

Upside Down, Right Side Up

James 1: 1-18

Rev. Philip Parker
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Years ago our son gave us a new Christmas decoration for the outside of our home. It was an inflatable snowman standing on his head with a warm hearted, welcoming smile. As I was thinking about this new sermon series on the book of James in the New Testament, I was reminded of that snowman. In the eyes of the world Christians and their beliefs often seem to be upside down, completely out of step with the latest cultural trends. Upon further examination, however, what Christians believe is not only closer to what the Lord has imparted unto us in the Scriptures, but also much closer to a way of life that actually works, that is truly successful and genuinely beneficial to those who pursue it.

Like the snowman, God's people are smiling because down deep they know they are not upside down, but in fact are right side up.

That's what we will be discovering beginning this Sunday and continuing in the weeks to come as we begin this new sermon series, "Putting Your Faith to Work." In many respects the book of James is just like the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament. It is a collection of short, insightful instructions to help us put our faith to work as we live out our lives day by day. So let's get started because James has a lot to impart unto us in the first eighteen verses of his letter that was read to us just a few moments ago.

However, before we dig into this passage of Scripture, let's begin by spending a few moments talking about the author of this letter and the audience to whom he wrote it. The writer identifies himself as "James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ." That's all he says about himself. Who was he? There are a number of people in the New Testament named James and we could spend a great deal of time trying to figure out which one is the author. Most people, including myself, believe that this letter was written by the pastor, the chief elder of the church in Jerusalem. Here's why. In the early days of the church there was a controversy about Gentiles becoming Christians without first adopting the religious traditions and practices of Judaism. In Acts 15:1-35, James addressed this controversy

and along with the leaders of the church sent out a letter to hopefully bring it to an end. It stands to reason, therefore, that he could have sent out a second letter, the very one that we're going to be taking a look at beginning this morning.

Additionally, many believe that this James was the brother of Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that Mary and Joseph had other children after Jesus was born. In other words, Jesus had brothers and sisters as well as an earthly father and mother. After His resurrection and ascension into heaven, Jesus' brothers were members of a large group of believers who awaited the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Upper Room, the place where the Last Supper had been celebrated. Acts 1:14 states, "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary, the mother of Jesus and with His disciples." Because of his relationship to Jesus and because of his leadership as the pastor of the very first Christian congregation, it's not hard to imagine that he would have been well respected throughout the Christian community and that, indeed, seems to be the case.

Furthermore, here are a few more details to consider. According to tradition, James was a very devout individual. Today we would call him a Messianic Jew. He believed in Jesus, but was also a strict adherent to the Jewish faith in which he had been born and raised. He was also a man of prayer. He believed in keeping in touch with His Heavenly Father. In fact, he was known as "old camel knees," because they were wrinkled and knarred like a camel's from the hours he spent in prayer on his knees. Wanting to encourage fellow Jewish believers, it is therefore not surprising to discover that the first verse of his letter is addressed to "the twelve tribes scattered among the nations." In other words he was addressing members of the twelve tribes of Israel, fellow Jews living throughout the Roman world. He wanted them to be strengthened in their walk with the Lord.

We, of course, are not Jewish. We do not follow a lot of the teachings and practices of Judaism, although there are some that we ought to. Nevertheless, you will discover that what James had to say in his letter can be applied to our own lives. So let's take a look at what he wrote in those first eighteen verses. We'll discover there are five important things, like tools in a spiritual tool chest, that we need to utilize. Each of them will help us to put our faith to work in such a way that we can build a way of life for ourselves, which is not only beautiful to behold, but is also one that really works. Let me share them with you in an outline form.

1. **TRIALS ARE A BLESSING** (verses 2-4 and 12). In today's world, people flee from trials and difficulties. We want everything to be nice and easy. We give participation awards to athletes even if they just sit on the sidelines doing little or nothing. However,

there's an old saying, "No pain, no gain." That's what James is saying. When we face difficulties, especially when criticized or persecuted because of our Christian faith, we should not flee from such situations, but stand up with a spirit of determined perseverance. Here's the reason why. Perseverance produces maturity and that's what we need today. We need Christians who are mature because like a good athlete, they have faced the worst that an adversary can throw at them, but have risen above the challenge. They are the kind of people who experience a profound sense of joy because they have stood strong and true for the Lord. They stand up for Christ and for what is right, even when the winds of adversity are howling. Not only that, in verse twelve, James reminds us that those who persevere receive "the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him." He's speaking not only of eternal life, but also of the kind of commendation that Jesus spoke of in His parable of the talents. The master says, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." Isn't that what we want to hear when we stand before Christ in heaven?

