

**NEVER GIVE UP****JAMES 1:1-4, 12-18, 5:7-11**

A new year is a fine time to be inspired by quotes about never giving up. For example, "Character consists of what you do on the third and fourth tries." (*James A. Michener*) "Winners never quit, and quitters never win." (*Vince Lombardi*) "It always seems impossible until it's done." (*Nelson Mandela*) "You just can't beat the person who won't give up." (*Babe Ruth*) *Winston Churchill might be the most quotable human being who ever lived. Here's one from him:* "If you are going through hell, keep going." But this one might be my favorite, "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." I want you to think with me today about never giving up.

I'm beginning a new message series on this first Sunday of a new year. During the months of January and February, we're going to reflect together on the entire New Testament book of James. It's fair to say the number one issue James addressed in his letter was spiritual immaturity. One demonstration of personal immaturity is a lack of endurance. He just gives up too soon. She takes on a project, but doesn't finish it. People who lack endurance never get much accomplished. God's goal for you and me is spiritual maturity; therefore, any demonstration of spiritual immaturity is a big deal to Him. James identified several marks of Christian maturity. He used the word translated "perfect, mature, or complete" several times. In today's message, we're going to see how James addressed the need for followers of Jesus to learn how to endure and never give up. After all, spiritual immaturity for followers of Jesus is just as much a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem as a 1<sup>st</sup> century one. It's been observed, "Too many churches are playpens for babies instead of workshops for adults." (Warren Wiersbe)

Now, James had a pretty unique style of communication. Did you know there are fifty commands in this brief letter? Fifty! James didn't offer suggestions. He believed anyone reading or hearing his letter shouldn't just listen to him; instead, he or she should do what James said to do. He had a kind of broken, staccato-like method of communication. Abrupt. Blunt. Curt. Brusque. Politically incorrect. That's why I've entitled this message series *Tell It Like It Is: The "In Your Face" Message of James*.

So, who was James? The best guess is he was the younger half-brother of Jesus Himself. They had the same mother – Mary – but James' biological father was indeed Joseph while Jesus had no earthly father. He was the incarnate Son of God born before Joseph and Mary were intimate. Like the rest of Jesus' siblings, James did not believe in Jesus at first. The Bible tells us the residents of Nazareth once said this about Jesus, "He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us." (Mt. 6:3 NLT) And in another place it says, "Even his brothers didn't believe in him." (Jo. 7:5 NLT)

What changed James' mind about Jesus? We're not told, but likely Jesus' resurrection. James became the first pastor of the first church: the group of Jesus' followers who lived in or near the city of Jerusalem. James was arguably the most important leader in the first two decades after Jesus went back to Heaven - even more important than Peter or Paul in those early years. In the book of Acts, we read about a very serious controversy in those early days that almost torpedoed the early Church. The issue was

over whether non-Jews had to be circumcised and keep the Mosaic Law in order to be followers of Jesus. James moderated a crucial council in Jerusalem that decided it wasn't necessary for non-Jews to convert to Judaism to be saved. His speech in Acts 15 was a critical moment in the history of Christian missions, because it paved the way for Paul and others to spread the good news about Jesus everywhere to everyone.

The rest of James' life and ministry is alluded to in different church histories and traditions, but not in Scripture itself. He likely pastored the Jerusalem church for some 20 years. He apparently earned the nickname "Old Camel Knees" because he spent so much time on his knees in prayer that they started to resemble the big, hard, knobby knees of a camel! Tradition says he died as a martyr in 62 AD. The story is the Pharisees in Jerusalem hated James so much they took him up on the roof of the Jewish temple, threw him off of it, and then made sure he was dead by beating him with clubs. He apparently died asking God to forgive his murderers just like his older brother, Jesus, had asked God to forgive those who crucified Him.

When I read the book of James, I hear several different themes that keep surfacing multiple times. The unifying message is spiritual maturity. So, instead of going verse by verse through James, I want us to look at groups of verses that seem to address the same mark of spiritual maturity. The first mark is this matter of never giving up. Endurance. Perseverance. Patience. I believe James underlined that mark of spiritual maturity in at least three places. Here's the first one (James 1:2-4). If I had to summarize those verses, I hear James saying to you and me...

