of happiness. It's the breakthrough of the understanding that in the midst of suffering, there is purpose, and that that purpose is an eternal purpose of God so that in the midst of the suffering, you can count it all joy.

And joy, as a New Testament word, almost always, as a Christian experience, emerges out of the process of suffering.

It's the only, in a sense, it's the only source of joy, is through suffering. It doesn't come as a kind of spontaneous reward at the pinnacle of good health, good management, great wealth, and happiness.

It's something that comes right out of the reality that James is talking about here when he says, count it all joy when you fall into various trials.

[13 : 02] This is where we most closely identify with Christ. And what he's saying here, I think, is that there is a kind of correspondence.

There is a correspondence between these outside trials and, if you want, the inside reality of our lives. In other words, outward trials produce inward temptations.

The way that this is sometimes expressed is that when you are under stress and when you are under trials of various kinds, you tend to break down at the center.

And the grace of God is to meet you in the sense not to cause a breakdown here, but to hold you together at the center. And that's why the passage that we dealt with in the beginning, you know, the passage that talks about all these things, it concludes with the words, be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect.

And that word perfect means undivided. You are held together in the midst of the pressures that are tearing you apart. The grace of God is at work in you, holding you together in the midst of that situation.

[14 : 34] Now, when James is talking about our world, he's talking about the church as a community, not just the individual who is being torn apart, but he talks about the church as a community of people who are in this community of faith in God through Christ by the Holy Spirit.

They're caught up in that community, and the pressure dividing them are very real, so that the pressure dividing the trials and temptations which we experience as individuals are also happening to us as a community of people.

And it's how we hang together in the midst of that kind of pressure.

The word that's used in the text is that you meet various trials for the testing of your faith is in a sense like getting, if you want to, well, I suppose it's, I just flew back from Toronto last night, and when you're ever traveling by air, if you're like me, you contemplate the ultimate disaster.

And suddenly coming upon you, well, what they talk about is that I was in at Timmins, and I was told that only the most senior pilots fly into Timmins, Ontario, because it's very tricky countryside to fly in, so they only put the most senior people in there to pilot the planes into Timmins.

[16 : 29] Well, that's what's happening here, is that only the people who have, that what's happening to the people is that they're being tested by these various trials so that they can go into the most difficult places.

And so that's what James means when he says, the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And that steadfastness is the word about holding together when all the pressure is pulling you apart, when you feel the pressure is pulling you apart, there is that which holds you together so that you don't get torn in pieces.

The testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And then he says, let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect.

Now, what he means by that is that in standing fast, in the midst of the trials that are pulling you apart as a community, what you were allowing to happen there is it's sort of like letting a jelly gel, you know.

You let it solidify because, and, you know, in our society, you tend to think that, well, the way to handle this problem is to give in to it and to experience whatever it is that's pulling you.

[18 : 12] And so we go off in all directions because that's where the pressures are, that's how the pressures are tearing at us. But he says, no, that's not what you're to do.

And he describes the church as a community living within a world and he describes the world as one in which salvation is not yet seen.

Now, salvation, of course, is the purpose of God. And when the world looks at the church, it sees, I mean, I think it sees a ridiculous community, basically, an anachronistic and ridiculous community that is carrying on for reasons that nobody in their right mind understands.

Because the thing that the church is interested in is, is God's bringing things together. And they don't see that bringing together process going on.

It's not, they're not aware of the level on which God is working to bring things together. All they see is things tearing apart. And they see oppression and persecution by satanic powers.

[19 : 27] In other words, they see this happening and they say, you know, it's, there's no use trying to fight it because the powers of this world, which we don't call satanic because we don't, not even sure if there is one, you know.

I mean, we're, evil for us is just a slight mistake which needs to be corrected. I, I think of places like, well, again, if I go back to flying across Canada on one of the major airlines of Canada who are all desperately competing for passengers, the stewardesses are nice beyond words.

