

SERMON TITLE: The Blessed Life

SCRIPTURE: James 1:12-18

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SERIES SUMMARY

In Scripture, we find the life of faith is often a difficult journey. But true faith in Jesus will show itself in tough times and display the reality of Jesus to a watching world. In the same way, we're called to give voice to our words and action to what we believe. This is how our faith can make a transformative difference in our lives and the lives of others. On this side of eternity, a faith not applied is worthless and will make no difference. The book of James regularly asks us to put our faith into action so others can witness the reality of Jesus in our lives. As we turn towards Christ, our faith journey will be purposeful, fruitful, and sustain us through any difficulty we face.

SERMON SUMMARY

"Blessed" is such a churchy word that is often overused. A lot of people define being blessed as having lots of stuff. Others define the blessed life in terms of good health. We should absolutely "keep the temple holy," but that can't be it because our bodies will eventually run out of steam. Furthermore, the blessed life can't primarily be defined in terms of popularity, intelligence, money, social media followers, or having a picture-perfect family. In the Bible, God created humanity to reign and rule with him, and this is all about blessing. God made humanity to be satisfied in right relationship with him—that's the true substance of the blessed life. However, in Genesis 3, we chose our own way. Ever since then, the blessed life has always included how we respond to the obstacles we face. Somehow, after Genesis 3, the truly blessed life includes rightly responding to God when the brokenness of the world infringes on us. What does the blessed life look like when it meets trouble? Enter James 1:12-18. In this passage, James says we must "remain steadfast in trial to receive the crown of life" (1:12). Perseverance in troubled times is how we live in the blessed life before God. The blessing we're invited into is all about us learning to live the Eden life right now in the middle of exiled life. This blessed life is also how Jesus began the Sermon on The Mount: "Blessed are the poor, the mourning, and the meek. Blessed are the pure, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. They get the kingdom of heaven." We're called to live this way when trouble knocks on our door. There are internal temptations and external trials, and God uses them all to test our faith to mature it to make us more like Jesus. This is the context of how we should think about the blessed life. So, how should we live in God's blessing by rightly responding to trouble as we respond to God?

SERMON SCREENSHOTS & KEY POINTS

- *Blame halts the blessed life* (1:13). Yes, James talks about God here, but the principle here can also include blaming other people. However, Olympic-level blaming is skipping people and going straight to God and blaming him. Yes, God is definitely up to something in your trouble. He's there in the middle of it with you. But he is not there in order to tempt you. And it's great to lament, but if it ever downshifts into blame, the blessed life is halted. Why? Because it slows us down from actually dealing with how sin and temptation are at work in our lives. If blessing is about being postured before God rightly and ready, you can't grow into that place if you're busy accusing others, including God.
- *Lust kills the blessed life* (1:14-15). The word "desire" here means "lust" or "over-desire." James says that over-desire gives birth to sin, and when sin grows up, it gives birth to death. Meaning, lust kills the blessed life. James is teaching us that the essence of sin is not necessarily that we want bad things, but that we want them badly. We want them in the wrong way or for the wrong reasons. So, it's not wrong to have money, it's wrong for money to have you. It's not wrong to have comfort, it's wrong to crave comfort as an escape. It's not wrong to have control; self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. But it is wrong to want control in order to glorify self rather than glorify God. It's not wrong to want to be healthy. We're called to "keep the temple holy." But it is wrong to crave a detached ideal of physical health that deters you from spiritual health. It's not wrong to be married and have friends of the opposite sex. But it is wrong to expect them to be for you what your spouse is supposed to be for

you. And what James is saying is that when you want something too much or you want it in the wrong way, then over-desire becomes habituated sin. And if sin is not confessed and repented of, you become numb to it and presume on its presence in your life. And eventually, you end up living in a kind of death.

- *Perseverance fuels the blessed life* (1:12). James is echoing 1:2-3 and reminding his friends that this life is about the endurance and resolve to depend on God no matter how heavy the trial is. It's about not giving up or giving in when temptation comes knocking. It's about not yielding to blame or lust when they just feel easier. This is about a determined desperation for God and his agenda rather than your own. And here's the strange and beautiful thing about perseverance and the blessed life: By Faith, the more you endure through trials where your things, your stuff, your health, your security, or your ideals are threatened, the more you will realize that you realize that Jesus is the purest and truest thing that you need. He is your true security and your true comfort. Or, as the old hymn says, "He is thy Health and Salvation."
- *Gratitude sustains the blessed life* (1:17). When James mentions "every good gift and every perfect gift," he also has gratitude in view. The language of gift-giving in the first century had built in cultural responses of gratitude attached to it. So, James is calling us to both recognize God's gifts and respond to them with gratitude. This call is a function of "the blessed life" working rightly. So, think on his good gifts. Forgiveness, hope, laughter. Food, family, prayer. Scripture, sunsets, music. Beauty, art, coffee. Community, sport, truth. Colors, clouds, silence. And the simple fact that he doesn't leave us in sin and death should astound us with joyful thanks. If we could see all that he is and does as a gift of his grace, appreciation would be our native tongue. And if we never owned another single earthly possession, the cross and resurrection would be enough to fill eternity with bursting gratitude.
- *God gives the blessed life* (1:18). He can't be blamed for temptation, but he can be blessed and praised for New Creation. Yes, the call is to reject blame and lust. Yes, the call is endurance and gratitude. But we are to do these things knowing that he is the one who truly brings about life. In creation, he began with blessing. And in the same way that he spoke everything into being by his word, so he is the one who is bringing about New Creation by his word of truth. And this ultimately happens through Jesus. Jesus is the New Adam of the New Creation. He rightly bears God's image and lives the blessed life for us. In Matthew 4, he was into the wilderness to be tempted, and he passed the test! He didn't accuse his Father; he trusted. He didn't over-desire; he depended. And then, in Matthew 5, he started talking about the blessed life: "Blessed are the poor, the mourning, and the meek. Blessed are the pure, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. And at the cross, Jesus became this Blessed One. He was the pure Son of God who came to make peace by being persecuted, by taking sin and death into himself for us. Jesus went to an exiled tree of death so that we could partake in Eden's Tree of Life. "For the joy set before him, he endured the cross" (Hebrews 12). He persevered. He remained steadfast under trial. He wore a crown of thorns so we could wear a crown of life one day (James 1:12). In Jesus, God is not calling us to anything that he himself has not also done. This is grace. This is how he gives the blessed life.

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS

Read James 1:12-18—

- What is your favorite part about this passage and/or message?
- When have you been most tempted to think that "the blessed life" is about wealth or health?
- When are you most tempted to blame or lust (or "over-desire")?
- What are crucial motivators for you when it comes to persevering well?
- Who is someone you know who lives the essence of this passage in James?
- How does gratitude relate to "the blessed life"?
- Why is Jesus the best example of rightly responding to trouble as we rightly respond to God?

The following resources have been a great help to us in preparing messages for this sermon series: *The Letter of James (NICNT)*, by Scot McKnight; *James (ZECNT)*, by Craig Blomberg; *Mariam J. Kovalishyn*; *The Epistle of James*, by Peter Lange & J.J. Van Oosterzee; *The Letter of James*, by Douglas Moo. Also, I (Charlie) have benefited from the teachings of Tim Keller, Tim Mackie and the Bible Project, and others whom I will credit during my messages. I have adapted and borrowed insights and illustrations from these men and incorporated them into the messages in this series.