### **LIFE IS HARD: IT'S HOW GOD GROWS ME.**

Maybe you've heard that tongue-in-cheek, cynical comment: life is hard, then you die. James, and the rest of Scripture, agree with the first part. Life is hard. Life has its share of troubles, to be sure. But, in God's hands, troubles aren't intended to punish you or make you miserable. Instead, they're intended to grow you with the ultimate result being spiritual maturity. James said a whole lot in v. 2-4 of chapter 1. First, he said my perspective on life's troubles needs radical adjustment. He used that word "consider" – "...when troubles of any kind come your way, consider..." (1:2 NLT) When you consider something it often means you come to a new way of looking at it. I once thought and believed this way, but upon reflection, I know consider something different to be true. The normal, human way to look at trouble in life is that it's 100% negative. Nothing good can come from trouble. Resist it. Avoid it. Escape it.

A follower of Jesus needs to get a different perspective on life's troubles. Like what? Like, troubles can't all be avoided. It's not a question if you will have troubles in life, but when. "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds." (1:2 NIV) Not if, but when! Sure, some troubles in life are the result of poor decisions, foolish choices, or downright sinful attitudes or actions. You can and should avoid those kind of troubles. But many troubles come to us simply because we're human beings living in a broken world: illnesses, tragedies, disappointments of many kinds. There's also the kind of trouble that comes from being a follower of Jesus. Both

subtle and overt forms of persecution. The very first followers of Jesus experienced that kind of trouble wherever they lived in the Roman Empire. Trouble comes in all shapes and sizes. You can't avoid all of it no matter how hard you try.

A follower of Jesus needs to get a different perspective on life's troubles. Like what? Like, troubles have a positive outcome in God's hands. "For you know that when your faith is tested (by life's troubles), your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." (1:3-4 NLT) Instead of just focusing on the trouble we might be in today, we are encouraged to look through that trouble to what God can do in and through it. In that sense, troubles in life can be both bad, but also good. In the same way, we can have joy in the midst of them, if not pleasure. "When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy." (1:2 NLT) Nobody enjoys troubles. You're not supposed to find pleasure in them. But earthly pleasure and godly joy are not the same thing. The kind of joy James was talking about here is the ability to believe God can and will bring something good out of my troubles, that He's still very much in control, and that some kind of positive transformation is happening inside of me.

This is not your ordinary, run of the mill joy. Granted. Here's what the Bible says about Jesus. "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." (Heb. 12:2 NLT) Jesus was joyful about dying on the cross? In one way, surely not. He clearly dreaded the experience itself. But in another way, absolutely yes. Jesus knew what it would achieve. He knew what it would accomplish. He knew the end result. Those were all very good things. We can have a kind of godly joy in the midst of trouble, too, if we value the development of our character over our comfort, the spiritual over the physical, and the future more than the present.

I've told you before about the pastor in Florida who occasionally hosted "count it all joy" parties based on James 1:2. When he would face a difficult situation, he'd call up friends and say, "I want you to come over to my house for a party." They'd say, "Oh, is it a birthday?" "No," "Uh, you got a promotion?" they'd continue. "No," "What's the situation?" they'd finally ask. "Well," he'd say, "I'm going through this incredibly difficult crisis right now, and I'm having a count-it-all-joy party. We're going to celebrate the difficulty, because I know that this difficulty is going to bring something of special value to my life. I don't know what it is yet, but I want you to come and count it all joy with me." Have any of you ever thrown a count-it-all-joy party? Me neither. To tell you the truth, it's tough to consider it pure joy, because it hurts. Yet it's important to realize that troubles have a positive outcome when you put them in God's hands.

Here's a second big consideration. God's goal for me is spiritual maturity. It's not personal happiness, or self-fulfillment, or reaching my potential. "You know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (1:3-4 NIV) Some translations use the word "perfect." The word "mature" is better. Adults are mature human beings – not babies, or toddlers, or even teenagers. When you're a mature

musician or a mature athlete, you're fully developed. Physical maturity kind of happens automatically. Not so with spiritual maturity. You have to cooperate with God. Sometimes that means letting life's troubles do their work and persevering through them. God is always looking out for mature men and women ready and willing to carry out His work in this world. He's looking for followers of Jesus who are joyful, useful, able to encourage others, and who gladly share Jesus with others and disciple those who become His followers.