Conversational, thoughtful, attentive. it's a wonderful time to fly. You know, so that what it's demonstrating is that people under pressure can behave but once the, once the pressure is taken off they cease to behave so that, you know, in our human strength we can hold together but ultimately things fly apart.

The center does not hold and, and so we find that the pressures on us as a community are so strong and God's salvation is so invisible to most people and because we suffer in addition to that, that the Christians as a community suffer from being genuinely despised by the world in which they live, you know, that it only increases, it only increases the pressure and that's why James is saying as clearly as he can that you are to hold on and let this steadfastness have its perfect effect and it uses the word perfect there, just as the end of Matthew 5 says, be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect, says let steadfastness be perfect in order that you might be perfected by the impact of, of that steadfastness on your life, that you're holding in the midst of the pressures that are all around you, you're holding on so that you may be perfected by allowing the steadfastness in you to be perfected and that's why

I wanted to give you that illustration from here that though the pressures are all external, the steadfastness has got to come from here, holding on to your faith in Christ, holding on to your obedience to Christ.

[22 : 04] The steadfastness has got to come from here even though it manifests itself in relationship to these outward issues. The inward temptation is to let go and James says no, be steadfast and let that steadfastness have its perfect work in order that you might be perfect and you might be complete and it's an interesting and rather unique New Testament word there that is that you're not defective in any way but all the fullness that belongs to you comes in this way.

That is it's not just in a sense that you've achieved some level of moral unity in yourself, you come to the fullness of human experience that you be complete in going through this trial.

You see Christ comes to his resurrection through all the stresses that tore him apart and nailed him to a cross but God raised him from the dead. So we in the same way are encouraged to count it all joy when you meet various trials because you know that this process of testing produces steadfastness.

Steadfastness you allow to hold on to you and it perfects you and brings you to fulfillment and to completion the kind of completion which belong to Christ when God raises him from the dead and that you lack nothing and that is that you are in no way destitute.

And so that is the process by which you discover what human existence is all about not by being spattered on the sidewalk after jumping off the 50th floor but by being brought together emotionally and spiritually and personally and allowing God to bring you together into a person who is perfected that is undivided who is complete that is has all that there is and lacks nothing is destitute of nothing.

[24 : 25] So that what James is going to do now and what we're going to trace through in the in the story of of of in following James epistle for the next three weeks is how he does this and how he sees in our world the forces that are pulling us apart and how it is God's purpose that those things come together together and God's salvation is revealed and God's uniting us and bringing us together is the process that he is working in our lives.

It's something which our world which our world acknowledges the necessity of by a phrase which you've all heard you know when somebody comes along to you and says why don't you get your act together and you can reply to that well all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again so where am I going to get put together and then you find that through this process of trial which besets you and me constantly I mean it's not something that happened a week ago last Sunday or something it's something that happens every hour of every day in the midst of this process of trial you count it all joy because you are sharing in a sense the sufferings of Christ the word suffering in the New Testament is often it's the Greek word *flipsis* and *flipsis* is often translated in our society as stress this creates the stress for you and in the midst of that stress there is a pulling apart what stress is doing to you but there is also a coming back together you count it all joy that you're in this process and you're being held together by the grace of

God and as you allow that grace of God to have its perfect work in you then you become undivided complete and you lack nothing and that's the model that James puts before us in the first two verses the first four verses and then he goes on through the rest of the epistle to tell you about the various other factors that are pulling us apart and how you bring them together specializing in chapter three where he says it's even possible to control your tongue let me just say a prayer and then father thank you for your word the incisiveness of it and the fact that we we have to stand convicted by it and yet greatly comforted or strengthened by it because we can turn to you when all our resources and all we know of ourselves proves to be inadequate we have to cry out to you to put together what we can't put together we ask that you will carry on that work of grace in our hearts we ask that in Christ's name amen thank you all very much and there's lunch down there