



Leader Guide
Sunday, April 7, 2019

Be Gracious to Me

Sermon Text: Psalm 41

Study Texts: James 1:2-12, 26-27.

Sermon Recap: The main idea of this week's sermon is: The blessed rely on the grace of the everlasting LORD. Take time before your growth group to review the key points you noted from today's sermon.

Sermon Connection: In this week's sermon we have looked at Psalm 41, the close of the first book of the Psalter. In this Psalm, we see two themes emerge: 1) Care for the poor and the lowly, and 2) God's faithfulness to His people in the midst of suffering. We can, at times, take these things separately. We care for the poor and lowly when things are right with us, or when things are easy. When we, ourselves, are facing hardship and suffering, caring for others tends not to be in our minds. And yet, the Psalmist holds these two things together, and this is also what we find in the first chapter of the Letter of James. As Christians endure hardships and sufferings of various kinds, we may be sure that God is control, that He has a purpose in the hardship for our good and maturity. At the same time, we also note that James says true religion is found in hearing and treasuring the Word of Christ while also doing it; living obediently and caring to the lowly.

Lesson Plan

Lesson Goal: To see how trusting in God frees us to do good to others even while we experience hardship and difficulty

Lesson Points:

Point 1: A Faith that Sustains (vv. 2-12)

Point 2: A Faith that Acts (vv. 26-27)

The Context: James is a letter to the suffering Christians in the Jerusalem church. It is important to keep in mind that James' letter is heavily influenced by Jesus' Sermon on the

Mount (Mt. 5-7; Lk). There are heavy overtones of Jesus' sermon throughout James' letter, and it serves as the hermeneutical key to the letter.

Opening Question: Are there times in your life when you have been grateful for discipline? Why did the discipline create gratitude?

Transition Statement: James' point is that our good and faithful God uses hardship and struggle as discipline for us as we grow in Christlikeness. True religion, true faithfulness, is learning to walk in faith, in joy, and in deeply rooted trust.

Point 1 - A Faith that Sustains (vv. 2-12)

In vv. 2-3, James calls Christians to view hardship and trials with a particular perspective. What is this perspective?

In these verses, James is telling the church that trials and hardships are never out of God's control. He calls upon Christians to embrace their *trials of various kinds* as opportunities for joy. Our natural instinct is to think only evil of hardship, but James offers another perspective...James offers us God's perspective. Trials come in various forms from unplanned flat tires to unexpected deaths of loved ones. In the midst of it all, James calls us to remember God, to remember that He is in control. Knowing that God is in control in the midst of our chaos is deep joy.

In v. 3, the ESV states "...*the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*" Other translations read, "...*the testing of your faith works/produces (patient) endurance.*" Considering these things, how do trials make us more like God according to James?

God's goal for our lives in Christian maturity. That is, maturity in Christ-likeness. V. 4 goes on to show that the purpose of trails is to produce endurance that leads to maturity. Therefore, as we remember that God is in control of our trials, we may trust that each and every trail is an invitation to become more like Jesus. In the midst of hardship, God invites us to remember His Word, to remember His control, to embrace His promises, and to experience divine growth in Christian maturity. In the midst of trails, we learn to grow in God's likeness.

How does a Christian perspective on hardship and suffering contradict a worldly perspective of the same? See also 2 Cor. 4:7-18.

The Christian view of suffering and hardship as articulated in Scripture is entirely opposed to a worldly perspective. Without God, suffering can have no meaning and no purpose. Without understanding Who God is and how God works, suffering and hardship are nothing more than evils to be endured, or in some cases, crushed underneath. As Paul notes in 2 Cor. 4, even when we feel that we are being crushed, perplexed, and driven to despair, we have God's

divine promise that we are not. On the contrary, the physical suffering of our bodies is evidence of God's blessed salvation that sustains our spirit, renewing day-by-day.

Verses 5-8 highlight wisdom; particularly our need for wisdom. What does the *context* of this passage reveal about James' mention of wisdom here?