Here's a third big consideration. God uses life's troubles to achieve His goal in my life. "For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." (1:3-4 NLT) You see that all through the Bible. God told Abraham he'd have a son, but He delayed fulfilling that promise for 25 years. Then, He commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, but stopped him at the last second. God allowed Joseph to languish in Egypt for 13 years suffering all kinds of humiliation and injustice before elevating him to a place of incredible power just below Pharaoh. God allowed all kinds of troubles in Moses' life for 80 years. But then Moses was spiritually mature enough to lead the people of Israel for the next 40 years. The moment you decide to follow Jesus is the moment you should expect life's difficulties to start. When you're able to see life's troubles in this way, you demonstrate real faith. Faith isn't so much believing the right things about God or the Bible. It's about trusting God in and through life's troubles. It's knowing and believing God has some good purpose in it and holding onto God in the midst of it regardless. That's part of what it means to never give up. Here's another dimension of that mark of spiritual maturity.

### **GOD IS GOOD: ALL THE TIME.**

Church people say that all the time, don't we? There's even a happy little song about it. It may sound trite, I know, but it really is a Scriptural truth that can help us never to give up on God. It might well be a great summary for what James says in 1:12-18. So, what do we learn from what he said here? First, life's troubles can be a test of my faith. James already made that very clear, so we can move on to a second thought: life's troubles can also be a temptation to sin. How so? In two different ways. Some troubles in life have to do with giving into our own sinful desires. Not all desire is sin. God gave you a desire to eat and drink so you'll live. But some people become gluttons and drunkards. God gave you a desire to sleep. But some people become lazy couch potatoes. God gave you a desire for sex. But some people express that desire outside the bounds of a marriage between a man and a woman. When we get confronted about our own sin, human beings become experts in evasion. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. When our sin gets pointed out to us, we blame other people, we blame circumstances, or we blame the way we are made which can be a sneaky way of blaming God. God never entices us to sin or sanctions temptation to sin – not even to build our spiritual maturity. No way.

But life's troubles can be a temptation to sin in another way. James knew that life's troubles have a way of getting you to doubt God is really there and God is good. When

life gets difficult, we're tempted to complain against God, question His love, and resist His will. When Satan tries to get you to start thinking poorly of God and doubting His goodness, testing just became a temptation. Whatever the case, James' answer to questions about temptation was the same. God can never be tempted to sin and He can't tempt anyone to sin. God is good from first to last. He never stops being good for even one second! People sin because we're sinners – plain and simple. “When you are being tempted, do not say, ‘God is tempting me.’ God is never tempted to do wrong and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.” (1:13-15 NLT) We want something, we go about getting it in the wrong way, and the inevitable result is some kind of death: the death of our integrity, death in our relationships with others, and ultimately spiritual death in our relationship with God.

I hear James saying here never doubt God's goodness. Whatever trouble God is allowing or will allow to come into your life – as long as it's not a result of your own foolishness or sin – isn't meant to break you but to make you. This is how He moves you and me toward His goal of spiritual maturity. Instead of questioning God's goodness, hold fast tightly to the fact of that goodness even more. Then, James provides three examples of God's goodness. “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” (1:17-18 NIV) First, God does not change like shadows change depending on the light. He is constantly and forever good, loving, kind, and gracious. Second, we've been born again spiritually through the Holy Spirit who helped us to recognize and respond to God's truth. Third, the very existence of all God's people all over the world is like the first part of a great harvest. First fruits were the first results of a harvested crop brought to God as a worship offering. It was a way of saying, “There's a whole lot more where that came from!” God has promised to transform and restore His creation filling Heaven and Earth with His glory. Your life and mine transformed by God's grace through Jesus is just the start of God's larger project. God is good: all the time. Believing and holding on to that fact will help you to never give up. Quickly, here's a third aspect of this mark of spiritual maturity.