2. **WISDOM IS NOT INSTANTANEOUS** (verses 5-8). Wisdom is the right use of knowledge and that implies a resource which can provide impeccable insight. For Christians that resource is God. As Proverbs 2:6 states, "For the LORD gives wisdom, and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." Acquiring that kind of wisdom requires prayer, the kind of prayer that is built upon a personal relationship with God. Acquiring godly wisdom also takes time. It's not instantaneous. Often God lets us stew and brew over an issue until we're ready to hear what He has to say and hopefully follow His counsel. That's why James says, "He who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind" (James 1:6). In other words a "double-minded" person doesn't really trust God or the wisdom He is willing to provide. There's an old saying from the Davy Crockett TV series of years ago that pretty well sums up what James is saying, "Be sure you're right and then go ahead." For Christians, being sure you're right means checking in with the Lord before you make the kind of decisions that could really impact your life and the lives of others.
3. **WEALTH IS FLEETING** (verses 9-11). Now here's a nugget of wisdom that seems to be upside down. It's the wealthy who are usually the ones who are prideful, not the other way around, not those of more modest means. Well don't be so sure. Those who have won the lottery will tell you that lots of money attracts lots of friends and can slip through your fingers like water going down the drain. James says that the wealthy are like plants that wither in the hot sunlight. He concludes, "In the same way, the rich man will

fade away even while he goes about his business” (James 1:11). That’s what happened during the Great Depression when a number of businessmen took the short way down from their office windows. An old Chinese proverb states, “Acquiring wealth is like riding a tiger. It’s dangerous to dismount, lest you be eaten up.” That’s why Jesus warned His disciples that the accumulation of wealth can be dangerous. Remember the parable about the rich man and Lazarus. Both men suddenly died. Lazarus was received into the arms of Abraham. The rich man was ushered into a hotter realm.

4. **TEMPTATION IS WITHIN** (verses 13-15). When you get right down to it, temptation does not come from God or even His adversary. It comes from within. For example, you’re riding down the road by a car dealership when you see a beautiful new automobile. It’s absolutely gorgeous. Yes, I know it’s been placed in such a way as to draw your attention and perhaps there have been some newspaper and TV advertisements to attract your interest. Nevertheless, you are the one who has to turn into the dealership and express your interest in what is being offered. The same is true with other kinds of attractions that are of a much more serious nature, the kind of attractions that are genuinely sinful. James paints a picture of a person literally being dragged away by his or her own desires. The desire gives birth to a sinful pursuit that eventually leads to dreadful consequences. There are literally thousands of individuals in prison because their sexual desires led them astray and in at least one instance was instrumental in that person’s death. Like James, Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount that adultery begins in the heart and He was right on when He uttered those words (Matthew 5:27-30).

5. **EVERY GOOD AND PERFECT GIFT IS FROM ABOVE** (verses 16-18). No, I’m not taking us on another journey to Christmas. But the fact of the matter is God did bestow a marvelous gift unto us when He sent His Son into our world. In fact, God’s gift at Christmas is probably the inspiration for a treasured picture in our home, a beautiful calligraphy in the shape of a Christmas tree with the words of James 1:17 etched among its branches, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and cometh down from the Father of Lights.” When James said in the next verse that God chose to give us birth through the Word of Truth and that we were like the first fruits of that decision, he was talking about Jesus Christ. He is God’s gift to us so that we might be saved. But there are other gifts as well that God bestows upon us. Looking back over my years of Christian ministry, God has gifted me in some wonderful ways. For example, my calling to be the pastor of a church that I served in Portsmouth, Virginia for thirty years, had

nothing to do with me. It had nothing to do with my training, my experience, or even my desire to serve that particular congregation. It was an out of the blue invitation to serve as the pastor of that church. Simply put it was a wonderful gift from God. Now as you look back over your own lives, I bet there are some instances, some treasured memories, where you realize that God gifted you in a very special, almost miraculous way. Stop for just a moment and thank Him.



Remember that happy, little, upside down snowman? He's still smiling and I hope you know why. He knows something that I hope you know as well. Upside down sometimes means that things are really right side up, especially for us as Christians. Yes, the world may think that we've got it all wrong. But we know better. Being upside down with God is a whole lot better than being right side up with the world. In fact, from God's point of view and hopefully our own, it's really like being right side up.