Wisdom is important. Wisdom is an important biblical theme that shows up all throughout the Bible. But James' mention of wisdom here is not generic. He has not left his theme of hardship and trials. The theme rolls right into his mention of wisdom. When he writes, "*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God...*" his point is that in the midst of the various trials we face in life, we often find the end of our own wisdom; there are many times when we just do not know what to do or how to proceed. James's point here is that God meets us in those moments, making the end of our own wisdom the point of joy because God freely gives of His Own perfect wisdom.

In vv. 9-11, James turns his attention to the poor and the wealthy. What is the connection between worldly wealth and enduring hardship and trials?

As with the verses on wisdom, this portion on wealth is tied to our enduring of suffering and trials. James wants us to see that our hope is not in worldly provision, our hope is in God alone. It is God Who becomes our strength when we are weak (2 Cor. 12: 9-10). This is why James commends the lowly (the poor) to boast in their lowliness, for when we are stripped of the world, we find that we have nothing to cling to other than God. This sheds light on James' instruction to count trials as joy. Trials strip up of worldly hope and drive us to God, and this is where we should be. Therefore, let us boast in our weaknesses. (2 Cor. 12: 9-10).

What does v. 12 reveal about how the gospel sustains the church in the midst of trials? How does this verse shed light on v. 2?

The world has a way of convincing us to live for its own hopes and treasures. It has an allure that we so often buy into, putting all of our hope in the world. And yet, in an instant, hardship can ruin it all. Suffering, sickness, loss, death...it can all shatter our worldly hope and trust. Here, James says, is where the gospel speaks a better word to us. The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us to hope in God alone, to trust in Him and not in the world. When our hope is in God, trials become opportunities for joy and worship; they become opportunities of special nearness to God. Thus, James writes, "*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life...*"

James' point is not to say that life is a test and those who pass receive eternal life. On the contrary, James is showing that through the power of the gospel we are made to stand in the midst of trials. Furthermore, in the midst of trials we have the hope of eternal life with God to steady us, to hold us fast. This is why we count trials as joy. They draw us near to God, make us more like Him, and remind us of the coming hope we have in Him forevermore.

Point 2 - A Faith that Acts (vv. 26-27)

James devotes much of his letter to developing a Christian hope amidst trials and sufferings. In v. 26 he turns his attention to how the church is to live in the midst of these trials.

Why does James highlight our speech in v. 26? What connection does this have with enduring trials with God's wisdom and joy? See also Mt. 12:34; Lk. 6:45.

James' point is not unclear...our mouths reveal what is true about us. And, more to the point, James is not speaking of what we say when we are trying to sound good, he is referring to our normal, day-to-day conversations. The Lord Himself notes that "*out of the mouth the heart speaks...*" When we face various trials and hardships, what is the content of our speech? Does it reveal a deep and abiding trust in God? When we are suffering at the hands of others, are we praying for God's mercy and help, for grace for our enemy, or their salvation? James' point is that the gospel affects every aspect of us and our mouths reveal what is true about us. As we see in Psalm 41, David's enemies speak ill of him, but he raises not his voice against them. His speech reveals an abiding trust in God even while he suffers.

Verse 27 highlights a very practical act of religion. What does it mean to "*visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world*"?

To visit, in this context, means to care for and make provision for. James' point is that, like the tongue, our lifestyles reflect whether or not we are true followers of God. Keep in mind that this all flows from how we deal with various trials and hardships. Life does not occur free from suffering. And so, how can we know that we are counting our trials as joy, trusting in God, growing in His likeness, and anticipating the coming hope of eternal life? By tangibly living the gospel in the world, and a very practical expression of that is to care for the most vulnerable.

This is David's heart in Psalm 41. Even when he suffers himself, he is concerned for the poor and the needy because He knows two things: God is concerned for Him, and God is concerned for the poor.

What are some practical ways our growth group can care for the most vulnerable among us?
Orphan Care: Hands of Hope Ministry; caring for foster/adoptive families with meals, clothing, etc.; Foster Care licensing class; Respite Care; Adoption.

Widow Care: Being aware; getting to know these ladies in our midst; take initiative to care for them in practical ways.

The Big Picture - Living with Hope

(restate or indicate how the lesson goal was met)

Application Questions

(max 5 question, 1 family focused)