### **PRACTICE EVERYDAY WHAT GOD VALUES: PATIENCE**

Let's go to the last chapter in James' letter and read a few verses there (James 5:7-11). James reinforced here what he said back in chapter one. Never giving up is one result of learning to be patient in the midst of life's troubles. God wants us to be patient because it's the key to so much blessing. Impatient people are immature people. As a result, they miss out on so much of what God wants to give them. Some things God wants to give us in this life, but we might have to wait quite a while to receive them. Patience. Some things God wants to give us only when Jesus returns. Patience. James' example is a farmer who understands very well that you have to wait for the good stuff. He plants his crop in the spring, but he doesn't run out to the field the next day expecting to see a mature crop. No, rain has to come at the right times. So does

sun and dry weather. Months later, it's time to harvest. Like a patient farmer, we wait for God to do what He needs to do – what He alone can do. Never giving up demands the presence of troubles in your life and mine. You can't learn to be patient, or to endure, or to persevere, or to never give up on God by listening to messages, by reading Christian books, or by hearing the inspiring testimonies of others. We just have to go through some stuff – sometimes painful, difficult stuff – where we learn to be patient, learn to trust God, and learn to keep on obeying Him regardless.

James reminded us here this is how God has always operated. “For examples of patience in suffering, dear brothers and sisters, look at the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We give great honor to those who endure under suffering. For instance, you know about Job, a man of great endurance.” (5:10-11 NLT) The prophets. Men like Daniel who didn't give up on God when he was thrown into a lion's den. Men like Jeremiah who endured being considered a traitor because he said God was going to judge His people through a foreign army. Job. He lost his wealth, his health, and his children. He had to endure his wife abandoning God, his friends assuming he was really a bad person after all, and God's silence and refusal to explain. Now, Job wasn't all that patient, was he?! Job complained to God and questioned God, but he never abandoned God. Patience doesn't have to be passive. We can tell God we don't like life's troubles. Protest all you want. Job sure did! Just land where Job landed. “But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.” (Job 23:10 NLT) These were people whose faith in God wasn't just skin deep. They had reasons to give up on God, but they never gave up. Patience.

A final truth. Never giving up will result in an eternal reward. James expanded on this truth back in chapter one. “God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” (1:12 NLT) God protected and blest Daniel and Jeremiah. God gave everything back to Job and a whole lot more. To you and me God promises “the crown of life.” James is probably thinking of the crowns that were given to the winners of athletic competitions back in his day. God rewards you and me with a very different, far more significant crown. The crown of life is eternal life in all of its fabulous dimensions. The writer of Hebrews had the same image in mind when he said, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us.” (Heb. 12:1 NLT) In human competitions like the Olympic Games, there's only one winner. Not so in the Kingdom of God. Anyone and everyone can win the “crown of life” promised to us here if we never give up.

Dan McConchie is currently a member of the Illinois State Senate. Back in 2007, he was riding his motorcycle through a suburban intersection when a car came into his lane and pushed him into on-coming traffic. When he woke up two weeks later in a trauma center, he was a mess. Six broken ribs, deflated left lung, broken clavicle, broken shoulder blade, and five broken vertebrae. Worst of all, amidst all the broken bones, he had a spinal-cord injury that left him a paraplegic. The neurosurgeon told his

wife that it would be a "miracle" if he'd ever walk again. As far as I know, Dan is still in a wheelchair. "What I learned," Dan said, "is that this life isn't for our comfort. Instead, the purpose of this life is that we become conformed to the image of Christ. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen when everything is unicorns and rainbows. It instead happens when life is tough, when we are forced to rely upon God through prayer just to make it through the day. That's when he is most at work in our lives molding us into who he designed us to be. My prayers are different today than they were years ago. Back then, I looked at God like Santa Claus. I asked him to send nice things my way. Now, I have one prayer that I pray more than any other: 'Lord, may I be able to say at the end of today that I was faithful.'"

A new year has begun! The last thing I want to do is to suggest you should live fearfully, pessimistically, or with your guard up. But the truth is trouble will come to your life and mine. Not if but when. God's Word for us today is a reminder that one mark of spiritual maturity is never giving up. You may really need that message today. You may not, but one day you will. We all will. Let's try to remember. Life is hard: it's how God grows us. God is good: all the time. And practice what God values: patience. By God's grace and through the Holy Spirit's power – let's never give up.