

Joy: A Perspective that is Radical **James – God’s Work in Us and through Us**

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Pentecost – when we celebrate the birth of Christ’s Church with the coming of the Holy Spirit seems a great occasion to begin a study of the book James. James, the brother of Jesus and the leader of the church in Jerusalem was a practical believer who was filled with the Holy Spirit and saw Christ’s Church thrive through difficult times because God was at work in their midst. James writes a letter to the church in persecution to encourage them. James begins with a radical perspective - to count it joy when we go through trials...because God is at work.

James 1:2-5, 12 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him...Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

“Consider it pure joy...” - what a crazy perspective...yet as God’s Spirit is at work within us, we begin to look at life in a whole new way...but an overarching theme we will find in James.

Mateen Ellass was a Muslim before becoming Christian. In his book, The Holy Spirit, he wrote:

“I sensed in my friend a real yearning to serve Christ, as well as an ambition to stand out in his efforts for God. So we talked about spiritual gifts for a while, about what it means to have a servant’s heart and about the dangers of seeking to wield Jesus’ power without being clothed in his character. “I am convinced,” I told him, “that God is much more concerned with the kind of people we become than with the things we accomplish.” Transformation of character is a higher priority than exercise of gifts, because without maturity spiritual gifts can be abused and lead to harm. As part of a mature life, on the other hand, they can be utilized to their full potential.”

James never talks about spiritual gifts, but he does talk about spiritual maturity. As we grow in Christ, the nine qualities listed by Paul as spiritual fruit come out in our life (Galatians 5:22-24). Virtues like joy, love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are not “add-ons” or tasks to put on our “must do” lists – they flow out of the spirit-filled new life we have in Christ and enable us to do the work God has for us to do BECAUSE God is at work in us and through us.

James begins with joy, so we do too. First, joy is given to us by the Holy Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 1:6 **“You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit”** Second, joy is not dependant on possessions or circumstance. Psalms 4:7 **“You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound”** Third, God’s Word brings joy to the heart. Psalms 19:8 **“The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.”** Fourth, joy comes from abiding in Christ’ love and doing God’s will. John 15:9b,11 **“Now remain in my love...I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”** Clearly joy is a gift from God - whether it is given to us by Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, by God’s word, or by God Almighty. And joy grows within us like any spiritual fruit...it is received and tended by us...and God brings it out in us.

“Pure joy” means “real joy”...not “phony joy” or some kind of self-centered, sadistic joy in facing troubles. “Pure joy” is the inner reality of the presence of God within us and the knowledge that God is in control. An HPCer said it well: “Don’t tell God how big your problem is, tell your problem how big your God is!” I like that. I also like what James writes next: God gives wisdom to those who ask and trust. There are many things we do not understand in this world...but we do trust God. More important than the “why” question is the “what” question. We ask “why?” and the answer is that we live in a fallen world. Jesus said “in this world you will have trouble”. The “what” question is “what do you want me to learn from this?” or “Lord, what purpose do you bring to this?” Part of the purpose is that God is growing us up...God is growing our character. Did you notice in these few verses that “trials’ can go two ways? 1:2-3,12 through trials - God tests our faith, develops our character, and ultimately crowns us with life. 1:13-15 through trials - God’s adversary tempts our desires, drags us away from the faith, and ultimately to death...spiritual and eternal.

M. Scott Peck wrote a book, The Road Less Traveled, which begins: “Life is difficult.” It is. We close with some basic, practical advice that God gives us in the book of James.

Be realistic. 1:13 **“when tempted”** We are all human. We are all tempted...everyone. Hebrew 4:15 **“Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are yet he sinned not.”** It is not a sin to be tempted. It is a sin to give into temptation. Temptation proves you are human, not that you are evil.

Be responsible. 1:13 **“no one should say, God is tempting me.”** Since Adam we have played the blame game. We blame God, we blame others, we blame the government, we blame the economy. Will Rogers said you can summarize American history in two movements: the passing of the buffalo and the passing of the buck. The fact is that most problems we bring onto ourselves. We make unwise choices and we pay the consequences.

Be ready. 1:16 **“Don’t be deceived”** How? Know your weaknesses. Know what entices you. Know what your trigger points are. Know God...Father, Son, and Spirit. Know God’s Word. Ask for wisdom for all of this knowledge. God knows us. God gives us desires. Desires are good gifts. But when we obsess about them, we become disobedient, and they become dangerous...even deadly.

Be refocused. 1:17 **“Every good gift is from God”** Focus your mind on the goodness of God. This is the principle of replacement. Change your attention. Count your blessings. The more you focus on what you desire, the more you want it...the more it’s got you. Don’t fight the feeling...ignore it and it will weaken. Change your attention, the channel, your friends, direction.

Be reborn. 1:18 **“God chose to give us birth through the word of truth...”** Get the Lord Jesus Christ into your life so He can start changing your character. We don’t have enough power in our willpower. We need some supernatural power. This is what it means to be reborn. You get a fresh start on life that includes a radical new perspective on everything. You can never say “no” to temptation until you say “yes” to God.